The Designed "Public Spaces" in Solidere's Beirut City Center

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In the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War, a private company *Solidere* took on the mission to reconstruct the center of Beirut, the capital city. An enormous real-estate privatization process transformed the once historic city center to a shiny upscale district. The paper investigates the different public spaces within it and reveals the design politics behind them.

INTRODUCTION

The once historic city center of Beirut, now a shiny upscale district, is the result of an enormous real-estate privatization process that began in the 1990s, headed by the late prime minister Rafic Hariri. Under the pretext of reconstructing the Beirut City Center, destroyed during the 15-year civil war, Solidere, a private firm established by Hariri, took on the mission to realize the city's master plan following a neo-liberal model, with a capital investment of $1.65 billion dollars mostly secured through foreign aid. Hariri commissioned the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR), a public entity, to undertake the exercise, after significantly enhancing its legal powers. A series of laws were passed that targeted property and ownership rights of Beirut tenants, as well as the urban fabric of the historic city center. These laws gave authority to Solidere to (1) forcefully evict those who owned property in the city center and claim ownership over them and (2) bulldoze the city's major urban tissues including all traces of Ottoman and Medieval architecture, the ancient souks, the Jewish and Hotel Quarters, parts of the Saifi residential area, among others. Buildings, as well as archeological sites, that were deemed "unworthy" by the company were razed to the ground in order to allow for Solidere's new developments, while the rights of thousands of Beirut tenants and landowners were forcibly ceded to Solidere, in exchange for minor shares valued by the government. The price of the share as well as the price of the real estate property were set according to their respective prevailing market price at the time of the purchase[1]. As a result, some protested; in response, the government banned protests and deployed the Lebanese army to remove – by force—anyone who contradicted the plans. Others, filed lawsuits against the company in vain.

Designed and marketed towards a new elitist clientele, the city center—divided during the war between East and West—now separates the haves from the have-nots, catering mainly for tourists and the rich in the Gulf area. As such, the right to a city that was the meeting point for all Beirutis before the war, was seized, and a new island, detached from the rest of the urban fabric and its social context, was imposed[2].

"The Ancient city of the future", Solidere's mantra supporting its reconstruction agenda, emphasizes on public domain, conservation and heritage areas, followed by residential neighborhoods, souks, and new development areas[3]. As part of its building narrative, Solidere promises the "growing community of residents, workers, and visitors" to create around 60 public spaces comprising of gardens, squares, and seafront promenades. The company's website states, "with 39 ha of landscaped public space, the city center, representing 10% of municipal Beirut, will contain half of the capital's green areas."[4] This paper investigates the different public spaces listed on the website and reveals the design politics behind them. It argues against the privatization of the public realm, a process through which public spaces become assets for the real-estate, both in their aesthetics and function. Furthermore, and particularly in the case of divided cities such as Beirut, rather than acting as a mediator between different social and religious groups, public space becomes sterilized and depoliticized, as political leaders seek control over it.

THE POLITICS OF NAMING AND REPRESENTATION: PUBLIC/OPEN/GREEN SPACES

A quick look at maps, brochures and reports published by Solidere, reveals a discrepancy in the way the company depicts its different areas. Though under "open spaces" with an introduction that reads "green public spaces and pedestrian promenades"[5], some of these spaces that will be discussed in this paper are in fact privately owned and sealed off from the public. As to the element of "green", the master plan advertised by Solidere is actually much greener than the reality on the ground. Under "Green open spaces" are listed privately owned hardscaped plazas that are neither "green" nor "open". In fact, one of the largest "green open areas" listed on the master plan is the site on which sits the Serail. Not only is this site not green (predominantly asphalted), it has never been open to the public, with 2.5 m high concrete walls fencing it off. While strict security measures may seem understandable in the case of the prime minister's official headquarter, listing a private land under public open space is misleading and can be deceiving to potential users.
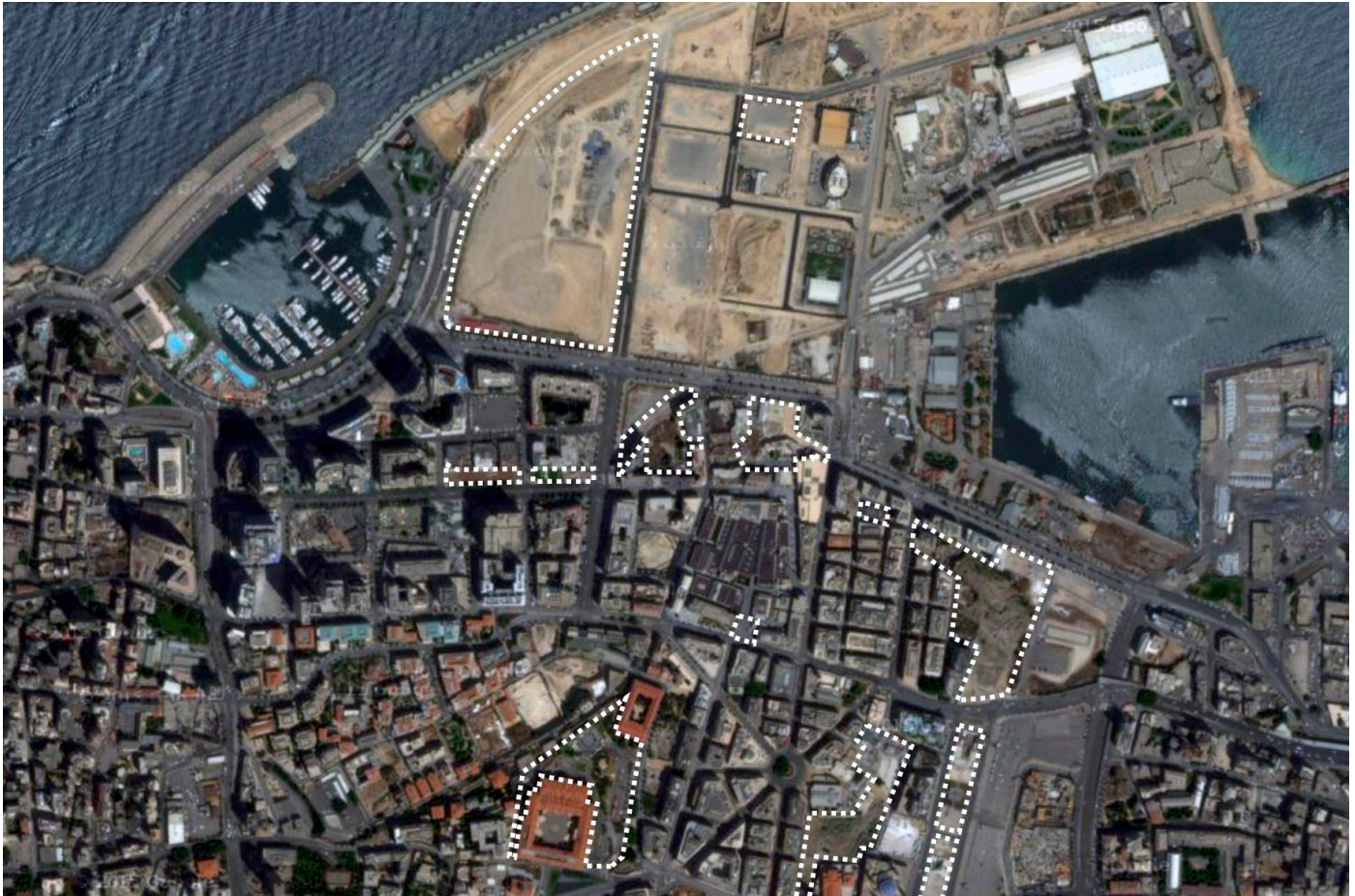
Figure 1 Google image outlining Solidere's "green/open" spaces .
Highlights by author

THE LONG PROMISED PROJECTS FOR THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

An article entitled "What happened to Beirut's Shoreline walk?" published in Beirut Report investigates the state of an announced landscape project that seems to have been never realized. The author questions the realization of public projects within Solidere's perimeter: "Perhaps the firm will say that political turmoil has hurt progress. Yet why has the same political turmoil not affected the completion of residential towers, sprawling condominiums with hanging gardens, a yacht marina and high end seafront shopping center (Zaitunay Bay) that have all been completed over the last decade? Are glass and steel towers easier to build than minimalist landscaped gardens?"[6].

Indeed, the four major and largest public spaces that are listed on the company's website have been put on hold or have not been realized yet. These are Martyr's square, the Garden of Forgiveness, Castle Square and Belvedere Park and most recently Waterfront City Park. In "A Vital Void: Reconstructions of Downtown Beirut" book chapter appeared in The Resilient City, architect Hashim Sarkis writes "it is difficult to imagine a public space that could unify a mosque to its south, a virgin megastore in its middle, and an archaeological glacis on the north. Collective space seems no longer possible"[7], discussing Martyr's square that remains a sterile hollow space to date. In fact, these three landmarks show the prevalence of religion, economy and the ancient past over a national

public realm yet to be realized. Discussing the politics of amnesia and memory, Sarkis refers to Garden of Forgiveness and states that "Garden of forgiveness was forced to absorb all the pressure of remembering the war in the downtown area." And yet, the project has been put on hold for many years.

THE IMAGE: HOW IS MEANING CONVEYED? HOW IS THE PAST MANIPULATED TO SERVE THE PRESENT?

Solidere's concept of restoring Beirut as an "ancient city" with multi-layered history is remarkably selective in the history it reproduces and the memory it induces. While ancient Beirut is celebrated through excavated and displayed Roman Baths, a "heritage trail that connects mosques to churches"[8], a more recent past—the remnants of the traumatic civil war—have been erased.

Over the years of reconstruction, amnesia has played an important role manifesting itself both in the political life as well as the urban form of the city. While novels and video works have addressed the issue of dealing with the emotional and psychological traces of war, architecture and urban design have failed to do so, argues Sarkis[9].

In the absence of a functioning political body, the responsibility of recovery from amnesia was passed from a central governing authority to Solidere's many architects and designers, most of which are international figures. As a result, the notion of memory was translated and expressed in particular historic dates, names and events, historical or political

Figure 2 Martyr's square. Left: 1960s (Source: 1960s postcard), Right: 2000s (Source: Solidere's website: http://www.solidere.com/city-center/urban-overview/landscaping)

figures, cultural symbols, functions, architectural styles, stone types, etc. The attempted reconstruction has thus turned its own heritage and culture into a "product", a touristic souvenir. It is Hannah Arendt's "The Crisis of Culture" that is best exemplified here, as "the life process of society [...] will literally consume cultural objects, eat them up, and destroy them."[10]

While the descriptions of projects posted on the website claim to be true to the historicity of the site and reminiscing on a vague "past", they clearly fail to address the Civil War. Though some state that the design "includes numerical historical layers", none tackles the gravity of the Civil War as the most recent historical event—with only one description hinting at the war's East-West tension through a design that "re-establishes an East-West connection between the places "[11]. As such, there is a clear policy of covering up a section of the recent history, thus turning an entire location of memory of militia battles into a falsified "museum" or a product of entertainment and consumption. In fact, the clearing of the historic downtown area left most Beirutis homesick for Beirut, often expressed in their nostalgic recollections of the past.

In an attempt to move away from negative associations of Beirut's most recent past, and in an effort to put Beirut on the world's touristic map, Solidere's design strategy for its newly designed spaces encourages strong images that support a global "neutral" culture, detached from the socio-political context of the city. Besides consciously omitting an important historical fact, these squares and gardens, are very prescribed and intensely designed spaces, hindering the possibility of multiple meanings to develop. As such, Beirutis who see little connection between the Beirut they once knew and these new images, feel alienated. Rather than engaging and participating in the production of their city, they become mere spectators in an environment that encourages mass consumption.

One such example is Bab Idriss Square, designed by French architect Olivier Vidal. Located at the southwestern entrance to Beirut Souks, Bab Idriss was the site of an arcaded street leading to the Roman

Hippodrome. Today, the square is a wide sidewalk decorated with an installation entitled "Promenade à l'Hippodrome" by Spanish artist Xavier Corbero. The 18 basalt and two cast iron sculptures are meant to evoke "a group of people on their way to the races "[12]. The work itself might be appreciated for its artistic achievement, but it has little to do with the context in which it sits. Apart from preserving the original name, no effort seems to have been put in order to engage the notion of public space in the context of Beirut. Once a vibrant square and entrance to the old souk, Bab Idriss today attempts at marking the entrance to the monolithic structure of the new souk designed by Spanish architect Rafael Moneo. Personal experiences related to this spaces are centered around its spatial configuration. One person claimed that she stands by the square when waiting to be picked up or when meeting someone; "It's an easy landmark". Another person stated that this place feels like a round-about in the middle of the sidewalk and wished it really was one, as many drivers stop by to pick up or drop off people coming or leaving the souks. There is not much you can do on this square, except standing by the sculptures or entering the souks, and these experiences illustrate the lack of public life around the square.

Ajami Square, located at the northern tip of the souks, is another example of a square that has preserved not more than its original name. In fact, the Ajami square is not even in its original pre-war location. Heavily adorned and lit, this square is formed by an 18 m high ceiling and wall that gives its back to the preserved and historic L'orient building. With restaurants and cafes framing it, this plaza becomes a major consumption space for families and individuals who can afford to frequent these spaces. When asked about personal experiences related to this space, one person expressed his dislike to this square, explaining that it feels like a stage with people seated at the tables in the restaurants watching the passersby. Another visitor expressed her liking to this place, stating that it is a convenient place for her family, as kids can run and play on the plaza while she can watch them from the table. Apart from consuming the goods offered by the restaurants and cafes, there is in fact not much one can do, with the space acting as a connecting corridor to the two perpendicular streets of the souks.

Figure 3 Ajami square today (Source: Solidere's website: http://www.solidere.com/city-center/urban-overview/landscaping)

Bab Idriss and Ajami squares embody both the generic modernity and generic historicity illustrated in Michael Sorkin's notion of the city as a theme park, where pseudo-historic marketplaces, gentrified zones, corporate enclaves take over the traditional public space. The theme park, explained in "Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space", is an environment in which structures are highly ordered and controlled, in order to minimize interaction among citizens. In-between spaces disappear as everything becomes highly designed and ordered, limiting social engagement to whatever is offered within the controlled space. "Whether it represents generic historicity or generic modernity, such design is based in the same calculus as advertising, the idea of pure imageability, oblivious to the real needs and traditions of those who inhabit it" [13], writes Sorkin.

REAL FUNCTIONS: WHO BENEFITS FROM URBAN DEVELOPMENT? WHOSE PERSPECTIVE MATTERS?

Looking at the master plan conceived by Solidere, one has a misleading idea about the extent to which Beirut has public green spaces. An AutoCAD file used in Solidere's offices reveals the hidden details of some of these spaces. As mentioned previously, while listed under open public spaces, some of these squares are privately owned, as they are merely "open" as a result of the allowable building footprint of their respective plot. While the legend on the publicly accessible plan reads "public

open space", the AutoCAD legend reads "mandatory private open space, underground construction allowed". These seemingly public spaces may occasionally become spaces of consumption, but mainly serve as aesthetic zones and extensions of private properties, with underground functions serving the nearby private property.

One such example is Mina El Hosn, "an elevated grand square" listed under open spaces. "Designed as an urban piazza, with two vehicular drop-off points for both adjacent towers "[14], this space is technically serving the residents of the adjacent private properties rather than the public. The description also mentions the pedestrian activity on site, stating that the design of this square "articulates the space and defines a sinuous circulation flow". The reality is very different. In fact, no pedestrian has a reason to walk through that particular space as it is detached from the rest of the city. We also read the "wide border of these circular planters provides seating areas throughout the space to encourage rest and relaxation". Far from it! Not only do the wide borders not encourage seating and are a mere design element for the planters, the description is claiming to provide seating to the non-existent pedestrians of the site. Contrary to the description, this space is forbidden for public use, and one person attested that he was kicked out of the plaza by the security guards, with the excuse that it was a private property. An interview carried with Vladimir Djurovic architects, responsible for the design of the

Figure 4 National Unity square (Source: Solidere's website: http://www. solidere.com/city-center/urban-overview/landscaping)

plaza, clarifies certain aspects of its design. For instance, the reason for wide raised planters is because "the buildup of the plaza did not allow for planting, hence, we had to design raised planters in order to achieve enough planting depth." Moreover, when asked about design restrictions imposed by the company, the architect explained that since "the same paving treatment had to be extended to both pedestrian and vehicular areas", they were inclined to choose a "dark stone for paving", such that "oil stains or car wheel marks wouldn't be too evident"[15]. Both answers come to demonstrate that, in the design process, little if any consideration was given to public use.

Another such example is Harbor Square. Similarly listed under open public space, this heavily designed plaza is also the result of the maximum allowable footprint of the three residential buildings that frame it. Hardly ever visited, this space acts as an aesthetic extension of the adjacent private properties. "In keeping with Solidere's aim to integrate archeology in the reconstruction effort, Gustafson Porter's design repositions and represents part of the old harbor wall discovered on site and treats it as a sculptural element with the square."[16] Ironically, the archeological remains were dismantled and replaced with the technical spaces serving the underground parking, hidden behind the "sculptural elements". When inquiring about this space, many wondered where it was and did not seem to recognize it, while one person said "it looks fancy". Furthermore, while the AutoCAD file of the master plan has the symbol P referring to underground parking for this site, the buildings surrounding it have a symbol with a legend that reads "frontage with mandatory street wall control", meaning that particular attention should be given to the design and implementation of the façades facing the street. This symbol is found on all facades that frame an important street, demonstrating the company's particular attention given to external appearances, while considering and listing a private underground parking within the public domain.

ACCESSIBILITY AND CONTROL: HOW IS POLITICAL POWER CONSTRUCTED THROUGH SPACE?

Handing over the development of the city center to a private real estate company resulted in the exclusion of the land owners and tenants from participating in the rebuilding of their city. Moreover, Solidere's strict control measures, as well as security presence, completely removed any sense of ownership to the city. With heavy presence of security guards who control every corner of the area, certain behaviors become prescribed and welcomed, while others forbidden. As such, the streets and squares within the control of Solidere become sealed off, controlling the users' behavior. Street vendors are forbidden from accessing this highly exclusive section of the city; "suspicious" looking individuals may be asked to leave the area or denied entry by the company's security guards. As a result, possibilities for diverse spatial practices are constrained and experiences are conditioned. The "promised" public spaces that are—at least according to the company's website—supposed to serve the different segments of the society, become exclusive sites for a certain group of people with a certain socio-economic background. Claiming to be "extending the existing Beirut corniche and the new sea promenade" and providing "outdoor spaces and public areas for displaying artwork", a signage at the entrance of the Zaitounay Bay Waterfront District reads: no dogs, no skating, no biking, no street selling, no eating, no singing, no smoking, no listening to music, allowed on the property.

The National Unity square on the Grand Serail Hill is another public square that is always devoid of people, due to army control. This cascading garden, a memorial for Rafic Hariri, is situated between the Prime Minister's headquarters and a church. With strict security measures around the building, the site prevents any sort of engagement and remains inaccessible to the public, acting as a physical buffer between the vehicular street and the main building façade. The design of the square is hostile to any public engagement with "elongated planes of gray stone and water mirrors". In fact, when inquiring about the nature of public engagement that the client foresaw for this space, the designer

answered that the client, Ms. Hariri widow of late Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, did not foresee any sort of public engagement with this space; "it was meant to be looked at". As for design restrictions, Ms. Hariri was keen on having the statue of Rafic Hariri on the site. Once a vibrant milieu and converging point for Beirutis, the City Center is now under high control and surveillance. Accessibility to site, a crucial element in bringing people into a space, is sometimes restricted in this area, as some squares—such as Riad el Solh—are controlled by installing barriers, such as barbed wires, during political tensions and riots.

Ali Madanipour highlights the potential for the public realm to act as "a place where many-side truth co-exist and tolerance of different opinion is practiced"[18]. However, for this to happen, public spaces must be accessible. This is especially pertinent in the case of divided cities, such as Beirut, where social and mental barriers hinder access and engagement of members of different sectarian groups.

PRIVATELY OWNED PUBLIC SPACES

Many would argue, that the privatization of downtown Beirut isn't simply a question of neo-liberal economy, but an attempt to manipulate Beirut's public spaces into a mere arena of consumption. For Solidere's urban planning manager Amira Solh, however, this result is expected. At "Resilient Urban Waterfronts" panel held at the Lebanese American University, she stated "there is a price to having a private company take on Beirut City Center, and that price is that you rely on a private company to also ensure the public good." Solh insisted that projects like Zaitunay Bay are open to the public, admitting that there are pitfalls to relying on commercial firms to develop public space. "Private interests want a return on their goods, they want it to be public insomuch as it serves them... so there is kind of a need to say this is controlled. But even London has these restrictions on rollerblading, bicycling etc." [19], argued the Cornell-graduate architect and urban designer.

Henri Lefebvre argues that most people disconnect from the city's spaces and abandon their rights to practice its public domain, when they lose ownership over it. This loss is seized by ruling authorities who conceive and manage the city according to their own capital-based interests. Stripped from their social and political dimension, and acting as an arena for market-orientated economic growth and elitist consumption practices, public spaces in the city center become highly depoliticized, leaving Beirutis with the quest for alternative spaces in other parts of the city. Rather than acting as sites for different groups to meet, interact and form a social and urban identity, these privatized public spaces stand in the service of the real-estate. Furthermore, in a divided city such as Beirut, where political leaders enjoy the control over their respective confessional groups, Solidere's city center reinforces the sectarian political system's domination over the people, as it intentionally refrains from creating spaces of encounter and exchange. With derelict private and public entities, citizens of Beirut are left alone in changing this status-quo.

ENDNOTES

1. Details found under section VI- The Shares http://almashriq. hiof.no/lebanon/300/340/342/law_no91-117.html

2. The master plan of SOLIDERE includes a major highway construction that delimits the perimeter of Solidere and detaches it from the surrounding neighborhoods. This highway was built with no consideration to pedestrian access from the rest of the city to the center.

3. http://www.solidere.com/sites/default/files/attached/cr-brochure.pdf

4. http://www.solidere.com/city-center/urban-overview/landscaping

5. http://www.solidere.com/city-center/solidere-developments/open-spaces

6. http://www.beirutreport.com/2016/02/what-happened-to-beiruts-shoreline-walk.html

7. Sarkis, Hashim. "A vital Void: Reconstructions of Downtown Beirut". In "The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster", edited by Lawrence J. Vale, Thomas J. Campanella, 2004.

8. Larkin, Craig. Reconstructing and Deconstructing Beirut: Space, Memory and Lebanese Youth. Accessed through: http://www. conflictincities.org/PDFs/WorkingPaper8_21.5.09.pdf

9. Sarkis, Hashim. "A vital Void: Reconstructions of Downtown Beirut". In "The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster", edited by Lawrence J. Vale, Thomas J. Campanella, 2004.

10. Arendt, Hannah. Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought, 1961.

11. http://www.solidere.com/city-center/solidere-developments/ open-spaces/old-shoreline-walk-and-gardens

12. http://www.solidere.com/city-center/solidere-developments/ open-spaces/bab-idriss-square

13. Boddy,Trevor. "Underground and Overhead: Building the Analogous City." Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space- Ed. Michael Sorkin. New York: Noonday Press, 1992. Pp. 123-153.

14. http://www.solidere.com/city-center/solidere-developments/ open-spaces/mina-el-hosn-square

15. Interview carried via email exchange with Vladimir Djurovic.

16. http://www.solidere.com/city-center/solidere-developments/ open-spaces/harbor-square

17. http://www.solidere.com/city-center/solidere-developments/real-estate/zaitunay-bay

18. Madanipour, Ali. Public and Private spaces of the city, 2004.

19. http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/mar/17 rem-koolhaas-dalieh-beirut-shore-coast