From the Port City of Beirut to Beirut Central District

Narratives of Destruction and Re-Constructions

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Abstract

The repeated destructions and reconstructions of Beirut have been widely acknowledged and conveyed from one generation to the next through different narratives, anecdotes, literature, and popular cultural productions. This paper describes the historical transformations of the city of Beirut from an old harbour city to a generic central district through a selection of dominant narratives, as well as alternative counter-narratives and anecdotes.

The paper argues that the post-civil war reconstruction project is submissive to the neo-liberal models of development which resulted in the generic city that we can observe today. The paper also projects two extreme case scenarios for the future development of the city, of which one seems to prevail: a scenario that has started to materialise since the sudden dramatic and deadly port explosion that hit the port of Beirut on August 4, 2020.

Keywords

Beirut Port City, Beirut Central District, Solidere, Urban Transformation, Narratives, Destruction and Re-construction

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Introduction

Beirut has died a thousand times,
and been reborn a thousand times.

From *Twenty poems for one love*. (Tueni, N., 1979)

The cityscape of Beirut has undergone massive physical transformations throughout the last century and even more so during the past five decades. The civil war between 1975 and 1990, Israel's invasion of Beirut in 1982, its occupation of southern Lebanon up until 2000, its blockade on Lebanon in 2006 during which Israel targeted the southern suburbs of the city and the main infrastructure of the country, and finally the more recent Beirut port explosion in August 2020, have triggered continuous destructions and reconstructions and resulted in a constant flux of populations. In addition to armed conflicts and wars, other kinds of hostilities were observed against the built fabric of Beirut. At the end of the civil war in 1990, a hyper inflated real estate sector developed, prompting an unprecedented boom of construction activities and a drastic change in the morphology of the city. Solidere - a project for the development and reconstruction of the war damaged areas in the city centre, is an excellent example of the permanent damages to the physical and social fabric of Beirut.

The repeated destructions and re-constructions of Beirut have been widely acknowledged and conveyed from one generation to the next through different narratives and anecdotes (Alameddine, 2008; Al-Boustani, 1860; Al-Rihani, 1947; Awwad, 1976; El-Khoury, 1981; Kassir, 2003; Khalaf, 2006; Nasrallah, 1962; Salibi, 1988). It is thus important to note the role of literature and literary analysis in understanding the history and the development of the production of places in the city. In her book entitled *Beirut, Imagining the City: Space and Place in Lebanese Literature*, Ghenwa Hayek (2015) argues that the relationship between urban change and Lebanese literature has been dynamic and even dialectical. Besides offering a reading of the political, social, and historical context, she mentions that several Lebanese novels and books express emotional relations to specific locations and very often reflect the alienation of the character and the authors from the city. Other critics, such as Nirvana Tanoukhi, Neil Smith, and Robert Dixon, emphasise the need to address the geographic dimension and the materiality of the places described in literature. In contrast with the abstract and symbolic representation of the city in the seminal work of Burton Pike *The Image of the City in Modern Literature*, these authors call for a "closer reading" of the city – depicting it at a different scale and referring to it in less metaphorical terms.

This paper is structured around a tripartite division. The first section introduces two dominant yet contrasting grand narratives that contributed largely to the shaping of the Lebanese nation state. The juxtaposition of these narratives clearly portrays the political tensions at the time of the country's inception, towards the middle of the nineteenth century. However, despite representing contrasting ideologies and cultural identities, both seemed to have converged into a common aspiration for modernity initiating a process of urban transformation. The paper then unravels through a selection of micro-narratives based on stories and written accounts, taking a closer look at the old port city of Beirut under the Ottoman rule, describing daily activities and routines, physical and mental boundaries, as well as contested places. The selected anecdotes offer a different reading of the city and reveal some tangible and sometimes intangible heritage. The second section of the paper summarises a turbulent history of modern Lebanon that culminates in the breaking of the civil war, often referred to as a manifestation of an "identity crisis." The paper sheds the light on the works of artists and writers who used the cityscape to evoke their feelings of alienation from the city that was divided along sectarian and religious demarcation lines. The last section focuses on a major paradigm shift in politics and economy in Lebanon starting in 1990. The paper contrasts the commercial narrative brought forward by Solidere with the actual reading of the authors as

they roam around the streets of Beirut Central District, the recently re-constructed city centre. At the end of this section two extreme case scenarios are imagined for the future of the city that have been completely stripped from its core values and identity. Unfortunately, the paper ends on a dramatic note with the tragic Beirut Port explosion that shattered the neighbourhoods of the city and literally rendered it a post-apocalyptic city of ruins.

This assemblage of previous and current narratives is an attempt to materialise the metaphor of the city that "has died a thousand times, and been reborn a thousand times" through a physical description of old and new places and a historical account of the major events that have shaped it. It is also a practical attempt to write a new future for the city – a future that is resilient precisely because it refuses to adapt to its dramatic and traumatic transformations.

Building the Narrative | Shaping the Country

Two contrasting ideologies reflecting national aspirations and cultural identities emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century in the weakening Ottoman Empire and have equally contributed to the shaping of the port city of Beirut. The idea of the 'Asile du Liban' brought forward by the Flemish Jesuit Priest Henri Lammens - in reference to Mount Lebanon (Hayek, 2015), and the rise of an Arab cultural movement - 'Al Nahda' in contrast with the rise of religious identities in the Empire and also strongly supported by the West, have urged the Sublime Porte to adopt a series of urban transformations/reforms, also known as the Tanzimat. Although the narratives of the Jesuits and the Arab Nationalists were rooted in the specificity of the places they represented, they both explored the relation between the urban and the rural condition and strongly influenced the development of the port city of Beirut.

While there is not a perfect homogeneity among all the sections of the Syrian population, there is nevertheless, in its bosom an important core of nationality, and that is the population of Lebanon which, completely devoted to France, only awaits its advice and its guidance to enter on the path to regeneration.

From *Letter from the Jesuits in Lebanon to the French Foreign Ministry,* 1858. (Shorrock & Spagnolo, 1977).

The academic and religious institutions of the Jesuits heavily present in the area, because of the presence of a large Christian (mostly Maronite) population in Mount Lebanon, sought to cultivate this population and establish in them a Catholic nationality for Lebanon in order to foster France's colonial interests and ambitions (Hayek, 2015). In fact, the Jesuits strongly contributed to the formation of a Lebanese nationalistic thinking - rather sympathetic with the West, and eventually led to the formation of Greater Lebanon under the French mandate in 1920. Lammens' idea of the Asile du Liban is at the heart of the mountain-centred discourse and the idealisation of Mount Lebanon as a refuge for the Christians and non-Muslims, the symbol of the Lebanese nation and its source of inspiration. It is also important to note that the cedars - a species of trees native to the mountains of Lebanon - was adopted as a national emblem and an important image reflecting the strong connotations of the country with ancient civilizations preceding any Ottomans/Muslim heritage. The rise of the mountain nationalism and the romantic image of a pure and natural way of living not only excluded the port city of Beirut from its narrative, but also demonised it as being distrustful, too pluralistic, and dirty (Hourani, 1976).

In Beirut there are persons of different countries and races
Though they may differ in their nationality and tastes, they have common interests
and if they wish, they may live together in security, ease, affluence and prosperity

From *Nafir Suriyya* (Al Bustani, 1861)

Your status in the eyes of the Turks is debased,
And your right by the hands of the Turks is usurped,
You possess no known status or honor,
Nor any existence, or name or title,
O to my people, and my people are none but the Arabs!

From *Tanabbahu wa istafiqu ayuha al-arabu* (Yaziji, 1883)

> Mountain nostalgia alone could not exemplify the Lebanese national identity as it obviously excluded the non-inhabitants of the mountains, namely the population of the coastal cities of Beirut, Sidon, and Tyr (Hayek, 2015). Simultaneously with the Christian-centric discourse that rose in the mountains, a secular ideology deeply anchored in the pluralistic and multi-cultural environment of Beirut appealed to many Arabs and educated elites of the Ottoman Empire. This discourse, born in the city, quickly developed into anti-Ottoman sentiment and fostered Arab Nationalistic aspirations. The plan for the establishment of *Al Watan Al Arabi* or *Al Ummah Al Arabiyyah* [the Arab Homeland or the Arab Nation] (Antonios, 1939) was inspired by western ideas and the modern-nation model of self-determination based on shared language and ancestry (Volk, 2010). While the term *Al Watan* reflects a territorial dimension, *Al Umma* refers to a community of people without necessarily describing a well-defined geographic boundary. It is worth mentioning that the earliest figures of the *Arab Renaissance* used the term *Watan* in reference to a city or a city with its hinterland. As a matter of fact, Butrus Al Bustani and Kahlil Khuri first referred to the city of Beirut as *Watanuna* [our homeland] before ascribing to the term *Watan,* a larger territory encompassing rural areas in *Nafir Suriyy*a (Hill, 2020).
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> These two dominant and yet conflicting narratives of *the Asile du Liban* and *Al Watan Al Arabi* coexisted and contributed to the growing pressure over the weakening Ottoman empire to grant the land and its inhabitants a form of self-governance and independence from the Sublime Porte. While the Ottoman authorities tried to suppress the rebellious Arab and Lebanese nationalists, there were serious attempts to consolidate the social and the political foundation of the Empire, to reduce the danger of outside intervention on behalf of the defiant groups. Ottoman authorities sought to better integrate the non-Muslim population into the Ottoman society by improving the quality of life in the city and granting them more liberties, and at the same time, tried to appeal to the shared Muslim heritage of both Ottomans and Arabs (Volk, 2010). These efforts are best described through the *Tanzimat* reforms that were mostly concerned with the organisation of the Empire's cities of which Beirut was not an exception. A series of urban transformations contributed to the changing physiognomy of the *new city*, the appearance of new landmarks on the streets, and the establishment of a new urban space control.

As such, the new city would be more efficient than the old one in terms of comfort cleanliness, public services and security... Emanating from a uniform law, it would be open and fair, which means accessible to all, to its citizens as well as to new comers, without any prejudice about their origin or religion, and reflecting the qualities that the new Ottoman man deserves, when freed from communitarian burdens.

From *Beyrouth un siècle et demi d'urbanisme* (Davie, 2001)

The *Tanzimat* peaked in 1978 under the new Sultan Abdul Hamid II. The promised city - "the city of reason" - is meant to be superior to the old vernacular city and is characterised by order and conscious organisation of its streets and spaces (Davie, 2001). Its civic places are defined by wide and straight boulevards and functional buildings standing as landmarks and recognisable from a distance (Davie, 2001). The predecessors of Weygand, Foch, and Allenby streets today were the first creations of this new urbanism at the expense of the old and compact city fabric that characterised the Arab city. Another manifestation was the physical regularisation of urban spaces such as *Sahat Al Bourg* and *Al Hamidiyyah* through their demarcation with new buildings, streets, and modes of transportation (Hanssen, 1998) believed to make the city more *open* and *accessible* to all. The urban changes also affected the habitat structure that evolved into a more extroverted residence better adapted to the new cultural values and modern practices and made the city earn its name of *Mediterranean Bourgeoise* with the three-arch windows and red-tiled roofs (Fig. 1). Although the *Tanzimat* reforms aimed to re-establish the power and legitimacy of the Ottoman state, its physical manifestations were strongly connoted to the West and western practices, ironically increasing the hegemony of, and dependency on, the new European centres of power – much to the delight of their allies inside the Empire. Consequently, Sultan Abdel Hamid II adopted a highly symbolic construction programme to express the Ottoman nationality through an architecture that reproduced and reinterpreted Islamic art and patterns, of which the most impressive is the municipality building.

FIGURE 1 *Photograph of Beirut c. 1880.*

Note: *Photograph depicting the urban fabric of Beirut in the late 1800's. The bonfils Collection. AUB digital collections.* https://lib-webarchive.aub.edu.lb/BorreLudvigsen/http://almashriq.hiof.no/general/700/770/779/historical/pcd0109/28.html. *Reprinted with permission*

Narrating the Ottoman City | A selection of three micro-narratives

In 1888, Beirut was declared a provincial capital by Ottoman decree although it was neither the largest nor the most important city in the region (Volk, 2010). The common framework within which people from different religious loyalties and family ties coexisted, established a favourable environment in the city for the proliferation of trade and commercial activities between the East and the West. While the Lebanese Mountain maintained its strong symbolism of the Lebanese nation state, the capital, Beirut, gradually imposed its dominance as it became the main outlet for Mount Lebanon as well as Damascus – the important capital of the interior and of the Arab hinterland, thus becoming the main source of recounted events, encounters, and experiences.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the city of Beirut witnessed spectacular growth, mostly resulting from migratory movements within the empire and an influx of traders, journalists, and artists from the West. The site was transformed from a little coastal town to a major port city and later became a highly cosmopolitan centre. The population growth was the main generator of the renewal of the urban society and the subsequent challenge of the dominant political and cultural paradigms. Alternative narratives started to emerge as "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships" were being produced (Volk, 2010).

Narrative One: The City as Chaotic, Dirty, and Filthy

Men, women, kids, Greeks, French, Turks, Maronites, white, black, dark abound in the dirty streets, where with every step we take we bump into a camel, a dog, very often ducks and chicken. No pathway gets even close to regularity, or rectitude. Recognizing someone in Beirut is an impossible problem…

From *Voyages en Syrie 1860-1861* (Renan & Renan, 1930)

In her book entitled *L'occidentalisation de la vie quotidienne a Beyrouth: 1860-1914* (the westernization of daily life in Beirut: 1860-1914), Nada Sehnaoui looks at everyday life in the city of Beirut during the period of the *Tanzimat*, and through them analyses the new societal structure and relations that emerged in the midst of a systematic process of westernisation. Reading into her analysis is reading into a thousand tales about a city that was perceived by many as chaotic, dirty, and filthy. Henriette Renan, during her first visit to Beirut described its streets as a 'receptacle of dirt' and its houses as 'masses of mud' (Sehnaoui, 2002). Twenty-three days later, she writes:

Our present impression about Beirut is more favourable than the ones that were echoed in our first letters. While penetrating through thousands of horrors until we reach the interior of the houses, we understand that everything that is general remains completely abandoned in the East, that the street is a sewage, but that the house is most often neat. The Arab architecture has very nice motifs…

From *Voyages en Syrie 1860-1861* (Renan & Renan, 1930)

While her description emphasised again the disgust that a foreigner would experience when walking on the streets, she distinguishes the interior of the houses as places that are "neat" and showcasing "beautiful Arab Motifs." This testimony is not only important because it describes the city, but because it represents to a large extent the relationship of its inhabitants with the spaces that are identified as non-private. The dense morphology of the old city, the physical quality of the streets and urban spaces, and the introverted habitat structures shaped an image of the city that was the perfect stage for such narratives. While we could easily argue that these narratives described existing conditions and real places, we could

also think that they played an instrumental role in reshaping them and imagining the city of the future. In fact, the new mercantile bourgeoisie who wished to live in a city that reflects their economic and social aspirations could not identify anymore with streets that hinder their commercial activities and do not accommodate their clients, (Sehnaoui, 2002) and thus, supported the municipality's hygienic approach of wiping and clearing the old streets.

Narrative Two: The city as a stage for performance and representation

At dusk, [...] the pressured and the overwrought found soothing release on their way home in the conviviality, engaging humour and accomplished virtuosity of the celebrated *Hakawati*. After his makeshift stage is assembled (no more than a high table or wooden platform), usually in a familiar cul-de-sac or intimate intersection in the souks, he ascends the platform with his traditional garb, *tarbush* and provincial stick, his soul prop which he rhythmically taps to sustain the enthralled attention of his audience. Gradually, the gathering, as coffee and *arghilehs* are served, turns into an amiable, often rambunctious, interactive performance.

From *The heart of Beirut: Reclaiming the Bourj* (Khalaf, 2006)

In his book *The Heart of Beirut: Reclaiming the Bourg*, Samir Khalaf describes the different entertainment and distractions that characterised Beirut during Ottoman times and up until the middle of the twentieth century. He specifically refers to some traditional and local storytelling practices as a form of appropriation of the public sphere, transforming it into a *playground* or a performance place. Picture-shows (Sandouq al-firje), shadow-theatres (*Khayal al-zhil)* led by a *Karakoz,* and most notably storytellers also known as *Hakawatis,* were famous for their dramatic performances and were paid by owners of coffee houses to draw customers after sunset. Along the seashore, various cafes resting on the beach, or seated over the rocks turned into a popular stage where traditional and historical plot lines with an overall epic and theatrical form took place. Typically, the storyteller starts with a few comic statements and recommendations for the audience. Then, he resumes the story from the point at which he ended it the previous evening. A good *Hakawati* always interrupts the story at a critical point to prompt the audience to come back again (Zaydane, 1968). Samir Khalaf as well as Nada Sehnaoui both agree that these practices started to disappear as theatres and other western forms of cultural production made their first appearance in Lebanon. The last *Hakawati* was recorded several times by the Lebanese national television before the breakout of the war in 1975 as a valuable Object d'Art. The disappearance of such representations from the street not only marked the disruption of a significant local cultural production, but also gave birth to new architectural typologies and exclusive spaces catering for the intellectual elite.

Narrative Three: The city as a place for Martyrdom

"Glory and Eternity to our Martyr-Heroes"

(Inscription, *Unknown Soldiers tomb*, 1916)

There lives a people that knows how to die
They die as martyrs and ignored by the sword of fanaticism

From *Silhouettes Orientales* (D'Ancres, 1969)

Narratives that turn memory into history are usually told in times of crisis and political instability – when national identity is under attack (Volk, 2010). They selectively remember events in the past where unity prevailed to overcome the cultural differences and the conflicts of the present (Volk, 2010). The commemoration of such narratives becomes very important for the stability of the country and usually it materialises in the most significant places in the city. *Sahat Al Bourg* or *Al Bourg square* was not only one of the capital's major transit centres, it was also a public plaza where all vital functions were centralised. It is here that some - from different confessions and religious affiliation - were executed in 1916 by Ottoman ruler Jamal Pasha for their alleged conspiracy against the empire and aspiration for independence and where later a memorial honouring them was created. The fourteen men were proclaimed as martyrs and the square was renamed after them. Their heroic journey to the gallows was a lesson of civic duty and solidarity to both urbanites and mountaineers and eventually led to the formation of Greater Lebanon, including Mount Lebanon and the coastal cities under the French mandate. The narrative of the defiance of the Ottomans was also supported by the French who encouraged the commemoration of Jamal Pasha's Act of Cruelty and assigned to it one of the most significant places of the city; *Sahat Al Bourg* was also described as the Levant gateway and Liberty square (Sassine & Tueni, 2003). Martyrs square became a place of *shared grievance* (Volk, 2010) in the city, that continues to be commemorated today, despite the different motifs behind the martyrdom of the commemorated deceased and the different aspirations and beliefs of today's communities.

From Independence to Civil War | A turbulent history of Lebanon

To understand the turbulent history of modern Lebanon, it is important to acknowledge the long-standing rivalry between the Lebanese and Arab nationalists, and to understand the evolution of the power dynamic between the 2 groups after 1943. While the Lebanese nationalists were predominantly represented by a Christian Maronite population rooted in Mount Lebanon, their counterpart Arab nationalists were settled in the urban centres of the Ottoman Empire including Beirut, Damascus and Aleppo. In his book *Lebanon and Arabism*, Raghdi el-Solh argues that the geographic separation of the two groups under the Ottoman rule reduced the possibility of friction between them (El-Solh, 2004). In fact, both parties tended to cooperate against the Ottomans despite their differences. With the fall of the Ottoman empire and the emergence of Greater Lebanon in 1920 (Figure 2), frictions started to surface as the newly formed entity was considered a *Foyer* for the French and an extension of their influence in the region. However, the National Pact of 1943 reasserted the foundation of an independent multi-confessional country characterised by an "Arab face".

The National Pact was widely perceived as a reconciliation agreement but the conflict between the two groups persisted as the idea of the "Arab face" was constantly re-interpreted. The "Arab face" was considered by the Christians as an acceptance of Lebanon as being "less Arab than other Arab states" and as a total abandonment of the idea of the Arab Unity. They also took the liberty to pursue their self-determination path, excluding the others. Asher Kauffman (2014) further argues that during the three decades following independence, Lebanese nationalism developed into a more radical form. Phoenicianism – a national, non-Arab identity of Lebanon, was strongly advocated for by right wing Christian groups in a predominantly Arab - Muslim context. Simultaneously, the rise of the Palestinian cause as a consequence of the *Nakba* in 1948, demographic change, and regional politics also favoured a more radical form of Arab nationalism. Unfortunately, the civil war broke in 1975 opposing radical groups from both sides. Some of the bloodiest battles took place in Beirut, heavily damaging its built fabric and displacing its residents.

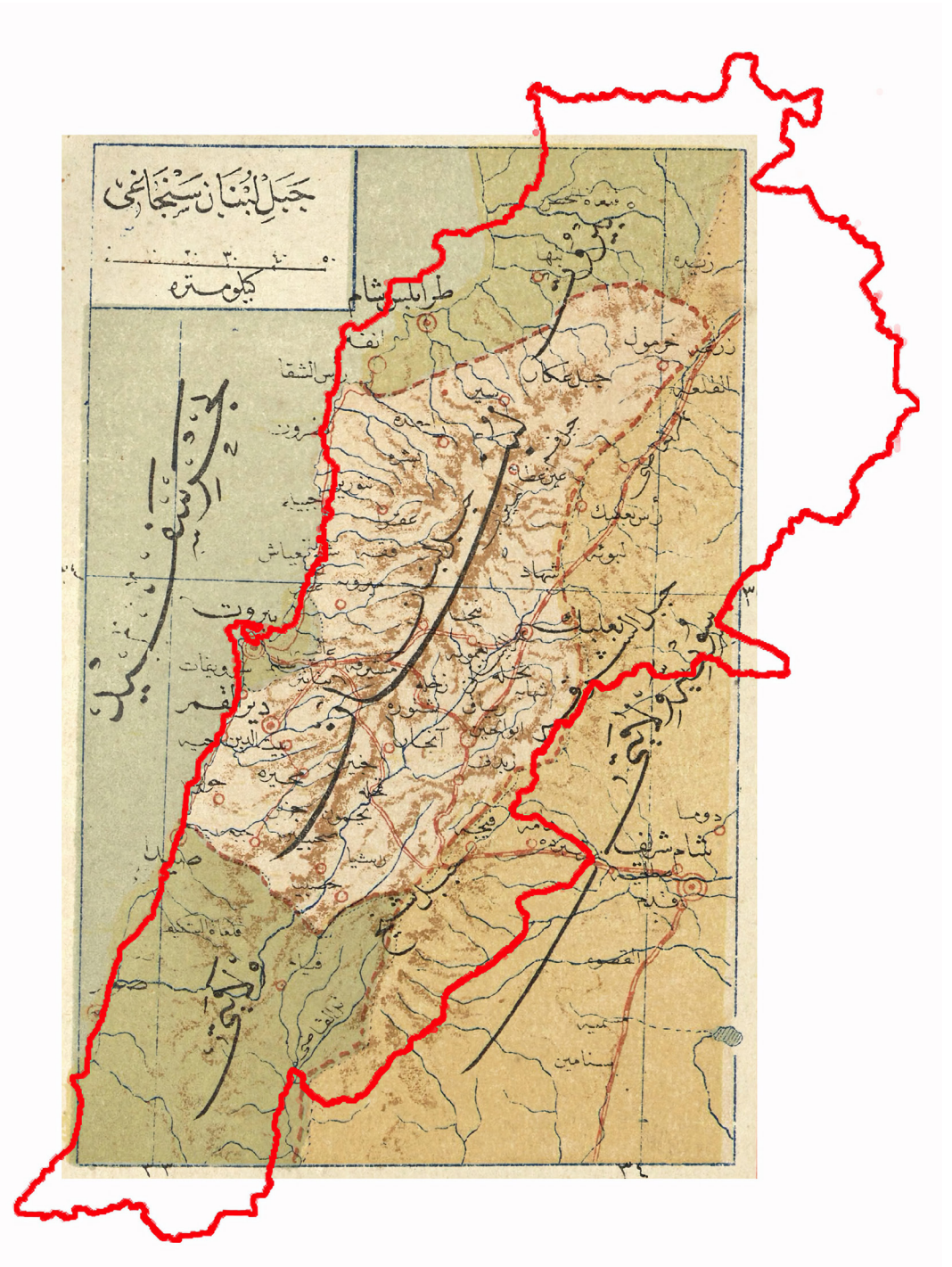

FIGURE 2 *Greater Lebanon Boundary Map*

Note: Overlay of Greater Lebanon boundary over the map of Mount Lebanon circa 1900

Fragmented City

We confess now
That we've maltreated and misunderstood you
And we had no mercy and didn't excuse you
And we offered you a dagger in place of flowers!
We confess before the fair God
That we injured you, alas; we tired you
That we vexed you and made you cry
And we burdened you with our insurrections
O Beirut

From *To Beirut the Feminine, With My Love* (Qabbani, 1978)

FIGURE 3 *Demarcation line, Beirut.*

Note: The demarcation line going through Beirut city centre and the end of the civil war. https://www.gettyimages.dk/detail/news-photo/the-reconstruction-of-big-beiruit-opening-of-the-green-line-news-photo/124121315 (Copyright 2020 by Marc Deville).

The civil war lasted 15 years during which the cityscape of Beirut featured as the main protagonist in several novels and poems written by local as well as foreign authors. Very often, Beirut was described in metaphorical terms as a young and beautiful female that was kidnapped, maltreated, or raped (Darwish, 1982; El-Khoury 1981, 2002; El Shaykh, 1996; Qabbani, 1978). The city was not only referred to as a victim but sometimes as a whore – possibly in reference to its "openness" as Mahmoud Darwish would argue in a series of prose poems entitled *Memory for Forgetfulness*. Besides the feminine and metaphorical description of the city, Beirut has also been depicted as a body dissected and amputated from its vital organs. In many texts, Beirut is described using a language of division and fragmentation, projecting the image of a torn city that cannot be pieced together. Looking back at the pictures of the civil war, the most representative photos are those that depict the green line (Figure 3) as a no-man's-land – a demarcation line cutting through the city centre and dividing the city into an eastern Christian sector and a western, predominantly Muslim sector. The once hustling and bustling city centre became completely deserted as shops and business owners moved to other districts controlled by their respective co-religionists. During the war, Beirut port - strategically located close to the city centre, fell under the control of factional militias and armed groups. What was once a vital organ for the city was transformed into a safe haven for corrupt practices

and illegal trade while other makeshift ports were constructed along the coast to serve their respective sectarian community. In another provocative representation of the city, several writers such as Etel Adnan, Mahmoud Darwish, and Hassan Sabra referred to Beirut, excluding the eastern Christian district as if it did not really belong to Beirut!

The shift in the representation of the city from a diverse and multicultural place to a fragmented place divided along sectarian and religious demarcation lines reflected a profound significance for the country (Hayek, 2015). In fact, the emergence of a new urban identity was observed by Elise Salem (2003) as happening simultaneously with another shift in the representation of the country from a focus on the mountains to an emphasis on the capital Beirut. According to the political scientist Lucian Pye (1962), the dilemma of parochial sentiments and cosmopolitan practices often results in a state of confusion or an identity crisis. He argues that as long as people cannot assimilate this duality within their civil society, their perception will always be uprooted and they will not be able to develop the firm sense of identity, a necessary condition for building a stable, modern nation state. In her reading of Emily Nasrallah's *Tuyur Aylul* and Yusuf Awwad's *Tawhin Beirut*, Ghenwa Hayek (2015) describes the city and the village - where the protagonists of both stories "could not find themselves or could not belong in either rural or urban Lebanon," as inhospitable places. She continues to describe that each of the two places is an escape from the other and argues that this condition reflects the Lebanese identity crisis.

While the entire country was affected by the civil war, the most destructive impact was concentrated in the city centre. During these years, Lebanese and foreign literature reflected the ideological conflicts, physical divides, and more subjective states of confusion experienced by the inhabitants of, and visitors to, the city. Ironically, the committed atrocities of the war contributed more than ever in bringing out the material sense of the city shaping the way individuals collectively remembered Beirut. At the end of the war in 1990, the Lebanese were looking forward to seeing the heart of the country revived.

Globalization and Beirut | The Post-Civil War City

The National Reconciliation Accord signed in November 1989 in Taef, Saudi Arabia is considered to be "the basis for the ending of the civil war and the return to political normalcy in Lebanon" (Krayem, 2012). The agreement settled many of the contested issues at the time and most importantly legitimised a new politico-economic order in Lebanon. The Taef Agreement as such is perceived as a major milestone in the country's history, but it is also part of a more global phenomenon that was triggered by the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. These two events allowed people to devise standards of "how things should be done" (Friedman, 2005), hence announcing the end of the cold war and the beginning of the unilateral dominance of the United State model all over the world.

Solidere - the reconstruction project of Beirut centre, was launched shortly after Taef and aimed at catching up with the age of neoliberal globalisation and at serving as a role model of "how things should be done" in Beirut. It was backed by the increasingly intertwined political and economic powers that prioritised the conversion of downtown Beirut into an international commercial and financial centre (Traboulsi, 2016). Despite widespread opposition, Solidere was incorporated in 1994 as a Lebanese joint stock company with 50% of its shares attributed to the former land and property owners of the city and the other 50% made available on the international stock market. The commoditisation of the capital Beirut perfectly illustrates the emergence of the global urban model seeking to create a favourable business environment and attract external investors and developers. Solidere is a clear by-product of this process and thus reveals a text or an image through which the social rules and political power were made legible (Rottenberg, 2001).

"Beirut Reborn"

The project gives form to a city centre that balances old and new,
Enhances its heritage and creates an "Ancient city of the future".

From *Beirut Reborn* (Chammaa, 1996)

The old centre of the city was identified as a perfect site for the development of a new Central District - a symbolic project it deemed capable of representing all Lebanese. To promote the project, Solidere tailored a historical narrative that suits its commercial objectives and communicated it through generic slogans such as 'Beirut – An ancient city of the future' and through a so-called 'contextually sensible' design approach. The project idealised a vision of colonial Lebanon inherited from the Ottoman empire and the French, neglecting any exchange between local traditions and modernity. The result was a pastiche of iconic representations limiting the definition of historical associations to the appearance and aesthetics of the façades. Furthermore, the heart of the city has been amputated from the urban fabric and the geographic location it belonged to by building a massive infrastructure of high-speed roads around the newly proposed Beirut Central District (BCD). Today, the city that was once naturally connected to the sea has only a series of industrial blue cranes visible from afar to remind us of its historical relation to the water.

FIGURE 4 *Domus magazine featuring Zaha Hadid's Parametric Souk.*

Note: Domus magazine (2019) featuring Zaha Hadid project under construction in Beirut.

Several eminent architects or archistars, such as Rafael Moneo, Renzo Piano, Giancarlo De Carlo, Herzog & de Meuron, Steven Holl, Lord Norman Foster, Arata Isozaki, and Zaha Hadid were also involved in the rebirth of the city. One of the recent issues of the glossy Italian architectural magazine *Domus* (Figure 4), features

the bombastic Zaha Hadid project in Beirut Central District under the title *Parametric Souk*, an evident oxymoron of two words belonging to two different worlds: parametric in reference to the architecture of the future, and souks as a typology reminiscent of past traditions, culture, and memory. Another headline at the bottom left of the page reads: *Under construction. Souk or Mall? Post-War rebuilding. Bulldozing Heritage?* A provocative question that is highly critical of the design approach for the project.

The development of Beirut Central District to become "the finest city centre in the Middle East" was described by the chairman of Solidere, Nasser Chamaa, as "one of the most ambitious post-war reconstruction and urban regeneration ventures" (Solidere Quarterly, 2009). As we look at it today, it is an admirable architectural outcome that defines an exclusive space where punctual and limited exchange takes place and where the visitor is overwhelmed at night by a perceptible sense of solitude. Behind the glazed windows of the ground floor, fancy shops and restaurants spread along the streets, while the upper floors remain empty like ghost spaces suspended in the air. At night, this portion of the city disappears in the darkness at the exact moment when one wishes to experience it the most! Furthermore, Solidere's final outcome is a project that is not able to reflect the process of urban change, in which there is no room left for openness, un-finished works, heterogeneous spaces or otherness within the Beirut Central District.

Beirut as an experimental ground

I have given up on fantasizing
about the future of cities.
My work is not about the past, and it
is certainly not about the future.
I am only interested in very specific
experiences in the present.
It is by addressing the specific rather than
the general that we can transcend the
predictable consensus of generalities.

The specific is the unpredictable
reality that is far too complex to be
absorbed by theoretical stances.
The present is volatile; it allows for
frivolous and spontaneous experimentation
within the limits of given realities.

From *The Anti-Manifesto* (Khoury, 2010)

Even a possible claim that Beirut Central District is an experimental ground for new ideas, forms, and architecture is far-fetched and unconvincing. The new constructions, products, brands, and lifestyle are a replica of other projects designed for the West rather than a contextual Lebanese experiment. As such, Solidere's project qualifies as a thematic city occasionally punctured by sparse islands of surviving ruins and leftover spaces that are designated as public places. It is worth mentioning that despite the resistance of the professionals, academics and nostalgic inhabitants of Beirut, the *tabula rasa* approach took over the reconstruction process and continues to unfold as the so-called BCD or Solidere (in reference to name of the real estate company) becomes a stage for submission and non-resilience. The heart of the city seems to have surrendered completely to the neo-liberal model, leaving no room for people-centred processes and replacing the 'real city' with a speculative bubble.

The identity of Beirut Port City has been completely obscured by the post-civil war reconstruction. The outdoor markets and local coffee shops that once greeted visitors from around the world have disappeared. The sound of random bargains and the smell and taste of the spontaneous sharing of food on the streets have also vanished. An induced anaesthesia overwhelms the city that no longer speaks a recognisable language. Visitors strive to find the lost beauty that made Beirut a Mediterranean capital. '*I love Beirut*', the brightly-coloured motto placed in three-dimensional letters at the entrance of Beirut Souks (Figure 5), explicitly represents the vulgar language through which the city wants to communicate with its inhabitants and visitors. '*I love shopping in Beirut*', we shall clarify.

FIGURE 5 *I love Beirut*

Note: *I love Beirut* motto placed at the entrance of Beirut souks in October 2019.

Two scenarios for the Future of Beirut

As we walked down the streets of Beirut Central District and observed the city during the autumn of 2019 (just before October 17), we imagined two scenarios.

In the first one, the BCD was destined to become a future ruin. The glamour of the empty flats would start fading as they became deserted and would soon be in need of restoration or renewal. Safi Village, the hotel district and *Wadi Abou Jmil* would turn into a gigantic site in a state of decay like ruins, occasionally visited by a few. The ruins of the future will be pretty much like a movie set built with special care given to every detail, but it will be destined to be dismantled... In the second scenario, a more rebellious ending was imagined for the city. Mass groups would march on the streets and would move into the empty apartments in an act of collective appropriation, reviving the lost *genius loci*. Although this act would not be legislated by any law, it would qualify as the sanest behaviour in a colony of insects, moving naturally to better places as part of a systematic process of occupation.

A few days later, on October 17, massive crowds marched on the streets of Beirut, filling Martyr's Square and other significant places in the city. The demonstrations spread quickly across the entire country, claiming the demise of the ruling political system and asking for change. The protests became known as the *October 17 Revolution* and lasted for months during which protesters attacked every form of representation that served as propaganda for the dominant and political actors. Concrete walls, metallic fences, barbed wires, and armed forces were struggling to protect the last soldiers of a crumbling empire – namely the banks and the luxurious retail centres (including the Zaha Hadid project still under construction), in addition to the most prominent institutions of the government…

Before we move forward and conclude, we would like to take a look back at the most recent series of events that occurred in Beirut and around the world while we were still writing the final draft of the paper. The *Port Cities*' call for abstracts was launched during the summer of 2019 and was due at the end of October, a few days after the start of the so-called *October 17 Revolution* in Lebanon. By the time the abstract was accepted a new government had been formed in Lebanon as a result of the increasing pressure of the crowds on the street. The first draft of the paper was due in April and extended until June 1 due to the unprecedented implications of the Covil-19 pandemic around the globe. The paper deadline was eventually re-extended until July 1. By then, the economy in Lebanon had hit "rock bottom," witnessing the most acute depreciation of the local currency and the total crumbling of the banking sector. But this was not all! A few weeks after the submission of the draft paper, a devastating and deadly explosion hit the port of Beirut and consequently the final draft of the paper is being revised. For over a year, Lebanon has been featured in the breaking news of every single media channel and newspaper in the world. Any paper disregarding this past year in Lebanon is certainly outdated and could only serve as a reference.

The "Apocalypse" | "The Great Collapse"

FIGURE 6 *The ruins of Achrafieh*

Note: A panorama of the ruins of Achrafieh neighbourhood facing the port. Copyright 2020 by Thibault Camus

At the door of the house who will come knocking?
An open door, we enter.
A closed door, a den.
The world beats on the other side of my door

From *Les amusements Naturels* (Birot, 1945)

On August 4th 2020, nearly 2750 tons of ammonium nitrate that had been improperly stored in the port of Beirut detonated provoking the second largest non-nuclear explosion in human history (BBC News, October 5). The blast resulted in the killing of hundreds of people and the injury of thousands, the destruction of tens of thousands of homes and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. The scene in Beirut following the August 4th explosion has been described as "post-apocalyptic" by many newspapers and channels reporting the tragic event (Figure 6).

The city that was once divided along religious and political demarcation lines, and continues today to be characterised by discrepancies and inequalities between its inhabitants, has suddenly come together as a result of this unprecedented tragic blast. Unfortunately, the new reality of Beirut reifies the first extreme case scenario we have imagined for the city: Beirut as a future ruin - a future that arrived too soon! Some years back, Lebanese-German movie director Myrna Maakaron drew a parallel between Beirut and Berlin, describing them as "two cities that were occupied, destructed, divided, reconstructed and where you feel today the weight of the past and the lightness of life-sharing, adventures and memories." Today we also remember the *year zero* set by the famous neo-realist Roberto Rosselini in reference to the reality of Berlin the year after its near-total destruction during World War II. Beirut *year zero* was referred to as the "Great Collapse" in the "Al-Akhbar" article featuring a photo of the destroyed port (Al-Akhbar, August 5). In fact, this collapse was not a surprise; it is better defined as the final stage of the downfall of an organism due to a long term and untreated illness or injury.

As people wander around the ruins of the city, they wonder if this final knockout was an intended act or simply the result of mis-governance, negligence, and corruption. They also wonder about their different fates if they were in other places at the wrong moments. They recount their journey across places they have been to, but that no longer exist and their encounters with people that have ceased from being. Samir Skainy, a Lebanese writer documented few stories of those who made it. However, some were in the wrong place at the wrong time and hundreds of unspoken stories have been buried under the rubble or are still missing.

"No one can tell a story on the casualties' behalf; they are gone with their stories and secrets. They are gone without telling us how they thought and fought at that painful moment. They left the hellish Lebanon, leaving us behind like moving corpse awaiting the second explosion."

From *Beirut Blast: The stories will never end* (Skainy, 2020)

Recorded narratives are like spoken memorials, commemorating both places and victims as well as "survivors" who will soon leave the city looking for a better place. As a matter of fact, just as the city started to show a glimpse of hope, a new narrative of forced exile has come to the fore, echoing an old Arabic proverb that says: "When the sad one decided to find happiness, she found nowhere to go."

Concluding Notes

Since its inception as a capital, Beirut has undergone continuous changes. The city was transformed from a small harbour town to a generic financial/business district to which the port has lost its relevance but remained too close. In ancient Greece, the design of the port was based on a 'ritual design' that considered different bays for distinguishing and preserving its multiple functions in case of disasters. The protection of a port has always been an essential factor for granting the survival of a water city. During the past decades, the port of Beirut continued to operate mostly ensuring the import and the storing of goods coming from abroad. It has been reduced to a dangerous 'storage place,' a mere shadow of its former beauty and complexity. Unfortunately, the daring aspect of the port materialised into an apocalyptic explosion that devastated the entire city. The silos that once represented a state-of-the-art infrastructure and a vital resource for the country has become an icon of its evil spirit. While we try to re-imagine the future of Beirut, we ask ourselves if it is acceptable to move the port somewhere else... and whether it is necessary to amputate its gangrene limb for a safer and healthier city.

Collecting different narratives is an important part of the documentation process that is necessary for any reconstruction project that might take place, ensuring that it does not take too long to be implemented, not happen at all, or turn out to be as destructive as the explosion itself. Re-thinking the port city as a place with new (or old?) possibilities requires the fulfilment of several milestones of which a resilient population - one that has the mental ability to understand and adapt to change – is crucial. Yet, it seems that the Lebanese population has taken a different path towards resilience, by rejecting to adhere to any imposed dramatic or traumatic transformations.

No! We don't want to rebuild.
We don't want to rise again.
We don't want to be resilient and go on.
We don't want to recycle this mess.
We want to destroy.
We want to destroy this system.
We want to build ourselves from scratch.
We want to live.

Just live with what remains in us.

(D. Kanaan – a Lebanese citizen, 2020)

As our perceptions continue to be eroded by capital flow and the continuous destructions and reconstructions of objects, goods, and ideas, our ability to see without language guiding our eyes is fading away. This research fully adopts Paul Valery's affirmation that *words affect our perception* (Valery, 1936), hence the relevance of investigating written accounts and narratives about the city. This paper is not merely a record of previous and current narratives; it is also a practical attempt to write a new future for the city - a city that is safe, with its door open, that gives equal opportunity and access to its citizens, a city in which each individual will play an active role.

We are knocking at the door of Beirut,
and we enter only if we find the door open.
Together with Beirut citizens,
we keep on beating on the other side of the door.

(Roula el Khoury & Paola Ardizzola, 2019)

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