



Lebanon and the Fog of Reconstruction

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The Man with the Golden Shoes [al-rajel du al-na' l al-dabī] (2000) is a documentary by the late Syrian director Omar Amiraley. The film provides a portrait of the former Prime Minister and architect of Lebanon's post-war "reconstruction," Rafik Hariri. It opens with a clip of a 10-story building in downtown Beirut collapsing from an explosion. The building's ruin is not by conflict but reconstruction, the planned detonation of dynamite at the structures foundation. A large cloud of dust rises from the collapsed building and the screen is engulfed in the fog of reconstruction. In Lebanon, the fogs of war and reconstruction have at times been difficult to distinguish.

In this paper, I am not suggesting that a certain type of sociopolitical and economic, as well as material, rebuilding did not occur in Lebanon in the 1990s following the end of the Civil

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War. The vast reconstruction led by, and formed around, the urban development corporation Solidere in downtown Beirut that eventually followed the signing of the Ta'if Peace Accords *did* mark a new era in the country. Indeed, the Solidere project is described by the architect Bernard Khoury in typical hyperbolic fashion as, “the largest real estate adventure on the planet at the time.”^[1] It certainly was in the 1990s the single largest real estate corporation in the Middle East and formed the core of the national reconstruction project for Lebanon. But, I argue, this process was neither a clean break from the dynamics of the Civil War nor an attempt to rebuild a social contract to establish a post-war phase.

The post-Ta'if reconstruction of Lebanon focused around downtown Beirut, and its transformation into an urban development corporation (Solidere), was aimed at building a socio-political and economic order organized around luxury real estate and the service industry. This reconstruction produced an order that continued certain forms of conflict between former militia leaders and political-economic figures, such as the Rafik Hariri, in new forms. More, it sustained the extraction of social wealth. Many of the country's contemporary failures, for instance, in affordable housing, infrastructure, waste management, urban governance and open space, as well as the vast accumulation of debt, can be traced to the battles over and within the reconstruction.

Reconstruction of the built environment is often tied to the end of war and the start of a post-conflict period but this link maybe misplaced. Reconstruction can also result in violence, displacement and social discord that is more commonly associated with the built environment's destruction. As many of the papers in this series assert, we need a deeper understanding of what reconstruction consists of, its processes and its complex relationship to conflict that is generally understood to simply supersede.

To disrupt the link between reconstruction and post-war periods, I provide an account of Lebanon's reconstruction that

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highlights the “sediments” of the Civil War in it. I do so by tracing the start of this processes within the Civil War and not – as is normally the case – in the post-Ta’if era and the inauguration of Solidere. The reconstruction that was implemented in the 1990s can be traced back to 1977. If we are attentive to the broader historical horizon of the reconstruction we can understand how it was responsible for not only the extensive destruction of the built environment but also for the continuation of certain types of conflict and extraction of social wealth.

To comprehend how reconstruction can be violent and tied to conflict, it is integral to recognize that war is not only about the destruction of the built environment. Construction and the control of mobility, in particular within urban areas, can be utilized to impose violence on others. Buildings and infrastructure, and the spatial networks they form, can be central to social relations and an integral part of socio-political and economic identity. How reconstruction processes organize urban space can often be part of ongoing conflicts rather than a break from them. The choice, means and method by which particular infrastructure, housing, government and financial institutions, were reconstituted and reconstructed was of profound economic and sociopolitical importance to competing factions both within and outside Lebanon. For example, the enclaved Beirut that emerged in the Civil War years was not only a result of the destruction of the built environment but also its re-formulation through construction during wartime. Militias used the provision of basic urban services as a strategy of control and intimidation of both their “own” population and “others” (Yahya 1995: 107).

The various militias endeavored to literally construct their respective sectarian enclaves.

The destruction and displacement that occurred in and around the center of Beirut was followed by the extensive construction and reformulation of urban space in the city’s peripheries. The war produced dramatic changes to the urban geography of

Lebanon and Beirut's role as the socioeconomic and political metropole was replaced by no less than ten militia controlled cantons built around several newly constructed ports along the Lebanese coast (Trablousi 2007: 232). Militias also shifted rural populations into the city to facilitate the acquisition of a religiously homogenous area (Yahya 1995: 110). The construction sector was one of the few sectors of the economy that continued to expand during the Civil War. A World Bank report notes that before the Civil War, in 1974, construction represented US\$141 million, an estimated four percent of GDP, by 1988 this had grown to US\$328 million, representing 10 percent of GDP (1991: 3). The absence of government supervision meant that developers were keen to exploit land over the permitted or appropriate legal restrictions (Eddé 1997: 116). General construction and land assembly, as well as the sub-division of land, were active in the war years (World Bank 1993: 34).

The Lebanese Civil War certainly entailed the destruction of the built environment but simultaneously it produced a certain type of (military) urbanization. Not only were regions and neighborhoods turned into sectarian enclaves but windows were replaced with wood, wooden doors replaced with steel, neighbors replaced with strangers and open streets transformed into fortified compounds. The war, scholars and architects have noted, produced an urban project that killed the prospect of an open and plural city, one I contend has continued to the present day (Yassin 2010; Verdeil 2001). As Bernard Khoury told me, "I compare Beirut to an extremely crowded room full of people that turn their back to each other, packed with solitary islands, all these building are very solitary, they do not communicate with one another."^[2]

In addition to the Civil War producing a socially antagonistic – even violent – urbanization, the reconstruction that began in earnest following the end of the "War of Liberation" and the signing of Ta'if Agreement was not a clean break from the conflict period. The Ta'if Accord was a Saudi-Syrian agreement,

overseen by the United States, that placed Lebanon firmly under Syrian occupation but finally ended fifteen years of war. The deal constructed around the Accord was that Syria would allow Rafik Hariri to lead the economy and reconstruction process, while the Syrians remained in control of security and foreign policy posts (Foreign Affairs, Interior, Defense and Information) (Denoeux and Springborg 1998). Rafik Hariri and his reconstruction project (the center piece of which was Solidere) played a central role in the United States and Saudi Arabia allowing, and even facilitating, Syrian military hegemony in Lebanon through the Accord. The Ta'if Accord was not a final and definitive resolution to the civil war but rather a pact to – temporarily and precariously – halt direct conflict. The reconstruction, meanwhile, was a means through which many conflicts continued.

The sediments of the Civil War were embedded in the reconstruction and in certain ways the reconstruction was the extension of conflict through the construction and re-formulation of the built environment. One of the very first large scale infrastructure projects to be undertaken was the construction of a trench around the Beirut Central District (BCD) to secure the territory of the area for its transformation into a corporation. Solidere was created as a distinct entity enclosed from the rest of the city expressing perhaps the continuation of the military urbanization of the Civil War. The preparations made for its formation entailed the extensive destruction of the very BCD it was tasked with “reconstructing.”

It was not only the physical form of Solidere that was embedded within the logic of the Civil War. The reconstruction process became an important means through which public resources were redistributed to former militia leaders and other power brokers in Lebanon. Solidere formed an important part of continuing socio-political and economic conflict within Lebanon and an alternative institutional space for financial flows to be directed toward patronage networks constituted by socio-political, religious and economic elites.

The complexity of the Lebanese Civil Wars meant that at several moments when open conflict had halted, the inhabitants and even the government thought that the Civil War was over and the reconstruction phase could begin, only for conflict to start again. The reconstruction process that began after Ta'if, and placed Solidere and the BCD at its center, was the third significant attempt to begin rebuilding. The reconstruction phase that began in 1991 cannot be understood independently of the multiple previous attempts to rebuild during Lebanon's civil conflict, most notably in 1977 and then in 1983.

I identify 1977 as the pivotal year because this is when a Beirut Central District Plan (1977-1986) formed following the declaration of a ceasefire. This plan, building on preexisting legal frameworks, introduced the general provisional laws for the financing of real estate companies that would form the basis for Solidere in 1991 (Kabbani 1992: 8). The 1977 reconstruction also put in place the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR). The CDR was given extensive powers for planning, financing (including borrowing and lending powers), execution and supervision of all reconstruction programs (World Bank 1991). It also created the plan and legal framework for the formation of a private real estate company, that resulted in the formation of Solidere and its ability to acquire ownership of the entire BCD area. Formed by Prime Minister Salim al-Huss, under a Sarkis Presidency struggling for power and legitimacy, the CDR and its reconstruction was expected to act rapidly to consolidate the halt in fighting and solidify the presidency of Sarkis (backed by the Syrians). The Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in 1978 and the escalation of fighting between Christian militias and Syrian forces shelved the plans for reconstruction in this period, however.

In 1983, a halt to the fighting meant that once again the reconstruction plans, and even implementation, started again. Amin Gémayel issued a new set of plans. This included a series of plans created by Dar al-Handassa (DAR) in 1983 and 1986 commissioned by Hariri's corporation Oger Liban and funded by

him. These involved a plan for the redevelopment of the northern littoral between Beirut and Jounieh (the Linor project). This was a region Gemayel wanted to assert his authority on due to its strategic importance (Eddé 1997: 105). But more significantly these plans by DAR were critical to the formation of Solidere and the Hariri-led “reconstruction.” Gemayel it seems was also cognizant of Hariri’s designs on the downtown area and attempted to dilute the focus of the reconstruction on this area (Eddé 1997: 107).

Charbel Nahas, former Minister of Telecommunications, who worked with Oger Liban during this period, related to me in an interview, how Hariri requested that he and his students from the newly established Lebanese University assist in the formation of plans to clear the rubble in and around downtown Beirut.[3] Charbel stated that he convinced Hariri, Amin Gemayel and the Minister of Public Work’s Pierre el-Khoury to launch a new survey of the downtown area based on the 1977 plan. The subsequent study showed that the buildings had deteriorated significantly mainly due to neglect rather than the direct impact of fighting. In 1983, Oger Liban undertook an extensive demolition of the downtown area in the name of reconstructing damaged buildings. Many have documented how the most extensive destruction of downtown Beirut did not occur in contexts of open conflict but rather in periods of peace in the name of “reconstruction,” specifically in 1983, 1986 and then finally in 1992. Oger Liban is accused of destroying many significant buildings in the downtown area (including Souk al-Nouriyeh, Souk Sursuq and parts of Saifi) during its “clear up” operations (Makdisi 1997; Salam 1994; Schmid 2002).

By the end of 1983, the Civil War had flared up once again and included the infamous bombing of the US Embassy and the US Marine headquarters. The increased tension in Lebanon between competing factions in this period and internationally also coincided with Hariri taking a more public and forceful role in attempts to halt the open conflict of the Civil War.[4] This period also marked a turning point in the plans for the

downtown area. Nahas, who worked for Oger Liban at the time, said by 1984 the return of conflict created a different “logic in people’s relation to the city.”[5] “In 1984 it was absolutely different,” Nahas explained, “no one was in the mind of coming back... it was a much more ambitious approach that needed to be put in place to justify the re-centralization of the city.” In 1986, Oger Liban published a new alternative Master Plan for the Beirut Central District (BCD) that for the first time introduced an up-market private development and joint-stock corporation for the entire BCD that we are familiar with today. Nahas stated that he “diverged very seriously” with these plans for downtown Beirut.

The third set of plans for downtown Beirut that would result in the establishment of the joint-stock corporation Solidere in 1994 would have to wait, however, until the “War of Liberation” (*harb al-tahrir*) ended. The so-called “War of Liberation” was one of the most brutal episodes of the Civil War. This conflict killed an estimated 1,000 civilians, resulted in mass displacement and extensive destruction in and around Beirut. An IMF report, for example, notes how the Lebanese economy had shown much flexibility and resilience during the civil war years but that “1990 was possibly the worst year for the economy since the conflict began” (1991: 5). It noted that, “Unlike in 1982, the conflict was centered in East Beirut and the surrounding areas, where there is a heavy concentration of industrial and financial activity” (5). The “War of Liberation,” however, would prove to be the final major open conflict of the Civil War. The geopolitical climate with the end of the Cold War, global expansion of American power, Syria’s participation in the UN-led operation to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation and Iranian power in remission, meant the start of Ta’if Era could begin in earnest by the start of 1991.

As soon as the open conflict halted a rapid political, legal and economic mobilization occurred for the reconstruction effort led by Hariri. Indeed, Hariri moved so fast the World Bank even called for the reconstruction plans to be slowed (World Bank

1992). In the period of 1991-1994 a heated public debate concentrated on the plans proposed for Beirut and the scheme to turn the entire Beirut central district into a real estate corporation. In the summer of 1991 a new master plan, paid for by Hariri, was launched by DAR led by the prominent Lebanese architect Henri Eddé and became known as the Eddé plan. Alongside the master plan, the CDR agreed to a new \$6.9 million study for Lebanon, funded by the Hariri Foundation, and created by the American engineering firm Betchel Group and DAR. This plan culminated in the *Horizon 2000 for the Reconstruction and Development of Lebanon* that envisaged a US\$12 billion national reconstruction and that placed what would become Solidere at its center. The Eddé plan caused enough public opposition for the plan for BCD to be reformulated. Henri Eddé resigned over what he stated was his own naivety regarding Hariri's intentions and his ambitions to protect his client, "qui était l'Etat" (Eddé 1997: 126). A new master plan and Solidere was officially incorporated on the 15th May 1994 and two months later was inaugurated under highly controversial circumstances related to the legality of its formation (Law 117/91) and corruption. Alongside Solidere, two more large real estate corporations – Linord and Elisar – were launched in the 1990s through Law 117/91. These projects have largely been forgotten about, however, as they were never initiated due to lack of funding and entanglement in political disputes.

The rise of Hariri and his Solidere project was remarkable in a violent and fractured Lebanese context. Hariri's Solidere led-reconstruction project produced a new economic order focused on luxury real estate that was part of a complex shift of resources and social power into the hands of factions connected to Hariri. As a number of scholars have detailed, the Solidere led-reconstruction process was part of an intricate set of flows of rents created through compensation, Treasury Bills, high interest rates, tax avoidance and real estate speculation.[6] Lebanon's sovereign debt by the end of the 1990s would be among the highest in the world, with much of this debt owned

by Lebanese banks either owned directly or associated with Hariri.[7] The “reconstruction” was central to the ability of Hariri to accumulate social power in a highly fractured and often violent social context. Solidere and the broader reconstruction that was pivoted around it, was an integral part of the profound accumulation and concentration of social power that Hariri had established in Lebanon by the early 1990s. As Paul Salem (1998) noted, “Never has one individual wielded such a combination of public and private power in modern Lebanon as has Rafiq Hariri” (21).

The formation of Solidere and with it the Second Lebanese Republic was also a violent process. Saree Makdisi (1997) details how the election of Hariri in 1992 was followed by the strengthening of the “repressive apparatuses of the state” (697). Old censorship laws previously ignored were now enforced; the death penalty was brought back for political and civil crimes; the widespread allegations of torture and abuse of prisoners in Lebanese jails; and since 1993 a ban placed on streets protests of any kind. In 1996, a military curfew was placed on Beirut and other cities to prevent a planned strike planned by the General Labour Confederation; Hariri notably declared that, “we will not allow the government to be toppled from the street” (cited in Makdisi 1997: 698). Lebanon under Hariri, Makdisi argues, “witnessed both an astonishing increase in the activities of repressive state apparatuses as well as an increase in the state’s role in those forms of public planning that – as opposed to health care, education, and low-income housing – are calculated either to yield immediate private profits or to improve the infrastructural conditions for the generation of private profits” (698).

Solidere was also directly associated with violence. Bahij Tabbara who created the legal framework for Solidere stressed that the real estate corporation is not an ordinary business, “the concept was to force the tenants and land owners to form a stock exchange company against the value of their share, it was a kind of expropriation but it was not a real expropriation. But

the tenants were forced into a company.”[8] Many of property right holders supported the creation of Solidere, as property rights over the years had become fragmented into thousands of different claims. But many other property owners did not agree with the formation of Solidere and were often violently dispossessed of their claims.

The Association of Owners Rights in the Beirut Central District formed and campaigned against the actions of Solidere (See Image One). Not only, as noted above, in preparation for the creation of Solidere result in the large-scale destruction of much of the BCD (rather than active conflict). In 1996, a building in Wadi Abu Jamil (plot 999 Mina el Hosn) collapsed, killing 15 people who were squatting in the building and seriously injuring eight others. Much of the media at the time accused Solidere of weakening the foundations of the building but no one was prosecuted (Wakim 2002; Tarraf 2014). Makdisi notes that when this family of squatters were killed, “many people’s worst fears were confirmed: there would literally be no space in the revitalized and gentrified cosmopolitan city center for such destitute and “undesirable” migrants” (1997: 700).

As Solidere was formed, and the broader reconstruction in Lebanon that was organized around it, it has continued to be a source of intense tension within the country. As Najib Hourani (2011) has argued Solidere is part of “illiberal and anticosmopolitan forces” and illustrates how the reconstruction process has been utilized by Lebanese elites “to turn reconstruction to the reproduction of the their own nation-fragmenting power” (159). As many people in Beirut lament, there has not been any space for the Lebanese themselves in the newly constructed downtown area. As the Lebanese poet Youssef Bazzi writing for the Solidere sponsored journal *Portal* ٩, for instance, stated:

When I take the Fouad Chehab Ring Road from Hamra to Achrafieh, I realize that people cross back and forth from East to West Beirut and bypass that island, the city center, isolated from traffic and the arteries of daily business, society, and

economy. It is an island, or in the tradition of the Commonwealth, a fenced plot and an exclusive social club, for the recreation and leisure of the elite (2012: 12-13).

Now the fog of reconstruction has receded, it is all too clear how the reconstruction in Lebanon was never aimed at rebuilding a social contract or establishing a post-conflict era rather it was part of an accumulation of social power by one faction over others. The reconstruction was one that often resulted in violence against the built environment and its inhabitants through the destruction of construction.

Reconstruction is not, necessarily, the mark of a post-war era. It too can be part of conflict by competing groups and result in socio-political and economic violence against civilian populations. The lesson of the Lebanese reconstruction is that rebuilding can be play a central part in sustaining conflict rather than creating a new social contract to work toward efforts to sustain peace. The link between reconstruction and post-conflict eras should not be automatically assumed but rather understood as something that needs to be forged.

Image 1: A poster by the Association of Owners Rights in the Beirut Central District that reads “Woe to a nation that rips out its heart and does not revolt!.” Circa 1993. Source: Archives of The Arab Center for Architecture (ACA). Copyright: The Association of Owners Rights in the Beirut Central District. Used with permission.

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[2] Khoury, Bernard. Principal DW5 Architects. Recorded interview with author. Beirut, Lebanon. July 5, 2016.

[3] Nahas, Charbel. Former Minister of Telecommunications and former employee of Oger Liban. Recorded interview with author. Beirut, Lebanon. July 18, 2016.

[4] Hariri took a prominent public role in the failed National Dialogue peace talks in Geneva at the end of 1983 and again in

Lausanne in 1984.

[5] Nahas, Charbel. Former Minister of Telecommunications and former employee of Oger Liban. Recorded interview with author. Beirut, Lebanon. July 18, 2016.

[6] For detailed accounts of how Hariri and his associates organized the reconstruction around a set of rents, compensation and sovereign debt see Baumann 2012, 2017; Becherer 2005, 2016; Makarem 2014; Leenders 2007; Sakr-Tiernry 2017;

[7] Jad Chaaban has produced important research mapping the control of the banking sector, he notes that from 2006-2015, Saad Hariri has made US\$108 million from the public debt. See <http://erf.org.eg/publications/ive-got-the-power-mapping-connections-between-lebanons-banking-sector-and-the-ruling-class/>, accessed June 1, 2018.

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