

REBUILDING DOWNTOWN BEIRUT

ILONA ILMA ILYÉS
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Photo: "Downtown Beirut" by Bertil Videt

THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب

15 YEARS OF CIVIL WAR

1970

LEBANON



3,500,000

Million inhabitants



144,000 Died



17,000 Disappeared



184,000 Wounded



144,000 Emigrated

\$ 15,000,000,000

in damage

\$ 5,000,000,000

to infrastructure alone

1990

LAND USE

PUBLIC SPACE
98 ha (242 acres)

=



59 ha (146 acres)
roads

+



39 ha (96 acres) in
landscaped open space

Beirut city center
reconstruction and
development project
191 ha (472 acres)

=



73 ha
(180 ac)
extension reclaimed
from the sea

118 ha
(292 ac)
originally constituting the
traditional city center

93 ha (230 acres)

allocated for **development**, including

22 ha (54 acres)

of **retained, public or religious** property

Beirut's city centre is now mostly rebuilt. A quarter century after it was destroyed during the Lebanese civil war, the area is now a polished mix of restored buildings, ancient ruins and glass towers. But a place that once drew all of Lebanon's diverse people to its souks, cafes, cinemas and hotels is a somewhat rootless zone of empty luxury stores and unoccupied apartments. Rebuilt as a destination for international money and tourists, it is no longer the heart of Beirut but a very costly monument to vanity and self-delusion.

Lebanon's capital long ago lost its place as the "Paris of the Middle East" and its current efforts to compete with the oil-fuelled Gulf cities were doomed from the start by changes in the global maps of money, travel and business. Outside of the Beirut Central District (BCD), the city suffers from the deep failures of governance that afflict the whole country. Public transport is almost non-existent, there is no social housing, a half comfortable life relies on generators and private tankers to bring in water and more people look to confessional groups for help than to the moribund municipal government. The city often ranks low in international liveability surveys, even falling behind its Middle Eastern neighbours like Amman and Cairo. In the summer of 2015 garbage piled up on the streets while protesters waved signs telling the government "You Stink."

The reconstruction of BCD has thrown up dozens of books and articles and a near torrent of denunciations by local architects and activists. Solidere, the private company that runs the downtown, undermined the public good, violated the constitution, demolished too many buildings and acted only in the interest of international investors, according to its critics. Solidere responds by asking what other mechanisms would have worked amidst Lebanon's polarised politics and shortages of money? The company also points to the buildings that stand where trees grew in the rubble. Beirutis in turn ask, "At what cost?"

There are many lessons for Aleppo from what happened in Beirut:

- Rebuilding driven by the few for the few will fail.
- The core values must be accountability and transparency.
- Aleppo should not focus on investor-led fantasies of what the city might be but concentrate on rebuilding families, their businesses and the local economy.
- Economic resilience should be a key part of any reconstruction.
- Rebuilding the city centre is essential, but so is an integrated plan for the whole city.
- Reconstruction will not mend deep political divisions, but can be used to rebuild common public spaces that promote reconciliation.
- Democratic control may mean reconstruction takes longer, but it will be done better and is less likely to deepen social divisions.

The reconstruction of downtown Beirut has attracted more controversy and generated more commentary than any major post-war reconstruction project. The shattered downtown, once the heart of a vibrant and admired city, was nearly wiped out during the war from 1975 to 1990 and rebuilding it seemed essential to heal Lebanon's wounds. But the way in which the area was rebuilt has left it disconnected from the city and its residents and too reliant on international investors who have been put off by Lebanon's turbulent politics. It has sucked up huge resources but benefitted few people; in the meantime the chaotic redevelopment of elsewhere in Beirut has worsened conditions for all the city's people.

Beirut Central District (BCD) is now the site of impeccably restored buildings and modern glass towers. It has heritage walks and a farmers' market among the stylish cafes and carefully rebuilt mosques and churches. What it lacks is life. The expensive stores and restaurants are often empty, the streets can seem desolate and it has none of the buzz and mix of people of the neighbouring Hamra district. Most Beirutis cannot afford the neighbourhood and the lack of public amenities and transport links mean that they tend to go elsewhere for shopping and leisure.

BCD represents the singular vision of Rafik Hariri, the murdered former prime minister who had made his fortune building palaces for the Saudi royal family. He wanted Beirut to compete with the emerging Gulf cities of Dubai and Doha as tourist and financial centres, recovering the place the city had held in the 1960s as the most sophisticated city in the Middle East. But the world has moved on. London is the financial centre of the Middle East and few need Lebanese compradores or bankers anymore. A city rebuilt for the desires of Saudi vacationers and investors found that they rapidly left when they felt the hot breath of instability fostered by Lebanon's confessional groups and their neighbours. A country that once had one of the most mixed economies in the Middle East started living off property speculation funded by highly mobile money. Market-driven development with little sense of the public interest left Beirut at the mercy of fickle investors.

The project was also designed around exclusivity. Almost all the shops and restaurants in BCD are expensive. Few people in a city with an average income below 1,000 USD a month can afford to spend time there. The public spaces, while often beautifully designed, are selective in terms of who is allowed in and what they are permitted to do. A few efforts have been made to bring life to the centre such as markets, arts events and street fairs but even these attract a predominantly wealthy audience. Beirut is of course not alone in having an expensive downtown but in most cities there is some mix and there are a wider array of public spaces due to historical legacies.

Beirut has been hit by a string of violent disruptions since the Solidere project began, illustrating how fragile its peace has been and how difficult it is to overcome a fragmented political system cemented in place by a peace agreement. In 2005, Rafik Hariri, Solidere's patron, was assassinated right by the downtown. In 2006, Israel invaded Lebanon and bombed Beirut, in 2008, the global economic crisis caused much Gulf money to be pulled back home and in 2011, the start of the Syrian conflict and the engagement of Hezbollah and others in the conflict caused a drop in tourism and investment. Increased security has meant that large areas of the BCD, particularly around the government headquarters known as the Grand Serail, is a tangle of barbed wire fences and concrete barricades.

All of these issues were beyond Lebanon's control but the problem with the model adopted by Solidere is that it has left the whole downtown extremely vulnerable to external shocks. The economic agenda pushed by Hariri reduced manufacturing and gave an enormous impetus to property speculation and banking, neither of which provide many jobs and both of which are often hit by economic cycles and recessions. BCD can seem almost lifeless and empty today. It will recover but it is too dependent on a narrow slice of the global elite to either be a permanent success or to be the true heart of Lebanon.

LESSONS FOR ALEPPO

Beirut's reconstruction offers some profound lessons for Aleppo and other Syrian cities. There is a fine line between vision and fantasy and the reconstruction of BCD veered too close to the latter. Globalisation and the rise of the Gulf states had changed the whole region. Mobility of capital meant that bubbles could easily implode and tourists were more interested in nostalgia and imagined authenticity than the same globalised shopping experience available all across the world. History and culture are valuable urban assets that attract visitors and investors. Hariri may have been too influenced by Saudi Arabia, a country that has destroyed its heritage with alacrity and by a supposed demand from Gulf investors for a deracinated, air-conditioned world of malls and marinas.

Aleppo will doubtless face some similar pressures. A lack of money for reconstruction will mean city authorities try to turn to regional investment to rebuild. Property developers and urban planners often want a tabula rasa so new over-scaled buildings with higher densities and returns can replace what went before. There is also a demand for enclaves – exclusive neighbourhoods protected from the outside and insulated from the rest of the city. Neither of these approaches is suitable for Aleppo.

We do not know and cannot predict how the war in Syria will end but the likelihood is that there will be a highly fragmented state, possibly bound together into some sort of power-sharing agreement. There is already a de facto division of the country and of the city of Aleppo. Some sort of power-sharing like that in Lebanon may leave the city in a similar predicament to Beirut – vulnerable to deep sectarian divides, paralysis, dependent on the private sector and hostage to Gulf money as these countries seek to boost their influence.

Since 2004, Aleppo shifted away from its tradition of manufacturing into tourism and services. This led to a boost in some areas of its economy that were a long time coming, but also meant a reduction in rural investment and widening divisions between city and countryside. Rapid urbanisation and deepening inequality left the city where it is now: divided and on its way to being destroyed.

In Beirut, policies promoted by the Hariri government and its international supporters worsened a similar situation. Manufacturing was undermined, and banking, telecommunications, tourism and property speculation promoted to a degree that squeezed out other sectors and created significant risk in the economy. Little was done to address housing, transport or manufacturing. This has not returned Beirut to the place in the regional economy it enjoyed in the 1960s, nor has it provided the economic success that might have eased reconciliation. The assassination of Hariri in 2005, the war with Israel in 2006, the economic crisis in 2008 and the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011 all undermined confidence in Lebanon which was increasingly vulnerable to local and global shocks.

On a structural level, Lebanese politics has left the country unable to tackle the deeper urban problems of Beirut. The city has almost no public transport and no social housing. Inequality is growing and in July 2015, a crisis over garbage collection prompted the "You Stink" demonstrations during which Beirutis vented their frustration at a deeply dysfunctional urban government.¹ While billions has been spent on

the redevelopment of the downtown into a glittering, empty tourist zone, the rest of the city has suffered from terrible neglect.

There are some similar risks in Aleppo. The city was Syria's industrial heartland but was not particularly competitive in the global market and had little of the innovation and marketing skills of businesses in neighbouring Turkey. There is no reason why it could not become competitive if peace returns but it will also need investment, reconstruction, access to borders and ports, a settled workforce that is housed, educated and cared for in a reasonable manner and access to raw materials. All of these will be difficult to achieve in a situation of insecurity and fractured politics.

Lebanon's continued insecurity and its own deep divisions show the risks of its approach to conflict resolution. The Taif Agreement ended the 15-year civil war that killed perhaps as many as 150,000 people and displaced a third of the population.² But it also cemented in place an inflexible political agreement that has done little to diminish confessional divisions and rebuild state institutions. The main lesson from Beirut is that reconstruction will never be successful as long as national and local institutions are subordinated to the interests of faith-based political parties. Unless politicians are able to take decisions about long-term national interests, development is likely to become a corrupt process that diverts money to the rich and powerful.

Beirut also shows the danger of reconstructing a damaged city centre as an enclave targeting a particular group. Focusing purely on tourism in Aleppo would kill the liveliness of the Old City and create a heightened risk of business drying up in the wake of a shock like a terrorist attack. A diversified economy would create resilience in the city and provide the widest benefits to its residents. Anything else is likely to perpetuate inequality and conflict.

In many cases, the reconstruction of cities follows ideas and structures established before the conflict. Dysfunctions that existed before will be replicated, attitudes that dominated the system before the war will persist. This was very much the case in Beirut where a very weak system of planning was replaced by a newer weaker system of governance that handed over power to a private enterprise. While Solidere was able to establish and enforce rules, it did so with little public engagement and a declining sense of its legitimacy from the day it was founded.

Any planning authority in Aleppo is going to need to establish legitimacy through democratic accountability and through popular consultations. These issues were consistently over-ruled in Beirut where there was little in the way of consultation until late in the redevelopment stage. Post-war Germany is a better model of popular consultation as planners often held exhibitions of new projects and in many cases were forced to bow to popular dissent. Aleppo city authorities before the war had improved their skills, as was seen in the planning for the Old City that was aided by the German government. But as with all institutions in Syria, it was plagued by high-handedness, corruption and a lack of concern in many cases for the poorest in the city.

Few cities are as clouded by nostalgia as Beirut. The past was better. Everyone mixed with each other easily, regardless of religion or ethnicity; there was peace, wealth and a cosmopolitan style. The Corniche and the mountains were places of unfettered leisure and tranquillity. Beirut was the “Paris of the Middle East,” a worn phrase but one that still conjures up the glamour, fashion and consumption necessary to sell the city to tourists.³ All the honeyed recollections of the past of Beirut beg the question of why, if it was so perfect, did it descend into 15 years of war? That war wiped out the Beirut of memories, leaving a divided city with a ragged hole where its heart had once been.

It has been 25 years since the guns were mostly quieted but the reconstruction of the city is far from complete and far from a success. It never would have been possible to recreate the past in Beirut, as those imbued with nostalgia desired. But the rebuilding, particularly of the downtown, has been an exercise in expensive amnesia. It has enriched many of those involved but has not returned the city to its heyday in the 1960s. It has not provided the public spaces or the symbolism that might have repaired some of the tears in the social fabric of Lebanon. It has not addressed the contentious history that was covered over after the war with the phrase “No victors, no vanquished.”⁴ Instead, the reconstruction has created a highly polished and privatised urban centre that excludes all but the most wealthy Lebanese.

Beirut Central District (BCD), known variously as Ras Beirut, Downtown, El Balad, El Aswak (the Souks), DT, Centre Ville and even Solidere, now mostly resembles any new business area in any global city. It has the same luxury brands, the same buildings by star architects, the same coffee shops and the same polished granite and potted plant detailing. Ringed with a multi-lane road and cut off from public transport, it would have always felt somewhat remote from Beirut but the effect is amplified by the presence of heavy security for government buildings. Barricades block your way and soldiers divert you from your destination. Some of the older buildings, including the Grand Serail, the seat of government, and the city hall, have been beautifully restored with an attention to detail that is rare in the Middle East. Religious buildings have also been rebuilt or added, archaeological sites preserved and new museums are being built. But mostly, as is the case worldwide in city centres, there are a similar array of shops, offices, hotels and expensive apartments. The difference in Beirut is that they all appear to be nearly empty.

The Beirut reconstruction has unfortunately failed so far on almost every level. The opaque financial system means it is hard to tell how much has been spent – although estimates go as high as 70 billion dollars – and it is hard to know whom, if anyone, has made money except the bankers who have funded the post-war property bubble of Beirut. Solidere shares have traded as high as 40 USD and as low as 4 USD. They are currently around 10 USD, down over 2015, and well below the estimated value of the company’s land stocks if they were to be sold off.

BCD certainly lacks vitality, an essential attribute for an attractive city. It clearly offers little to the wide mix of people who flock to the cafes and shops of Hamra and other districts and it is hardly an effective competitor with any of its Gulf rivals. It neither recreates the atmosphere of pre-war Beirut, nor does it fully offer the hyper-secure, international consumerist environment that people find in Dubai. The Emirati playground attracts nine million tourists each year, against just two million for Lebanon. Emirates Airlines has a fleet of 221 aircraft flying to 164 destinations. Middle East Airlines, once regarded as the best in the region, flies just 17 planes to 33 cities.⁵ Lebanon is no longer the financial or tourist leader it once was and is unlikely to return to that position. Communications and new financial systems have reduced the need

for old entrepot cities like Beirut. Indeed, if anywhere is now the financial capital of the Middle East, it is London.

Solidere failed in a mission that had been identified in the immediate aftermath of the war: that rebuilding the downtown would restore trust in the government and state institutions, indeed in the very idea of Lebanon. That may have been too much to ask of an urban reconstruction project but sadly Solidere in many ways did exactly the opposite of what people desired. There is little effort to remember the war or the 150,000 people who died or the 17,000 estimated to be missing.⁶ The memorials that do exist in BCD are for those assassinated in recent years in what has seemed like unresolved continuations of the civil war.

Any reconstruction would have been contentious. The area had been heavily damaged during the war and its residents and owners had left, many for other countries. Sorting out the mix of tenants and owners, getting them to agree on plans and then implementing in a timely manner would have tested even the best-managed government. Major regeneration projects around the world are often managed by a central authority with exceptional powers. Examples include the redevelopments of La Defense in Paris and the Docklands in London. But any such powerful agency has to maintain its legitimacy and that was tested by Solidere in a number of ways. Firstly, there was a conflict of interest between a government run by a construction billionaire and a scheme using national funds to reconstruct an area seen as belonging to all Lebanese. Secondly, Solidere came late to the idea of consultation after using its powers to sweep aside many interests. Thirdly, there was a wholesale destruction of many of the buildings that were deemed too costly to renovate but had a place in the hearts of nostalgic Beirutis.

Each of these failings is visible in Solidere's reconstruction; an isolated, rootless and sterile place of globalised consumerism at the heart of one of the most energetic and interesting cities in the Middle East. So much more could have been achieved, not just in the centre but across the city.

A SHORT HISTORY OF BEIRUT, ITS PLANNERS AND ITS DESTRUCTION

Almost every Mediterranean civilisation has left its mark on Beirut but the modern city really dates only from the 19th century with its expansion beyond the walls and out into the villages and farms that once lay along the coast. As the city walls fell, the Ottomans broke with a long tradition of enclosed, inward-looking planning and started building public spaces and large government buildings like the Grand Serail, the seat of Ottoman government and now the prime minister's residence. The Ottoman city was reworked after World War I with the addition of a French colonial overlay that removed much of what went before. The rubble of the medieval city was dumped into the sea to extend a harbour, a foretaste of what would happen to the modern city after the war.

It was only after independence in 1943 that Beirut had its few tentative encounters with urban planning. Radical schemes to open up the downtown to the sea, cross the city with highways and create a new government centre were all proposed but little was ever achieved. From the 1950s to the start of the civil war the city boomed, a growing fantasyland of modernist hotels and offices next to decaying Ottoman villas.

The first official masterplan for Beirut was drawn up in 1943 but was never implemented. The first laws relating to urban planning were introduced in 1963 and included mechanisms for public-private partnerships, something that would be revived under Solidere. The first comprehensive plan for the city was finalised in 1964. This plan was the work of Michel Ecochard, a French modernist who had worked extensively in Syria, and it was the first to recognise the importance of linking the development of Beirut to wider national progress. A critical decision was to mark out large areas of land in the southern suburbs

for the development of a new town housing many government institutions that would allow for growth outside downtown Beirut. This was never built and instead the land later became the home of large, unplanned refugee settlements. The roads that Ecochard laid out were mostly built, linking the city centre to the south but also cutting up neighbourhoods and damaging some of the urban fabric.⁷

Growth was significant between 1964 and the start of the war with hotels and apartments growing along the Corniche and the downtown showcasing some of the best modernist architecture in the Middle East. From the start of the war in 1975, the downtown was a target for both sides and the location of intense fighting. The city split into Christian East Beirut and Muslim West Beirut, divided by the Green Line, so called because of the vegetation that grew up along the street.

The war did not stop the development of plans for the city. In 1977, L'Atelier Parisien d'Urbanism (APUR) proposed a plan to rebuild most of the buildings in the centre. A joint stock company part owned by the government but held in the majority by pre-war owners would manage the process with, in most cases, individual owners responsible for their buildings. The plan was notable for its modesty and its focus on reconstruction but few of its ideas, except the public-private partnership, were taken on.

By 1983, destruction in BCD was significantly worse and a new plan was developed, this time for the wider metropolitan area, by Dar al-Handasah, a large regional architecture and engineering consultancy owned by Rafik Hariri, a wealthy Lebanese construction magnate who had made his fortune working for the Saudi royal family. That plan only finally came to fruition in 1991, a year after the war ended with the Taif Agreement, brokered by the Saudi government with the involvement of Hariri. The plan imagined Beirut to be similar to the empty deserts of the Gulf, a place without history or previous occupants and called for a massive development of towers on the rubble of the old downtown.

In 1992, a conference in London heard from many Lebanese and other experts who warned against the privatisation of the planning process.⁸ For them, reconstruction should be a process that rebuilt institutions and trust in the government, that wove communities back together. Planning needed to be based on popular consultation and any plan for the downtown had to connect it to wider reconstruction across Lebanon. If it was to be developed in a public/private partnership, enforceable anti-trust laws were needed to ensure no monopoly emerged and the government needed to maintain clear control over defined public interests. Any plan had to ensure that downtown Beirut recovered its mix of religious, ethnic and class groups.

All of this would be ignored as the Dar Al-Handasah plan established the baseline for much of what would happen over the next 25 years. The plan called for the establishment of a public/private real estate company to control the reconstruction, the bulldozing of most ruined buildings and the construction of two towers similar to the World Trade Centre buildings in New York. The plan involved opening up three wide routes leading down to the sea front, which itself would include marinas and apartments. The plan was huge in scale, unlike anything that had been there before and resolutely modern, albeit in the heavy manner of corporate developments in the 1980s. The plans had also been entirely funded by Hariri, who had become prime minister in the first post-war government. It was the first of a long series of conflicts of interest that would undermine public support for the scheme.

Even in 1992, it was obvious that there was intense pressure to move ahead with reconstruction so as to maintain the political momentum from the Taif Agreement. This pact had papered over many of the deep disagreements in Lebanese society by fixing the distribution of political power, giving more to Sunnis and Shias and less to the Maronite Christians who had once dominated politics and the economy. There was, however, little in the way of reconstruction aid. Money from the United States and Western Europe was flowing to the former Soviet empire. The only way in which the Lebanese government could afford to rebuild the centre and fix its own political divisions was through a near total privatisation of the project.

But the attempt by the original Dar al-Handassah plan, designed by a French-trained Maronite Henri Edde, aroused too much opposition to go ahead. It was seen as too ahistorical and indifferent to what has been in Beirut before. With its vast roundabouts and a boulevard cutting through what had been Martyrs' Square as well as twin towers on the shore, the scheme was massive in scale and obliterating in nature. New planners led by Angus Gavin from the United Kingdom would be brought in to soften the harsh edges.

SOLIDERE

“The older generations, who had a more emotional relationship to the place, considered us harsh in our outlook. We believed the city centre needed more than plastic surgery; it required major surgery to be resuscitated. We realized that times had changed and that we had to let go of certain nostalgic emotions. The nature of youth is to have a margin of maneuverability between the old and the new without sacrificing the integrity of either. We had the ability to move forward, to make what others considered harsh decisions, yet we maintained the relationship with the memory of the place without being hostage to it. We were also the link between the older generations and the younger ones, who had no memory of the place at all.”

Oussama Kabbani, Member of the Board of Directors of Solidere

Solidere, the French acronym for Société Libanaise pour le Développement et la Reconstruction de Beyrouth, was founded in 1994 under the adapted 1977 law that allowed for the creation of a company to manage the reconstruction of the city centre. It was born into controversy as many lawyers felt that its right to take over properties in exchange for shares violated the constitution. That was just one of its legal challenges. The lack of transparency in Lebanese banking and the near complete power granted to the company meant that development of the city centre could be taken over by a single, anonymous investor who could then sit on the land, rather than carrying out the necessary reconstruction and infrastructure development. Public interest issues had been almost completely set aside in the establishment of the company.

Solidere was managing the reconstruction of an area of approximately 180 hectares out of which about 60 hectares was to be reclaimed land.⁹ The reconstruction plan covered two main areas, the Traditional City Centre, which was to retain some of the older buildings, and the new Waterfront District, a modern city of towers and parks that hewed closely to the original Edde plan. The BCD was divided into ten sectors, each of them having detailed regulations, eight sectors of the Traditional City Center and two sectors of the Waterfront District.¹⁰

In 1995, Solidere started its damage assessment surveys and designs for the structures to be preserved. A committee was established to look at preserving heritage and to classify buildings depending on their cultural or historical importance. What caused controversy, as it does everywhere, is defining the value of heritage. Many landmark buildings were built in the 1940s-1960s and some were not completed before the war. Although Beirut had some of the best modernist buildings in the Middle East, they were not always regarded as worthy of preservation. Because of the damage, it was also not viable to maintain certain buildings.¹¹ Surviving elements like old stones, wood and iron were used for the restoration of facades to create a resemblance to past structures.¹²

According to the master plan, there were 292 salvageable buildings in BCD, including 27 churches, mosques, and a synagogue. There were also public buildings including the Grand Serail, the seat of the Council of Ministers; the Lebanese Parliament; the Beirut Municipality; the Central Post Office and several

ministries. In 1995, the recuperation process allowing former property right holders to reacquire their real estate came to an end. A total of 146 lots were handed back and 1,180 tenants applied to return to these buildings. Most of them obtained permits to restore their properties. Some 114 buildings remained in Solidere's ownership. In total, about 30 percent of original owners kept their properties. They had to restore the buildings respecting Solidere's preservation rules, which were demanding, expensive,¹³ and had a strict timetable for redevelopment.

Solidere created urban design and technical guidelines for restoration work in all preserved buildings, both for buildings restored by the company and for those purchased by others. Designers prepared a restoration brief for each building. In most cases, external walls had to be restored to their previous condition, preferably re-using materials. Cobblestones and granite curbstones, structural and decorative ceramic tiles, wooden doors and windows from buildings that were not preserved were used to restore others. Regulations required that renovations adhere to fire and safety regulations and provide access for the disabled. In most cases, interiors and access were modernised extensively, which gives the area a highly polished and modern feeling, a long way from its pre-war ambience.¹⁴

Architects, developers and contractors working on buildings reconstructed by Solidere had to conform to seismic safety measures because of earthquake vulnerability. For every plot in the BCD a certain density was foreseen, determining heights and street frontage. At the beginning, this caused a lot of animosity but in time some enjoyed the challenge of working within these limits.¹⁵

Twenty-one years after its founding, Solidere can produce a robust list of accomplishments: the toxic dump of rubble and garbage along the coast was removed and replaced with a new landfill and a protective sea wall. Large areas of the downtown have been rebuilt, often with extraordinary precision and care. Some two hundred and sixty-five buildings were marked for restoration and rules developed to ensure rebuilding was done in a respectful manner. The Solidere plan did take several steps back from the Edde plan, which would have bulldozed almost all of the downtown and create nothing but a dense crush of glass towers. It did make some efforts, not all of them entirely successful, to ensure that religious buildings and archaeology were preserved.¹⁶

A 3.8 kilometre ring-road now moves traffic around the city centre and the entire area has vastly improved infrastructure that far exceeds the quality found elsewhere in the city. A new marina and sea-front park are under construction on the large area of reclaimed land that has expanded the downtown. Beirut Souks, a large, up-scale shopping centre, replaced the old Souks that were destroyed in the war, radically changing the nature of retail space in the downtown. The downtown now has 2,500 parking spaces and will eventually be able to house 6,000 cars underground.

Some argue that the Solidere project encouraged investment, created thousands of new jobs both directly and indirectly and has revolutionized business practices in Lebanon. Among the mentioned benefits is that the approach to reconstruction has optimized the assets of the city centre, integrated the dump into the land development process, allowed comprehensive archaeological excavations and addressed major urban concerns in a broadly planned way. It has restored about 265 architecturally significant buildings. It also transformed the garbage dump, a major source of sea pollution, into a coastal area for the public with a seaside promenade and a planned public park.

A report by UNESCO's Management of Social Transformations (MOST) that draws on Solidere's advice argues that the company made possible the quality reconstruction of the BCD, helping Beirut regain its traditional leading role in the region.¹⁷ Solidere also contributed to the modernization of rules governing urban development¹⁸ as it created a series of codes for safety and security in BCD. It also had other benefits, according to the United Nations, including expanding the concept of ownership by giving shares to some 100,000 people who had owned land in the area. This broke open the rigidity of the family-domi-

nated Lebanese economy, according to the report, although this idea has been challenged by many who see the redevelopment as a massive case of self-dealing and exclusion by wealthy Lebanese.

Following the lead of many cities attempting regeneration, Beirut has called on several brand-name architects. Renzo Piano is designing a vast mixed-use development known as the “Pinwheel.”¹⁹ Zaha Hadid has designed a department store as part of the Beirut Souks Mall. Norman Foster has three towers of apartments rising in the neighbourhood and the Swiss pair Herzog and de Meuron are building a tower topped with 13-million dollar penthouses.²⁰ Steven Holl designed the yacht club on Zaitunay Bay. Beirut Souks was designed by Rafael Moneo, with some loose references to local architecture and the original Greek street plan of the ancient city.

Local architects have been featured far less often than Pritzker Prize winners. Bernhard Khoury, Lebanon’s best known architect and a fixture on the exhibition circuit, is said to have been commissioned to design an arts centre.²¹ Architectural tourism – which draws visitors to Bilbao for example to look at Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum – already had competitors across the Middle East with Doha and Abu Dhabi spending their almost limitless billions on the often mediocre offerings of starchitects. The moment of the city-changing new building designed by a famous architect may be over now that every struggling tourist destination in the region has adopted the idea.

Amid the enormous scale of Solidere’s development with its brand name architects and glittering towers, there are some moments of impressive calm and beauty. The Samir Kassir garden, a memorial to a murdered journalist, is built around two massive ficus trees that miraculously survived both the war and the redevelopment.²² But this is a rare moment of human development in a project that has preferred gigantism and public spaces aimed more at consumption than reflection.

While the swell of globally famous architects is impressive, it is less than clear that this method of planning is going to produce an urban centre that is either an economic success or a magnet for people, from home or abroad. The economic and social impact of massively scaled developments is very hard to measure. Canary Wharf in London is now busy and filled with people but its wealth has not spread far beyond its massive office towers and global money still prefers traditional areas of the city. The enormous cost of developing infrastructure is rarely figured into the overall benefits.

SOLIDERE: THE BACKLASH

“Beirut city center was considered of prime importance in repositioning Lebanon on the world map. The city centre represented the economic heart of the country and the focus of coexistence and interaction between the various religious communities of the country. Lebanon and its people needed to move beyond warfare and its inter-communal strife, and the city center was the best place to have that happen.”

Ghaleb Mahmassani, General Legal Counselor of Solidere²³

More often than not, Solidere has been excoriated by critics as an urban planning failure and a financial disaster that wrecked an opportunity to bring Lebanese together. It has most often been judged as one of the many disappointments of a post-war period that has seen more conflict, more disarray and more fragmentation. Indeed Solidere must be among the most criticised developers in the world. Some of the failings of BCD are due to decisions taken by the company but just as many are probably due to the relentless dynamics of Lebanese politics and business.

Solidere’s plans have repeatedly been hurt by issues far beyond its control and as a public company that relies on a high-level of investor confidence in Lebanon it is very vulnerable to the wider political environment. It actually benefitted from the attacks of September 2001, as many wealthy Saudis withdrew

investments from the United States and spent time vacationing in Lebanon. But the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 was a serious blow, not only as he was Solidere's main patron, but because it exposed the very deep and enduring divisions with Lebanese society. The fact that the car bomb that killed Hariri went off in the downtown undermined its reputation as a safe place. The subsequent demonstrations of the "Cedar Revolution" also took place in Martyrs' Square and elsewhere in the BCD. These demonstrations also undermined some of the confidence of Gulf investors, who tend to see any public engagement in politics as destabilising.

A year later, war with Israel shook Lebanon and resulted in many foreigners and expatriate Lebanese fleeing the country. The economic shocks of 2008 were to hit the region hard, particularly as Gulf money returned to Dubai and elsewhere to cover losses at home. The Syrian conflict in 2011 and the marked decline in oil prices have further reduced investment and tourism. The currency is fixed to the dollar meaning that costs remain very high for the region.

In this environment, a developer and land bank like Solidere is unlikely to prosper. But that has been another risk of concentrating so much power in so few hands and then exposing the whole project to the vagaries of international finance. Likewise, private firms have a poor record generally on public consultation and it is hardly surprising that Solidere came late to the process. Few other developers around the world have done as much to preserve religious sites and provide access to different representatives but the highly contentious, faith-based and personalised politics of Lebanon make any attempts at public engagement extremely difficult and time-consuming.

DID SOLIDERE ENHANCE THE CITY? Walking around in the centre of Beirut, one has the impression of a highly finished but very sterile environment. Buildings and streets seem to be empty except security personnel and lone shop assistants waiting mostly in vain for customers to buy luxury clothing and accessories. As one walks toward Martyrs' Square the area becomes more lively with people visiting the Beirut Souks with its international shops that one finds in all major cities. But many of the luxury shops remain deserted and as night comes, few lights are switched on in the luxurious apartment buildings in the BCD and along the Corniche.

Beyond the new boulevards and buildings, many voices argue that BCD "does not feel Lebanese anymore," that it has become a playground for "star architects" to create their luxurious "totem" buildings,²⁴ a downtown where a "hybrid corporate monster" has done something "apocalyptic"²⁵. Fady El-Khoury, owner of the famous St George Hotel, summarized a widespread sentiment in the two words of a massive sign placed on the side of his unrestored building: "Stop Solidere."

As the American University of Beirut (AUB) academic and critic Richard Becherer argues, Andrew Gavin's urban vision was fundamentally aesthetic, and he planned BCD to be a tourist attraction featuring heritage and architecture.²⁶ People from all spectrums of the society criticised Solidere's reconstruction plan, arguing that it did not take into account the city and its inhabitants' diverse historical and social identities, ignored locals' interests and needs, and favoured the technical and economic interests of investors over public space.²⁷ Indeed the historical emphasis has been on the most distant aspects of Beirut's past – its Greek and Phoenician history – rather than anything more contentious from recent decades. There is a sense in the city centre that history has been erased.

A city's cultural heritage exists in two major forms: firstly the religious and educational buildings that communities form around.²⁸ Solidere has done a generally good job restoring religious buildings in the downtown, helping communities do very high quality restorations of their churches and mosques. But secondly, heritage exists in the very fabric of cities, in the small shops, the hidden treasures buried behind washing lines and cables, the mix of a community and the jumble of high and low. That whole side of the heritage of Beirut has been ignored by Solidere, excluding many of the city's residents. Heteroge-

neity is the cornerstone of city life, and rather than enhancing that, Solidere has produced an anonymous and globalised urban district.

Professionals in Beirut confirm the resentment felt against the company. A Syrian architect working currently in Lebanon said that with about 70 billion USD of investment, Solidere created about 70 billion dollars worth of empty apartments. Even though the area is key to the identity and history of many Lebanese, it was rebuilt for those who could afford to buy speculative real estate, mostly from the Gulf states.²⁹ A Lebanese professor from the AUB argued that “reconstruction” is a now dirty word in Lebanon, as so much more was destroyed than reconstructed and the reconstruction process was so heavily marked by corruption and money laundering.³⁰

Another AUB professor claims that Solidere’s approach to public space is exclusive and restrictive. For example, he said that the Beirut Souks is not conducive for appropriation by people. Rather, it is an alienating, intimidating landscape and lifeless. Access to public space is selective and bound by many rules. Children get chased out if they splash in the fountains.³¹ BCD is not a lived-in space but more imaginative, a blank space where different memories and narratives can be projected.³²

“There is a lot of fakeness that takes place,” Rami Daher, an architect and academic, explained in an interview with *The Electronic Intifada*, “For example, Saifi Village, it’s really only used by very rich Gulf and Saudi visitors to the city and they have certain restrictions at the ground level where they’re only allowed to open art galleries and boulangeries and the place becomes very classist. There are private police that somehow filter who is allowed and who is not allowed to be in this so-called public space, but it’s not really public space.”³³

DID SOLIDERE DEMOLISH TOO MANY BUILDINGS? Others argue that instead of reconstructing, Solidere actually demolished many salvageable buildings in an attempt to erase the memories of war and to enable it to raise densities by building modern towers. The initial plan to restore some facades was replaced by a desire for collective amnesia about the conflict.³⁴ Out of about 800 damaged buildings about two thirds were demolished. Some buildings were destroyed for political reasons, including some from the Ottoman rule and the old souks or those in the Jewish district.³⁵ This “raze-and-rebuild” ethos that has become so widespread in Lebanon has led to the destruction of about 80 percent of Beirut’s architectural heritage.³⁶

Could Solidere have done better on this front? Possibly, but probably not given the overall lack of real protections across Lebanon. Corruption and indifference to history has led to most of Beirut’s heritage being replaced by banal apartment and office buildings. If an owner is refused permission to demolish buildings, they often just let them fall down, indeed the area around BCD is filled with crumbling Ottoman houses that will soon be replaced with excessively large modern apartment towers.

Although Solidere has been praised for establishing and enforcing planning guidelines, the attitudes towards heritage and urbanism encapsulated by rules has not spread to the rest of Beirut.

DID SOLIDERE ERASE HISTORY? Along with the issue of demolition, one of the most frequent criticisms of the redevelopment is the sense that the 16 years of civil war have been erased from BCD. Demolition meant that the scars of war were mostly removed early, in some cases as the war was still going on, and without the permission of owners. Some of the most intense criticisms have involved preventing the demolition of buildings that became iconic as much for their destruction as their original construction. The Rivoli Theatre and the Holiday Inn Hotel are emblems of the war. But little of this can be pinned on Solidere directly. Amnesia has pervaded all of the political class in Lebanon – each group has been eager to gloss over their atrocities and violence. The war was a constantly mutating mix of factions whose shift-

ing alliances sometimes defied understanding and therefore finding an easy, palatable history has been impossible. The 17,000 people who are estimated to be missing from the war are rarely discussed and there is no real memorial within BCD that looks at the destruction that was wrought there, particularly the fact that the destruction of central Beirut appears to have been a deliberate act of uricide.

Solidere has made one gesture in the direction of remembrance or perhaps more accurately in the direction of collective amnesia. The Garden of Forgiveness is a 2.5 hectare garden and collection of ancient ruins designed by Gustafson Porter, a British landscape design firm best known for the Princess Diana Fountain in Hyde Park.³⁷ The site documents reference Beirut's 5,000-year-old history and were inspired by the ruins uncovered by the war but it says little about recent history. It is a place for communities to come together, according to the designers. But it is unclear how they should come together here or why. Forgiveness surely requires some recognition of what is being forgiven but that is very much pushed to the distant background.

Dealing with history has been something of a problem for Solidere and this is hardly surprising given that those in power in all communities mostly want to cover up their complicity in violence and corruption. A heritage walk drawn up by Solidere took years to implement as almost every word on every one of the polished stone panels was fought over. When even the distant past is fought over, it is hardly surprising that Solidere prefers to gloss over problems within living memory.

Another example highlighted by Becherer is that of a small Mamluk madrasa known as Mazar Ibn-Iraq that was uncovered by demolitions of surrounding building and was planned to be demolished itself.³⁸ When the day came for its destruction, a series of events blocked it: a chain broke on the bulldozer, the driver found his hand paralysed and a figure was said to have appeared at the door begging the demolition crew not to kill him a second time. The Shiite population took over the site as a holy place, attaching loud speakers and a picture of Ayatollah Khomeini to the small domed building.

Beirut's Sunni population felt this was an appropriation of a building that had been the school of a Sunni lawyer from Damascus, not Iraq, and that Shiites had no business claiming it as their own. Sunni groups promptly removed the recent additions, surrounded it with barbed wire to end any pilgrimages and put up a sign with its "correct" history.

This was very much the situation that Solidere faced across the board. Almost every building could be contested and the history of almost all of BCD might be challenged. Part of it was the desire to claim both space in the area and the money that was being offered to vacate buildings.

DID SOLIDERE RESULT IN THE PRIVATISATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE? Lebanon is not the only country to have seen a massive shift of urban control from the public to private sector. In these situations, the protection of the public good depends on many issues – a free and uninhibited press, a tough and independent judiciary, and effective local government. Lebanon has a noisy civil society but few ways of shaping public discourse in a way that directly impacts the major political players.

In the case of BCD, nobody was able to stop the process of taking public funds and channelling them into a private mechanism. Accusations that the law that established and empowered Solidere violated the constitution did not stand up to legal scrutiny in the courts. It is certainly widely believed that Solidere has not been a success economically and has relied on the massive transfer of public assets to private ownership. As Becherer wrote: "Neither public nor private, Solidere epitomises a hybrid economic world whose viability is fundamentally dependent on huge infusions of state capital, public revenues that might otherwise serve other unsung sectors of the economy."

DID SOLIDERE CREATE LINKS TO THE WIDER CITY: To cross the street from Beirut outside BCD to Solidere-controlled land is to move from a place where everything from the signage, to cobblestones to

internet speeds are different. Almost everything has conspired to make BCD separate from the city of which it is the heart. There is no public transport links directly to the BCD, unlike in the past when buses used Martyrs' Square as a terminus. A wide ring road surrounds the area; on a summer day it is an ordeal fighting heat and traffic to walk from neighbouring areas into the downtown.

While BCD is isolated from its surrounding areas in terms of physical links and transport, it is clearly having an impact by encouraging gentrification. Bruno Marot and Serge Yazigi write that in the areas around the city centre, rampant demolition and reconstruction is undermining communities and threatening to raise sectarian tensions.³⁹ In Zokak el-Bhat, a poorer neighbourhood bordering BCD, developers have moved in to put up new upmarket apartment towers. This has driven out many of the poorer Shiite residents who provided an important base for Hezbollah in the area. Displacement is bolstering sectarian tensions and disrupting neighbourhoods that get little help from city authorities who lag behind developers when it comes to managing change in Beirut.

DID SOLIDERE IMPROVE RELATIONS AMONG LEBANON'S DIVIDED POLITICAL GROUPS? Solidere was very much the brainchild of Rafik Hariri and was itself driven by his Sunni-centred politics and sources of income in Saudi Arabia. The influences of Saudi money and building practices are clear. Hariri wanted a blank slate in the downtown with no focus on heritage, much in the way Saudis have built their cities. The aim was to attract Gulf money and to make the place recognisable and comfortable for tourists. The Taif agreement had given greater powers to the traditionally Sunni prime ministership, taking them away from the Christian presidency. Christian communities felt themselves to be further weakened by Hariri's neo-liberal policies of ending trade barriers and subsidies in a way that weakened the Christian-dominated manufacturing base in favour of banking and property development.

By doling out contracts and benefits among different elite confessional groups, Hariri maintained a degree of peace but the redevelopment of BCD did not create new spaces in which all groups would mix and form associations beyond those based on faith. Indeed many have argued that the redevelopment hardened differences.⁴⁰ BCD development has amplified the differences of class and faith that have already ripped apart Lebanese society and provided few mechanisms to bring people together.

Solidere could not have been expected to cure the ills of Lebanese society. Although it has offered support for the rebuilding of churches and mosques, it has not done enough to bring people of different faiths into the same spaces. The American University of Beirut, a selective and expensive private college, does much more to provide a common space for Lebanese of different faiths. Including a public university campus in the old city and building more accessible public spaces would have gone a long way to reducing BCD's isolation from the city without diminishing its appeal as a tourist destination. Indeed the lack of liveliness in the downtown is clearly hindering its success.

The Beirut Souks

“Bring commerce back to the city center, and you bring back life.” Oussama Kabani⁴¹

The Souks represented the heart of trade in Beirut and are invoked with much nostalgia.⁴² As Ousaama Khalaf described, partly because of its compact size and predominantly commercial character, the intermingling and collaboration between the various communities were both inevitable and vital for their coexistence and survival. Traders and entrepreneurs from various communities were partners in private businesses and they assisted each other in times of austerity and financial need. More importantly, they perceived themselves as members of an urban merchant elite, resisting threats to their economic interests. In the old souks and bazaars, artisans and traders worked side-by-side, spatial segregation and location of shops was occupational, and not religious, and social interaction was characterized by sentiments

of goodwill and mutual tolerance.⁴³

The current souk area was planned as the city centre's future retail and commercial hub. However, what is essentially a modern shopping mall retains little of the pre-war atmosphere. The master plan of the souks was developed following an international design competition with 357 entries from 42 countries. The requirement was to create something new while maintaining the old feeling of the souks,⁴⁴ synthesizing the traditional elements of the old souks and the features of modern commercial activity.⁴⁵ In fact, the competition was disregarded and the reconstruction of the souks was done by prominent Spanish architect Rafael Moneo. His design received much criticism for creating something totally new and not keeping the traditional marketplace although it did align with an earlier Greek street plan and incorporated ruins uncovered by the war. Solidere representatives argued that the notion of the souks has transformed during the war and demands have changed. After the conflict there was no need for a traditional marketplace.⁴⁶

However, early discussion about the reconstruction urged Solidere to create a much more diverse marketplace using rents from large international retailers and anchor tenants to subsidise smaller, more traditional areas modelled on the original souks. The project would still be anchored in the manner of typical mall design with a department store, cinemas and a supermarket but would retain traditional souk areas. The demands of ensuring high rents and competition from new malls in wealthy suburbs led to the creation of what is little more than a middle-run mall that could be anywhere in the world. Everything from the food court to the branches of Zara, The Gap and H&M make it an anonymous, deracinated experience. The aim was to make it attractive to tourists from the region but shortly after it opened the Arab spring and the Syrian war reduced the number of visitors.

Rawane Nassif, a Lebanese-Canadian filmmaker and anthropologist, interviewed Beirutis for a study of the reconstruction.⁴⁷ Her respondents were critical of the way the Souks had been rebuilt. "When you are there you think of yourself as a customer, because that is all you do, buy stuff and eat ... " said one Lebanese interviewed for her study. The near universal response among the less well off was of alienation, that the Souks represented a space that excluded them. BCD represented a cutting off of local links and relationships and their replacement by more globalised experiences of consumerism.

Solidere seems to have misunderstood why many visitors come to Beirut. Its focus has been on Gulf Arabs whose own countries are dotted with similar developments. That market has significantly dried up in recent years due to perceptions of instability in Beirut, competition from the Gulf nations and the waning of the 9/11 effect that led many Saudis to stay in the region. Other tourists from Europe or elsewhere are less enchanted by the same stores offering goods at higher prices than at home.

By doing little to incorporate tradition into the mix, beyond highlighting ancient archaeological remains uncovered during construction, the Souks missed an opportunity to tap into a desire to experience local and small-scale production. The mall is at its busiest when it hosts a farmer's market highlighting local products like honey and fruit. Although these are still expensive products to be sold to wealthy consumers, they at least have links to local production and tradition. Most of the stores that occupy the Beirut Souks have no connection to the city.

Martyrs' Square

We could see the entrance to the great square at the end of the street. Before the war, the place had served as a fruit market and bus station and one side of its peculiarly attractive nineteenth century Levantine facade had served as the entrance to the souk. Its centre was once lined with palm trees and its perimeter with cafes but for more than a year it formed part of the Beirut front line and for the past 14 months few Lebanese had cared to look into it ... But the square that now came into sight was almost unrecognisable. Every building in sight was in ruins, torn and scorched

by hundreds of gun and rocket battles ...

Robert Fisk, then writing for *The Times*, entering Martyrs' Square with the Syrian Army in 1976.

Martyrs' Square, also known as the Bourj from the Ottoman watch tower that once stood there, was the most important space in downtown Beirut before the war. Photographs from the time show a busy, crowded area centred on the large statue honouring those hanged under the Ottomans in 1916 for calling for independence. Despite the seriousness of the monument and the name, the palm-lined square had a Mediterranean loucheness and lushness, filled as it was with fountains, cafes and stores.⁴⁸ At one end stood the Rivoli cinema. It was a public space that combined national importance with the latest entertainment, an inclusive, heterogenous and lively spot that holds an important place in the memories of those who knew Beirut before the conflict.

During the conflict, the square became a no-man's land that marked the beginning of the Green Line that separated the Muslim and Christian sides of the city. The city lost its pre-eminent public space and one of the most important places for political and social expression.⁴⁹

The success of the square was almost certainly in its human scale. It was a place for people, sometimes for protests, but never just for military parades or the self-aggrandisement of a government. Most of the buildings that formed its perimeter were less than 10 stories. The ground floors were shops, cafes and restaurants, many of them spilling out on the pavements. It had, quite accidentally, evolved into an almost perfect urban space: diverse, welcoming, sheltering, connected and relaxing.

The war left most of the buildings shattered and the site was bulldozed in 1994, leaving only the statue and its plinth. The vast empty space was excavated, revealing significant Roman and other ruins, which have now been preserved and incorporated into the new designs. A principle element was opening the square up to the sea, opening up the place filled in the 19th century by an Ottoman administrative office and later the nautical moderne Cinema Rivoli. The Rivoli was bulldozed and replaced with a temporary car park.

Through the International Union of Architects, Solidere organized the Martyrs' Square Grand Axis of Beirut international urban design competition to solicit a new vision for the space, which is, now open to the sea in its extension from the Damascus Road gate to the Beirut Port. Candidates were requested to integrate important archaeological sites into the design. The competition included design, transport planning, and landscape design components. After the competition was won by a Greek company, the concept of Martyrs' Square Axis was further developed in a detailed urban design study by an Italian/French company. The construction of Martyrs' Square is ongoing.

In 2005, after the killing of Hariri, Martyrs' Square became the site of massive protests against Syria's intrusion into Lebanese life and politics, that eventually led to the withdrawal of their forces from the country. The Cedar Revolution or Independence Intifadah, as it was sometimes known, raised hope of real change in Lebanese politics and an end to external interference. Those days have not yet come.

LESSONS FROM BEIRUT

- Reconstruction in Aleppo must be focused on local economic and social needs rather than those of globalised capitalism. The vast sums spent developing BCD into an area for international investors and tourists have left it particularly vulnerable to geopolitical and economic shocks. The war with Israel in 2006 and the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011 both seriously undermined the Solidere redevelopment. Gulf investment is fickle; it moves quickly and can be withdrawn for any number of economic or political reasons.

The price Beirut has paid for selling its city centre to the highest bidder is immense. Those who promote this form of development will always blame outside shocks for their problems but the reality is that it is a very poor way of rebuilding cities in that it meets the needs of only a very narrow group of the population and only by taking enormous financial risk.

- The priority must be on re-developing a city centre in Aleppo that is lively, inclusive and as important to city residents as it is to investors and tourists. The fact that there is no major new school, university, social housing, popular market or popular gathering place in BCD is a major problem. If a city fails to attract people it will not provide the returns to investors. Cities require heterogeneity to succeed.
- Private models of redevelopment exacerbate inequality, which was already a serious problem in pre-war Aleppo. Public-Private partnership may work on a smaller scale but it is clear that they cannot deliver on the wider set of benefits needed in a post-conflict city. Social harmony, equality, representation and memorialisation need to be considered alongside business interests or narrow political views.
- Redevelopment must be realistic. Aleppo will not be a new global or regional centre, it will not recover quickly and rebuilding some of its core will not mend a ravaged society. The focus of rebuilding must be on more modest aims – recovery of families and communities, the return of small businesses and the development of a sustainable economic base.
- Ownership models should not be seriously disrupted. Ending the effective ownership of thousands of people and then handing them shares in a company over which they had little control was not a satisfactory arrangement. By insisting on very expensive reconstructions and a rapid timetable for rebuilding – which it often could not meet itself – Solidere put additional pressures on owners to accept shares rather than reclaim their property. In Aleppo, ownership issues are going to be very complicated after the war. Large number of buildings, particularly in the Old City, are formerly owned by religious foundations but are let on long leases. Other buildings have multiple owners, some of whom would have been died intestate or may not return. Solidere ultimately ran roughshod over ownership culture, even if it was able to bend the law to its side.
- Concentration of control. Urban planners tend to admire systems that sweep away planning law and put schemes in the hands of all-powerful special agencies or public-private partnerships. However, although they are often able to turn infrastructure problems around rapidly, they tend to concentrate power, eschew any accountability and run roughshod over public opinion. From the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey to the London Docklands Development Authority to others in Berlin, Etablissement Public d'Aménagement de la Défense in Paris and in the Middle East, these powerful organisations have not always delivered much more beyond big office parks isolated from their cities and not much loved by their residents.⁵⁰ A serious debate is needed about how much democratic control to cede to these authorities, particularly in a post-conflict situation where any mechanisms of judicial or public oversight are likely to be extremely weak.
- Funding for the reconstruction of Aleppo is going to be a challenge. Most of the money and work will be done by owners themselves, not by foreign investors. Regulations must be tailored to support the interests of city residents above any narrow group of investors. Investment money is going to serve narrow interests – in the case of Aleppo probably the eventual redevelopment of tourism infrastructure and industry. International support should allow for the establishment of effective credit mechanisms to support reconstruc-

tion and new businesses. This should not be left entirely to the private sector as experience in Iraq and Afghanistan shows that banks are often corrupt and mostly involved in money laundering and lending to the politically connected.

- Tourists and investors are more impressed by an authentic city that retains its culture and identity. Paris will always have many more visitors than Dubai and they will likely stay longer and spend more. Aleppo should focus on restoration of its historic centre not just as a tourist destination but also as a living city. This means maintaining a mixed economy, a range of social groups, public space that is defined in different ways and attracts mixed groups and few efforts at exclusion on the grounds of excessive security.
- Reconstruction takes time whether it is done as a public-private partnership or through individual investors. Berlin and Beirut started rebuilding their city centres at around the same time and both are incomplete and evolving processes. Both put commercial interests too much to the front, creating lifeless central districts designed by famous architects that are overshadowed by their more interesting and creative neighbours.
- Despite the long history of violence in Beirut, security features seem to have been ignored in the planning of BCD. Rather than building in relatively inconspicuous security devices, they were added later, cutting off large areas around government buildings and preventing life from returning to the centre. Some new buildings, for example the United Nations regional office are relatively insecure despite blast proofing and other efforts. If government offices or embassies are to be located in sensitive areas then security needs to be considered from the start.
- The memories of those who left Aleppo and take many years to return will be quite different from those who stayed and endured the full hardships of the war. Those who lived in the east and west will have different experiences and memories. Reconstruction and memorialisation of the war needs to be an inclusive process that brings together as many voices as possible. Amnesia and amnesty have been the choices of the powerful in Lebanon but not always of the victims of war and their families. Even if memories cannot be addressed right after a war, there still should be some effort to document what happened in order to address these issues in the future.
- Finding appropriate memorials after conflict can be a struggle. Lebanon has done little to deal with its past and so redevelopment has felt more often like erasure rather than recovery. The peace process did not allow for any real examination of what had happened in the civil war as the participants were all in power. Any memorialisation was likely to dredge up memories that the powers wanted suppressed. Consequently even places of great significance in the war are unmarked. All peace processes are flawed and Syria's eventual peace is likely to come at the cost of truth about the brutality of war. But Lebanon shows us that erasure is not the solution. Rebuilding cannot hide what went before.
- Many private corporations are not known for their inclusiveness or sensitivity to the needs of women or minorities. Solidere, for example, does not have a single woman on its board. It does have eleven Lebanese men, all with backgrounds in business, finance or law. The narrowness of decision making in the private sector and the lack of transparency or processes of appeal make it an unsuitable mechanism in a post-conflict society.

QUESTIONS FOR READERS:

What lessons can Aleppo learn from Beirut?

What would be the most effective way to finance the reconstruction of Aleppo?

Who should manage the reconstruction?

Should Aleppo encourage private-public partnerships?

How should the public be consulted?

What should happen to abandoned buildings?

How can the city centre be linked more closely to the rest of the city?

How should the war be commemorated in Aleppo?

How much emphasis should be placed on the recovery of tourism?

Which buildings should be a priority for reconstruction?

ENDNOTES

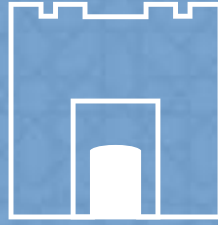
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THE ALEPPO PROJECT



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