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Beirut's City Center as an Expression of Global, National, and Local Identities and Confrontations

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The reconstruction of Beirut's city center after the civil war (1975–1990) has highlighted the role of multiple social, political, and economic actors, expressed at all scales, from the local urban level to the national (Lebanese), regional, and international levels (the Middle East, the global economy). At the local level, the conflict is between different economic and political elites over control of the center of the capital; at the national level, the confrontation is expressed over the projected and promised position of the center as the driving force required to integrate and modernize the rest of the country. At the Middle Eastern level, the debate is over the role of Beirut as a useful locus for the various national economies in the context of a regional settlement (regionalism). This, in turn, is part of a larger debate over the role of the metropolis in the globalization of the world economy (multilateralism).

The question of the reconstruction of Beirut's city center has produced a considerable amount of literature, both in the local and international press and in scholarly articles and books. Rebuilding the city center in a capital is a rare event in the last years of the 20th century: it is of such uncommon scale that it not only excites the imaginations of many, but also their cupidity. It provides a unique opportunity to test social science research methodologies, concepts, and problematics in an uncommon situation. The pride and excitement felt by the Lebanese has been accompanied by the recognition that such a venture is comparable to the rebuilding of Berlin after the end of the Cold War. Dizzying perspectives, indeed. For the country's politicians, it was a unique occasion to consolidate their power in the very heart of the reborn capital of a renewed country, while having a central and leading role in defining its profile.

This grandiose rebuilding project was not, of course, imagined *ex nihilo*. Ever since the many cease-fires of the civil war, from 1975 onward, plans were drawn up to either rehabilitate the city center or to rebuild it. In all cases, the aim was to restore the area's centrality at all levels: the local (the city's centrality), the national (the primordial space for the control and management of the country), and finally, the regional (Beirut as an irreplaceable interface between the Arab and Western economies). All these levels and scales fitted neatly into each other, guaranteeing the future prosperity—and thus survival—of the city and the country, and thus of the political apparatus.

It was the very last project that was adopted. It, however, posited requiring neither rehabilitation nor rebuilding, but a refounding of the city center so as to make it not only the symbol of a reborn Lebanon and a central place for the economies of Arab countries, especially the Gulf's, but also a space perfectly adapted for a new role, that of being one of the strategic spaces of the global economy.

This project, from the very start, provoked enthusiasm among many categories of Lebanese. They saw the rebuilding of Beirut as proof that the war was really over, that the country would return to a normal state in a modernized city; the economic sectors welcomed the movement as it would redirect flows back to Beirut, away from





the other cities that had benefited from the exodus of Lebanese capital and know-how; the political sector saw in it a consolidation of state power, sometimes confused with their personal power, and the definite demise of the militias'. Briefly, it would be through the rebuilding of Beirut's city center and its boomerang effect on the local and regional economy that general prosperity would be produced, which, in turn, would produce, then consolidate reforms in the country's political and economic system. Through the rebuilding of the main urban centrality, the country would once again be a driving force of the Arab Middle East, and a very serious competitor for any other pretender in the area, Arab or otherwise. "Al-Balad Macheh" ("The country is moving" as the once-popular slogan stated) meant that Beirut strove to stake a place in the world economy as the unavoidable relay-city in the Middle East, while cementing the national front. Democracy would thrive as an example for other countries in the area, confessionism would decline, social rights would be affirmed, and a new *Homo libanicus* would emerge.

However, opposition to the project also emerged. Intellectuals questioned the postulates behind the project. Did Beirut really need such a grandiose project in the context of an insecure Middle East and the reality of efficient competitors in the Gulf? Would the Lebanese economy be able to pay for the cost of such massive restructuring of the capital? Would Beirut and its white collars be able to survive in the cutthroat atmosphere of international business, and, if not, what would be the consequences? What would be the lot of the rest of the capital, those parts not affected by the reconstruction plan? Would the war-induced parallel centralities survive, or would they be completely marginalized? Would democracy—whatever definition one could give to the concept—thrive and bloom? Finally, would this new urban morphology signal new forms of urban governance? And what would be the place of the global economy in its consolidation? These questions, posed in conferences, seminars, and academic papers, were until lately pushed aside. Only now, with the apparent failure of the proj-

ect to live up to its expectations, are they being asked at all levels of society and catastrophic scenarios aired: the whole economic system will go into massive decline, producing a social crisis of unmeasurable consequences, with violence being one of the options. The country will plunge into civil war once again, with no hope for the survival of Lebanon as a state. Foreign occupation, partition, ethnic cleansing, massive emigration would be the lot of the country.

The comprehension of Beirut's city center as an expression of global, national, and local identities and confrontations requires anchoring it in the contemporary history of the city's centralities. By defining its various centralities, one can identify how various spaces in the city acquired a special strategic value for particular actors at different periods. This, in turn, leads to a better understanding of the actors involved and their motives, and finally the social, economic, and political tensions that underpinned these actions. As always, the understanding of the past sheds some light on the current situation while offering clues to the future.

The aim of this paper is to examine the various interactions extant between the social, political, and economic spheres implicated in the rebuilding of Beirut's center. I will first examine how the war produced a new urban geography through the emergence of new commercial, residential, religious, and political centralities. I will then present how the postwar reconstruction plan aims at recentring Beirut, on both national and regional levels, in the context of the new global economy and of regional peace or war. This will be followed by a discussion of how the various centralities that emerged during the war have continued to evolve, structuring the space of the city's suburbs while the city center is still in the building stages, producing counter-effects and tensions. I will stress how the city's center is seen, by its conceivings, as being part of a larger space, physical or metaphorical; this will lead to my reading of the current situation and its implications for the positioning of Beirut in the global economy, in the context of the world economic crisis, the forced march of global-

ization of the economy, and the disintegration of Lebanese competitiveness.

War and the Emergence of New Centralities

The city center at the start of the 1975–1990 war was a composite urban spatial production made of the juxtaposition of late Ottoman, French Mandate, and Independence-period buildings. The center was a mixture of traditional commercial spaces composed of *souks*, or markets, which also harbored aspects of the city's informal economy, and more structured but outdated shops and offices, especially in the French Mandate area built between the late 1920s and 1935, or the Ottoman-period buildings on the Place des Canons. All of this area was linked to the general activity of the nearby port. The center was also the locus for the political apparatus, with the Grand Sérail and the Ministry of the Interior, the Parliament building and other strategic ministries, police headquarters, and official departments. It was, lastly, the location of second-rate entertainment, with its declining cinemas, theaters, and bordellos. Surprisingly, here were also concentrated the headquarters of the main banks and insurance companies, the main offices of the larger import-export businesses and airline companies. The whole area was slowly being remodeled by new investment, the tearing down of old buildings and their replacement by large complexes indicating that the area was slowly being redirected toward new functions, especially offices. The city center was perceived as a slowly declining space, but of great symbolic centrality: the Place des Canons and its statue, the *souks*, and especially the three mosques, the Greek Orthodox, the Greek Catholic, and Maronite cathedrals, as well as the close proximity of the evangelical Latin church and the synagogue. It was also the main transport terminal (buses and "service" taxis to all parts of the country and the Middle East). As a whole, it was the physical expression of Lebanon's economic and power structure: on one hand, the urban heritage of an economy linked to the port and thus to Europe; on the other, a nearly complete absence of the state in the economic

workings of the system, a situation put in place and defended by the country's politicians.

The power apparatus reflected the subtle balance between the different religions; however, it also reflected the total absence of a Lebanese ideology capable of producing, in the long run, a nation. This aim was neither important nor necessary: the profits generated by the position of Beirut in an unstable Middle East, the complacency of the Parliament, the easygoing way of life of the bourgeoisie in power, the protection offered by the West all made any effort toward that goal unnecessary between the 1950s and late '60s. The cityscape illustrated the absence of any urban planning whatsoever and the dominance of private decision-making processes and investment.

However, the city center had been slowly marginalized by the spectacular development of a second center: Hamra. This first "modern" quarter of the city, built in the early 1950s with Lebanese and Palestinian capital, was used for dealing with the new postwar regional economy linked to the American presence in oil-producing states of the Gulf. Hamra was the banking, residential, and recreational center for foreign companies, and many thousand ex-patriots. In a sense, it was more of a new centrality than a duplication of the old city center. Hamra was not a political center (only the state radio and bank were located there, for reasons other than a quest for centrality), although it was the meeting place for local and Arab political intellectuals. It had the largest concentration of cinemas and hotels, but hardly any religious edifices of any real symbolic nature. The population was younger than the general average of the city, "Westernized," "modern," cosmopolitan, and politically nonconservative. Through its architecture and lifestyle, it also perfectly illustrated the absence of the state in the urban sites required for the reproduction of capital. Hamra could be described as the stepping-stone of the Western economy toward the hinterland. It was part of the mechanism that enabled the U.S. and European economies to monopolize the markets of the

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area and to guarantee the exclusion of East European and Soviet influences. Here, space had the double importance of being necessary for Western capital, while simultaneously geographically strategic. It was morphologically, socially, and politically quite different from the old center, which was anchored in pre-World War II economic and political logics; Hamra was more part of the U.S.-dominated Western economy of the postwar period, and its population and functions showed it. It was also this space that gave all of Lebanon its reputation as being Westernized and worth defending against the aims of pan-Arab, socialist, or communist ideals, which aimed at larger spatial entities.

The Civil War

The main consequence of the civil war was the destruction and paralysis of the city center. Demarcation lines between the opposing forces sprang up in the heart of the center, and the complete looting of businesses and the port took place. The result of the various forms of peaceful or brutal exchanges of population and ethnic cleansing was the emergence of new centralities, with the opening of shops and offices in surprising locations, both in the city itself, now divided into two distinct parts, or in their respective suburbs.

The choices of settlement were dictated by several considerations: religion, distance from the old center, distance from the front line, persistence or disappearance of a clientele, social status, etc. Distance from the front line explains, for example, why commercial spaces opened up on roads leading up to the summer resorts in the mountains, but far from artillery shelling; elsewhere, religious identities in other areas explain the "invention" of new centralities.

However, the late 1970s saw two significant events that remodeled Beirut's urban morphology, social composition, and centrality. The first was undoubtedly the Israeli invasion of 1978, with the subsequent rapid and massive influx of refugees from South Lebanon. They occupied all available lodging

and space, using vacant building sites, apartments, offices, garages, and shops. The population, being mainly of rural origin, deeply modified the physical aspect of the western part of the city, and, by boomerang effect, "ruralized" Hamra, further degrading its role as a central space for tertiary activities all the more as the foreign population had left, as had a large proportion of the white-collar bourgeois components. Hamra thus lost its functional and symbolic links with the Western economies; its previously rich urban environment was now reduced to harboring whole sectors of the informal economy. Politically, it shed its links with the West and became more introverted through the adoption of religiously structured or national and revolutionary ideologies.

The second event was that of the total ideological control of the "Christian" areas by one political party. This party's ideologues had produced a spatial vision of the territory it controlled, and induced a series of actions: new strategic roads, an airport, new ports, total control of media and information, control of population movements, control of financial movements, introduction of taxes, etc. This in turn brought about the concentration of population on the coastal strip, with new urbanization phenomena along the main roads.

The consequences of both the marginalization of Hamra and the emergence of new centralities to the east of the city were thus very important: there was now no clear-cut centrality, which was also perfectly illustrated by the breakdown of all the components of the state and the emergence of militia-controlled confessional entities. Each strove to make its space viable, through the injection of capital produced by rackets, contraband, extortion, or looting. Each of these spaces was designed for the maximization of profits by local political or militia leaders according to narrow visions of space: profits were to be made quickly in the context of narrow national conjunctural situations. There was no question of anchoring the various spaces to larger frameworks, such as all of Lebanon or the Middle East, and even less to the world economy. Capital was not

looked upon as being part of a larger system, with regional or global effects and implications, but only as an element to consolidate local semifeudal power. As such, space had little value except, of course, in the consolidation of local, small-scale centralities. Beirut, the former capital, was just space of military value, and not the top of a hierarchical organization of networks linked to the internal, regional, and international economies.

This spatial breakup signaled a deep change in the sense and value of space. The tiny spatial entities were the loci of local identities boxed in by hermetically closed military frontiers. Each, in turn, was protected by larger political entities (Europe, Israel, Syria, etc.), with the aim of consolidating localist identities, often confused with religious affiliation. This splintering of space had a negative effect on the reproduction of capital: it reduced the size of the market while hindering all transfers of goods or capital. That, in turn, rendered the space useless in the context of the new economic order of the 1980s, and it is hardly surprising that Lebanon's economy as a whole, or the economies of the tiny statelets, declined and disintegrated, notwithstanding investment in land and building to house the transfers of population.

The Reconstruction of the City Center and Its Postulates

The end of the war brought to power a new set of decision makers who were ideologically distant from the militias and constituted a different class of investors. They were instrumental in introducing a new constitution, the Taëf Agreement, which put an end to the more manifest discrepancies of political representation among the various confessional groups. However, the fact that control of the political structure had quietly slipped into the hands of an internationally minded group of entrepreneurs was hardly noticed. This was central to the redefinition of portions of Lebanon's space, and especially of the city center, in the avowed aim of placing both of them in a "modern" context, that is, integrating them into the world economy.

The idea was to recenter Beirut as the core area of Lebanon, and to put an end to the dispersion and confusion in the centralities based on religious affiliation through the introduction of modern planning structures and methods by a dedicated, professional, and nonconfessional group of investors, entrepreneurs, and technocrats. For the first time in over fifty years, the interests of the group in power took into account the presence of the city as a central element of its economic strategy. The plan was relatively simple: Beirut, as an urban space, would be the relay-point between the financial, economic, and decision-making cities of the North (the U.S., Europe), the Gulf states, and the Asian success economies. By being strategically placed on the coast of the Middle East, and exploiting the advantages of a liberal economy and a docile white-collar workforce, the city's center would produce enough jobs and economic surpluses to launch a new phase of economic prosperity for all the country, while reaping the benefits of this geographic position. As such, the urban context would be the seat of the post-civil war economy, itself part of a wider perspective, that of the integration of the city itself into the world economy brought about by the supremacy of the U.S. and secondly by Europe, in the context of the near-end of the various socialist economies. Beirut would thus not only be a relay-point, but also a significant actor in the New World Economic Order, offering space for its activities, labor for the workings of the system, and very liberal tax laws for capital. Capital from the oil-rich nations would once again be managed by the Lebanese banks, stocks would be exchanged by Arabic-speaking brokers, and foreign investors would be free to use the country as a fiscal haven. In return, the world economy would use Beirut as a very convenient place to penetrate the Middle Eastern Arab economies, a function Tel Aviv was apparently much less well designed to perform.

Beirut would also be attractive by its position on the Mediterranean coast, its proximity to cool mountains, its views, and its easy-going life style, very different from the austere norms of Saudi Arabia or the Gulf states





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and, increasingly, of Israel. To put this into perspective, a clear slate was required, and the investment company (Solidere) given the monopoly to rebuild the city center obtained the right to claim all private property as its own, in return for compensation through the issuing of bonds to the owners. It must be noted that Solidere, as well as many of the other companies directly working in the reconstruction sector, belonged, partially or totally, to the new prime minister. Capital and political power were thus in the hands of one group. The third component, space, was also brought under its control. This was done through a series of laws passed by a very submissive and compliant Parliament, which gave Solidere a total monopoly over land property in the city center, now extended to include portions of the city that had never been affected by the war. A master plan was drawn up which posited that the city center should be razed and then rebuilt according to state-of-the-art technical, urban, and architectural norms.

At the same time, these proponents of economic liberalism realized that urban disorder was unproductive, and that controls and regulations were a necessity. This simply mirrored current thinking on the role of space in the global economy: space has value only when it is organized for the needs of potential investors and not according to its position in a city. Urban centrality is translated by economic effectiveness, which requires docile, trained, and cheap labor, especially white collars. These constraints meant that the city center could no longer be the meeting point of all the country's population, the central bus station, and the main *souks*: a nobler function had to be set. In order to be efficient, the urban landscape had to be radically changed, so that only white-collar cadres would be welcome. Economic productivity would have to come at the price of class mixing. Pushed further, economic modernity would only function in a normalized setting, in which all political activity would have very little place. This would be expressed by having a politically (or at least strictly controlled) center in a sanitized environment, as any disturbance could endanger the investors' trust and diminish its profit-making capabilities. The fact that the

Parliament was in this sanitized space only signaled that it was partly controlled by this new power structure and that it would comply with any requirements aimed at further liberalizing the country's economy.

Decisions relating to urban questions would be centralized by both ministries and local authorities, usually the resurrected municipalities, under complete control of the political leaders and in which grassroots urban democracy had little place. Thus, even the CDR (Conseil du Développement et de la Reconstruction), an institution created to replace the Ministry of Planning, was directly linked to the prime minister's office. Inclusion in the world economy would be guaranteed through political and, of course, security control, with the army being given new responsibilities in this respect. In other words, no elected Beirut Urban Authority would emerge to tackle the numerous interrelated problems of the center, the city, and its suburbs; the Central Business District could operate without any interference from the Beirut municipality and the local population, and it could function under total state protection.

The state itself would be redefined: it would disengage from any remaining social responsibilities through the privatization of services, and would function mainly to protect and consolidate the profit-making capabilities of its members, themselves deeply involved in the rebuilding of the city center. In a certain sense, these new entrepreneurs linked Beirut to the world economy; however, they disengaged the state from any national role, while at the same time recomposing the state in accordance with their individual local political and economic ambitions. Two distinct levels emerged: the global level with the inclusion of a particular space of Beirut reserved for global financial operations, and a Lebanese, local level, aimed at reinventing a post-civil war national identity through nationalist slogans and positions.

From the outset, the reconstruction project received unambiguous support from most parts of Lebanese and Beirut society. It pleased all. The upper bourgeoisie of landowners, merchants, or bankers saw the

reconstruction as an undreamed-of opportunity to recoup losses sustained during the war: land could be sold at interesting prices (or shares obtained in an apparently prosperous and promising company, Solidere), shops could open once again in Beirut for the returning émigré population, and money would be available again. The lower classes saw in the reconstruction project job opportunities in the building sites or in the lower service economy; the younger generation saw it as proof that a new chapter in the country's history had opened, confirming the end of the old militia order and urban anarchy. The Lebanese diaspora welcomed it as material proof that the war had ended, and that it was safe to come back and invest or work. All were fascinated by the prospect of making Beirut a showcase of the Middle East, a place where international business and finance would be managed: a truly Middle Eastern Switzerland with a Monte Carlo atmosphere in a rich Arab environment on the Mediterranean.

However, this repositioning of Beirut was not accomplished without the loss of its social and symbolic parameters. No longer the focal point of the city's urban identity, nor the symbolic meeting place of all Lebanese, the city center is just another space, and not the space *par excellence* of the city. Reduced to its lowest common denominator, physical space awaiting buildings, and destined to perform only one planned function, the reproduction of capital for and by one social group in the context of a totally controlled political environment, the city's center could not expect recognition by the country's inhabitants, nor be part of any urban identitarian construct. This, however, does not influence its place in the liberalized world economy.

The Consolidation of the Peri-Central and Suburban Centralities

The rest of Beirut did not wait for the city center to be finished and began to use space in a versatile way. The peri-central districts are rapidly being modified, with the old Ottoman three-arched, red-tiled buildings being torn down and replaced by high-rise luxury apartments. Elsewhere the charm of the

old quarters is being profitably used as a venue for restaurants and luxury shops. The upper bourgeoisie is investing in the rehabilitation of whole areas, inflating land values but also reintroducing lost urban identities. The squatters have been paid to leave, and a more balanced urban way of life has emerged once again. The peri-central belt around the city center is now the most dynamic part of the city, the most coveted by investors, and the most culturally diverse.

Elsewhere, centralities born during the civil war have also matured. There is now a long strip of businesses and shops from around fifteen kilometers to the north of the city to the southern suburbs, which I have named the "Beirut Blue Banana" after the European Blue Banana, which now concentrates just about all the tertiary and secondary activities of the capital. In this space, stretched mainly along the coastal strip, the shops, offices, and businesses of the pre-war Beirut city center found a new haven, which, thanks to new investment, has emerged as a complex series of urban centralities. Banks, airline companies, supermarkets and department stores, car retailers, restaurants and fast-food outlets, hospitals, schools and university branches, entertainment centers, cinemas, religious buildings, embassies, light industries, storage facilities—all cluster on this narrow strip of land between the first hills of Mount Lebanon and the sea. The latter is being filled in to accommodate more building, especially luxury apartments, shops, and marinas; elsewhere, apartment buildings are being converted into offices, and ground floors harbor shops of all sorts. The net result is a clearly visible hive of activity which contrasts with the still empty, leveled city center.

In other words, while the city center is slowly being built (the end of the project is planned for the year 2015), the real center is now in the city's periphery—the heart is the fringe. Here, the value of space is dictated by offer and demand, by the amount of capital available either locally or from abroad; it has no monopolistic political significance, and is part and parcel of the local political logics. In this periphery, no massive urban planning is visible (apart from the privately owned coastal in-

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fills); the municipalities still function according to local loyalties and vested interests, and not according to top-heavy political dictates. All social classes are represented, although the lower and middle bourgeoisie predominate, which explains in part the large numbers of political parties present in the area.

One can state that this Beirut Blue Banana is the space of the consolidation of national identities and of the national economy. It is the space that structures Lebanon's national territory; it is the space of the national level of the economy, in opposition to the global space planned for the city center. It is the space that is unaffected by efficiency-minded technocrats so present in the planning departments of Solidere. It is, finally, the space for the slow transition from rural to urban identities and of the redefinition of political loyalties.

This periphery is thus central to the nation, but marginal to the global economy. For that reason it is neither planned nor looked upon as strategic for the current power structure.

The Global Economy and the Question of Beirut's Centralities

The reconstruction of Beirut is presented as being part of an overall plan to integrate the city's center into the world economy. However, the current global economic crisis, together with the collapse of Asian markets, the destabilization of the major currencies, and the possibility of worldwide recession, poses some very important questions as to the role of Beirut. Conceived as a relay-point between East and West, as a "real," material, financial hub in the Middle East, one can now legitimately question the validity of the idea. Also conceived as an irreplaceable locus for future business and pleasure, a city at the core of production and know-how, one must face up to the fact that the Lebanese workforce is expensive and not particularly knowledgeable, as a whole, in sophisticated production techniques. Put another way, it is cheaper to produce goods elsewhere, and the local market (just about 3 million inhabitants) is far too small; the technology used is simple and the added-value very limited. The use of foreign workers does not settle the problem of costs,

as there is an export of capital or earned revenue, which in turn affects the national currency and thus the prices of the goods produced. The heavy, inefficient, and totally corrupt state bureaucracy further stifles the mediocre profit-earning capacity of local industry and services. Even the much-vaunted banks make more profit abroad, investing in stocks and shares or speculating in exchange rates, than in Lebanon. Competitors are everywhere better organized and attuned to world markets: Dubai, in the U.S.-protected Gulf, is a heuristic example. Finally the now-irreplaceable use of the Internet for business eliminates the need for a physical location for businesses. Space, its value and distribution, is no longer at the heart of urban geographical questions, nor really central to the functioning of the global economy.

Nor is Beirut, as a staging point on the Levant coast, a necessity for most of the Arab states. Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states have all built state-of-the-art ports or container terminals, limiting the transit role of Lebanon. Similarly, Beirut International Airport has lost its position as a forced technical stop for aircraft on the Europe-Asia route: planes now fly nonstop to destinations in Southeast Asia, or stop off in the Gulf states. As for the road network, it is outside the region's overland transit movements: trucks from Turkey pass through Syria to Saudi or Jordanian markets.

One must also link the role of Beirut to the current larger political situation of the Middle East. The reconstructed Beirut city center was conceived as being an indispensable space for the peace economy. Through Beirut would flow Arab, U.S., and European capital, necessary to rebuild Palestinian, Iraqi, Jordanian, and Lebanese economies, or in search of profit-making niches. The current state of the peace process leaves a considerable margin of doubt as to this reasoning, to which one could add that Israeli banks, their access to international financial networks, and their familiarity with current international financial practice would no doubt constitute very serious competition for the international and regional market, notwithstanding Arab loyalties.

The bet on imminent peace and internal political stability as a prerequisite to rebuilding the country also turned sour, with the continuing violence in the Israeli-occupied south and growing internal social tensions. The alliance between the country's power structure and Solidere was slowly confining Lebanese society in a politically intolerant system, while at the same time proclaiming an unrestricted opening to the world economy, which was largely indifferent to its calls. At a moment when democratic expectations were being expressed all over the world, especially in the previously closed countries in Eastern Europe, this closure to debate and limits imposed on free expression chilled enthusiasm in the country. It was realized that the whole project would finally not benefit all the urban population, but only a privileged few who would be able to afford the luxury residences or the new offices. A reconstructed Beirut was thus seen by growing numbers of Beirutis as just an island of prosperity for the inner circle of the country's ruling class, with the rest left to manage on their own. The new centrality would not be national, but only for a privileged few, destroying the very sense of the word in an urban context. In a certain sense, the link between the local and the global failed to materialize: Beirut's periphery would have to continue working for a limited national market (occasionally broadened to some regional niches) and would not be linked to any global scale.

The idea of integrating Beirut as a whole into the global economy thus failed to convince. It was felt that the price to pay exceeded the dividends. It suddenly appeared to the Lebanese population that the world had not waited for the Lebanese war to end, and that fifteen years were lost on the competitiveness field. The global economy now worked according to a different set of rules, and position in space was not part of the equation. Labor and land were expensive, the technological level very low, the political regime archaic and unstable, the social crisis controlled only by repression, and finally the whole system left to its own without any credible long-term plan. Compared to cost advantages offered by some Asian countries and especially Asian cities, or by the political and social stability of Europe, or by the size

of potential markets, Beirut could hardly seem to be a serious competitor.

Conclusion

Beirut's city center is thus at the heart of multifaceted strategies expressed at several scales.

At the local, urban level, a rebuilt center would be the material setting of the primordial centrality of Greater Beirut and of its 1.5 million or so inhabitants. There, the main economic, political, and social functions would be present, just as in any other city. In a sense, Beirut would become a "normal" city, and its apparently paradoxical situation with the center spread along its fringes brought back to a "real," modern, and efficient center.

On the national level, the city center would epitomize the rebuilding of a national identity, of a new, modern Lebanon, hosting the country's most dynamic elements. Rebuilding Beirut means rebuilding Lebanon, and Lebanon is symbolized by its center.

At another level, that of the world economy, the city center points to an acceptance of Beirut and Lebanon in the new game, and proof that the old profit-making mechanisms based on trade through the port or through traditionally minded banks were replaced by much larger profits gleaned through the use of strategic space in the mechanisms of worldwide financial transfers.

However, further analysis reveals a far more complex situation. On one hand, the appropriation of the city's center signaled a certain "Lebanese" view of the use of space and of a reinvention of Lebanon as a state. The end of the war and the new constitution consolidated the normalization of the country and its institutions. Nationalist slogans, symbols, and identities were encouraged, with the aim of reinventing the ideal of a sovereign nation-state responsible for its citizens. This, in turn, signaled a closed national identity within the limits of frontiers that are claimed symbolically, metaphorically, and psychologically, and the disappearance of any other form of





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internal division. Through the reconstruction process, the national economy was to be put into motion, and all splintering factors put aside, including religious differences. The reborn Republic would function as a national space, jealously protecting individual and collective interests through recognized and legitimate action; a reborn Parliament, located in the heart of the capital, gave further symbolic meaning to the whole operation.

On the other hand, however, this very same space is used to anchor globalization mechanisms. These cannot function in narrow-minded nationalistic societies nor closed national spaces. The globalization processes in a worldwide liberal economy require space that is both open and competitive, in order to maximize both profits and freedom of movement for the transfers of capital. In the case of the city center, two contradictory logics were thus at work. On one hand, it is the locus of national and nationalistic identities, while on the other hand it highlighted the end of state control, and thus an end of the Nation.

The Lebanese power structure, epitomized by the previous prime minister, used this space for the consolidation of its own profit-making capabilities and of its political legitimacy. However, the global economy does not require participation of a narrow-minded nationalist Lebanese power structure in its mechanisms, only subordination to and compliance with its imperatives. It can be argued that the city center was, in fact, a sort of extra-territorial space created and built exclusively for foreign financial capital, and that Beirut or Lebanon, as a whole, were not concerned by this decision.

In order to make this space attractive to foreign capital, the state, through its entrepreneurs and likeminded politicians, privatized its main services, and thus dissociated it from any social responsibility. This, in turn, contradicts the aim of rebuilding a nation, the ideological basis to justify the need to end the war. Put bluntly, globalization requires the end of nations, even though some surviving parts are still useful, such as fiscal laws and some geographic spaces. The selling-off of the state reduces the importance of Beirut to just one

small portion of the city's real estate: the rest of the capital can be left to manage itself, without much interference, and the periphery (the Beirut Blue Banana) is confirmed in its role as the locus of the national economy. It is also the space that can produce enough surpluses to keep the system alive, and to continue the legitimization processes of the political apparatus. Here, political and economic life is "normal," social processes conform to familiar models, and the cityscape reflects the production of individual initiatives.

While this situation is hardly disruptive in periods of prosperity, it becomes critical in the context of economic crises. The collapse of the Asian markets, the slowdown of the world's economy, the technological revolution in communications, the opening up of other venues for investment through adjustment policies imposed on many countries of the South, the competitiveness of other cities or countries have all converged to shunt aside Beirut as a credible space for the world economy. The city center is not being rebuilt, investors are few and far between, and Solidere is in financial difficulty. The first result has been the destabilization of the power structure put into place by the previous prime minister: at the local level, jobs have not been created while at the international level, Beirut has been ignored. This, in turn, has destroyed the effects of national cohesion ("nationalism") and left the population in disarray, while the power structure struggles to survive, further delegitimizing itself by persisting in playing the global economy game through continuing privatizations. The end effect is the further reduction of Beirut as a serious contender as the space *par excellence* for the penetration and control of the Middle Eastern markets by the global companies, as was previously the case.

The global economy is ignoring the city center, and the periphery is struggling to survive at both the local and national levels. The city center is itself on the periphery of the global economy, pushing its own periphery even further away from any semblance of integration. The social fragmentation processes, arguably the reasons for the civil war, are once again in motion.



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