Beirut Reconstruction: A Missed Opportunity for Conflict Resolution
Lourdes Martinez-Garrido, MALD 2008

INTRODUCTION

In the BBC documentary, "War generation: Beirut," snipers from the different warring factions are interviewed. One reveals how the inequalities between the awful housing conditions in which he and his family were living and the opulence that he saw in the city center created in him a deep feeling of anger. According to his confession, this bitter emotion was only mitigated when he took part in the destruction of the St. Georges Hotel, a landmark of the luxurious side of Beirut. Urban references in the snipers' memories of the war are a constant theme.

In 1975, Beirut became the setting of a protracted civil conflict that would dramatically change the city's social milieu by the time it ended, over fifteen years later. What started as a disagreement between the Christian and the Muslim communities over the power of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon, ended up involving regional actors (Syria, Saudi Arabia and Israel) and international powers (American and European military forces). As a result, in a country of about three million, 170,000 people died, twice as many were wounded and 900,000 emigrated. More than half of the population suffered some kind of displacement from their homes. The war came to an end in 1990 with the Taif Accords, signed in 1989, through which the Sunni and Shia communities were granted greater representation in the parliament.

One of the outcomes of this urban warfare was a significant shift in Beirut's population distribution along sectarian lines. While before the war community intermixing was a characteristic of the city center, during the war the city was divided into two sectors: East Beirut, where the Christian community lived, and West Beirut, where the Muslim community was predominant. The demarcation line (the so called 'green line') that separated both sectors was the principle setting for militia fighting. The long-standing tensions in this area resulted in the disappearance of the main open public space, the central place known as Martyrs Square, from which the green line (the old road to Damascus) emerged.

This paper reviews the principal urban planning projects integrated into the reconstruction plan and their underlying implications in the current Lebanese socio-political dilemma. Two decidedly negative outcomes can be derived from this analysis within a conflict resolution framework. First is the disappearance of the main public space in which inter-communal social contact used to take place in pre-war Beirut, in particular Martyrs Square. The new public spaces that have emerged in post-civil-war Beirut,

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mainly commercial shopping centers, can be described as `places for exclusion,' conceived for and accessible to only a minority of upper-class Lebanese. The second outcome is the entrenchment of segmentation along sectarian lines that was first undertaken during the civil war. Linked to the disappearance of Martyrs Square, the city center functioning changed from a monocentric structure to a polycentric one that reflected the new sectarian organization. Furthermore, the implementation of post-conflict reconstruction plans has not reversed this segmentation trend nor it has addressed the urban inequalities existing between the different areas of the city. Instead of spreading the reconstruction process throughout the metropolitan area, which could have helped bridge urban and social gaps, all efforts were concentrated in downtown, which is now perceived by a great part of the population as an exclusive zone. As such, it can be stated that Beirut's urban reconstruction is a missed opportunity for enhancing social cohesion.

LEBANESE COMMUNITIES

Lebanese state formation must be understood through the lens of seventeen different religious communities converging in an effort to build a new public order in the wake of the French Mandate period from 1920-1943: Christian communities (Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics); Muslim community (internally confronted in Shia and Sunni rivalry); Druze group and Armenians.[1] In 1936, a French decree required each citizen to declare allegiance to one of the communities in order to be legally recognized as a citizen of the burgeoning state. As a result, the problematic internal division was, in part, artificially created through the institutionalization of such differences by the foreign intervening power. It is also important to note that the term `community' differs to a great extent from `tribe,'` `ethnic group' or `national minority.' Paradoxically, none of these divided groups can be considered as one of these in itself. The Lebanese communities were never historically social entities but religious groups whose division was due to the different conception over the nature of Christ in the Christian case, and over who should inherit

power after the Prophet's death in the Muslim case.[2]

The Maronite community received the greatest support from France, both during and after the Mandate period. As a result of this privileged position, members of this community have traditionally held prominent posts in the political, social and economic realms. Established in the National Pact of 1943, parliamentary power was to be divided in a fixed ratio of six Christians to five Muslims, by which the Maronites held the presidency and the Sunnis occupied the post of prime minister.[3] This rigid formula set the beginning of the power struggle between the Muslim and Christian communities, in which the Maronite Christian and Sunni Muslim were the main beneficiaries. The civil war of 1975 was fought between two main groups: those pro-status quo and those advocating reform of the National Pact. After fifteen years of protracted conflict and having reached a 'mutually hurting stalemate' in which none of the parties could win, the Taif Accords were signed in 1989. Unfortunately, they did not produce a substantive political reform that reflected the demographical changes that the country had gone through. Although they provided more parliamentary representation to the Muslim communities, the community-based power system remained essentially the same.

ROOTS OF SOCIAL CONFLICT: THE URBAN DIMENSION

From 1950 to 1975, the expansion and composition of Beirut's metropolitan area clearly materialized the process of socio-economic differentiation that was taking place among the myriad communities. Further complicating matters, a large number of migrants coming from rural areas, mostly from the Shia community, migrated to the capital, lured by the flourishing economy. As they settled in the

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villages of the city's outskirts, the villages became teeming slums, creating a ring of overcrowding and destitution that, over time, encroached upon Beirut's more affluent center. In addition, the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 originated two important facts: a rapid increase of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and the controversial presence of the PLO. Although Lebanese forces did not take part in that conflict, the loss of territory in neighboring countries (the Golan Heights in Syria, the West Bank in Jordan) increased the number of Palestinians living in Lebanon. When in 1970 King Hussein expelled the PLO from Jordan, in the aftermath of what is known as Black September, Lebanon became the principal destination for Palestinian refugees. As a result, a belt of social deprivation, the 'belt of misery,' soon overlapped Palestinian and Armenian refugee camps, as depicted in Image 1 (see Page 8). These urban conditions were a source of growing civil unrest that reached its peak in 1975 with the outbreak of civil war.

After the Lebanese civil war of 1975 to 1990, the destruction of the city of Beirut and its post-conflict reconstruction created a new source of segregation and division. The lack of interest in prioritizing social reconciliation has resulted in a systematic elimination of the possibility of social interaction among the different communities due to the absence of shared public areas. This urban fragmentation only serves to accentuate the existing hard segmentation in Lebanese society between the previously warring factions. Two main projects guiding Beirut's post-conflict reconstruction program exemplify this phenomenon: one for the city center, better known as 'Solidere,' after the company's name that implemented the plan, and another for the Southern suburb, named 'Elyssar plan.'

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SOLIDERE'S PLAN FOR BEIRUT'S CENTRAL DISTRICT

The reconstruction of the city center was officially entrusted to a real estate company named Solidere, which was created in 1992 for managing the development of the central district. The leading figure behind the promotion of the project (and also contributing twenty percent of the company's capital) was the Prime Minister at the time, Rafiq Hariri, who was assassinated in February 2005 on the streets of Beirut. The idea behind the project (Image 3 – see Page 9) was the revitalization of Lebanese economy by re-establishing Beirut as the regional center for trade and investment that it had been in the Eastern Mediterranean area before the war. However, the uncontrolled budget and several management failures of the reconstruction process had rather negative impacts on the Lebanese economic activity of the late 1990s. Among the causes that led to this failure, two can be pointed out. First, contracts were mainly awarded to foreign construction enterprises that subcontracted considerable amount of work to local companies at very low prices, thereby transferring much of the profit of this important public investment out of Lebanon. In addition, the opportunity to employ local population was diminished by the number of foreign workers contracted. For these and other causes, Lebanese economic growth started to slow down by the mid 1990s, becoming negative by the year 2000.[4] This is why some authors have argued that reconstruction was used as a pretext for a massive speculation and usurpation of the public resources.[5] On the other hand and despite the major failures, some people recognize this model as the only one capable of getting things done in the Lebanese postwar context.

In terms of physical reconstruction, the project's implementation has mainly followed a policy of *tabula rasa*, made possible by the expropriation of the perimeter of the central

district, without due respect for original property rights. As a consequence of this policy, original proprietors and residents were given Solidere's shares in exchange for land; hence they have neither returned nor participated in rebuilding the area. It is also worth noting that the number of buildings torn down by Solidere exceeds the number destroyed during fifteen years of civil war.[6] This major clearing has been considered analogous to the effort of erasing the past in order to heal the wounds instead of remembering it to avoid repeating the same mistakes.[7]

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The physical outcome of Solidere's plan is perceived as an island in the middle of the metropolitan area, an evocation of Dubai's model of exclusive housing compounds, private marinas and luxurious shopping centers. In no sense has it recaptured the inclusiveness that the pre-war district offered to the Lebanese citizens, regardless of their social condition. The central district and Martyrs Square in particular, have been described as inclusive spaces by several authors. According to Samir Khalaf, it was in 1879 when a landscaping project for a public garden in the 'bourj' (Marty's Square is also known as the 'bourj') was launched, that the area started to attract different types of public activities.

> The bourj began to evolve into an urban hub that encompassed a variety of activities ranging from official state and municipal bureaucracies, travel terminals, hotels, locandas, and sidewalks cafes to retail stores, popular souks, and less reputable venues such as brothels, bars, and gambling houses.[8]

Hence, for decades, the site played an increasingly important part on all levels of the city life.

> All across history, students and trade unions standing against the national government expressed in downtown Beirut all their dissatisfaction. On the other hand, this was also a center of tremendous intellectual activity, especially with the foundation of the 1950 Grand Theater. [9]

On the other hand, it has to be said that Solidere's project has achieved the environmental recovery of the central district's coastline, in which tonnes of garbage were spread over an area of 25,000 square meters and reached 14 meters high, as well as some remarkable restoration works, like the Foch-Allenby area.

ELYSSAR PLAN FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SOUTHERN SUBURB

The simple designation of 'southern suburb' has negative connotations in Beirut today: 'anarchy,' 'degradation,' and 'squatters' are terms that usually accompany any mention of the 'southern suburb.' Formed by the continuous flow of rural migrants, the current population is rather homogeneous, predominantly consisting of members of the Shia community. In contrast to Solidere's reconstruction plan, Elyssar's plan was agreed to be implemented by a public agency that reunited extremely diverse parties; from Prime Minister Hariri to representatives of the Shia groups Amal and Hezbollah. These contrasting voices assumed the express intent to reorganize this complex southern suburban area of the city in which one third of Beirut's population live.[10]

Aiming to develop and modernize a vast area five times bigger than the Central District, Elyssar's plan has been criticized by some specialists for its poor adaptation to social needs and for being based only on economic considerations. However, this project has not raised as many concerns as Solidere's plan for the Central District. This might be attributable to the longstanding fact that the Shia community, mostly of rural origin, has not been considered

part of urban Beirut. Although Elyssar's plan reprises a failed model tested in many Arab cities of Northern Africa[11] and proven ineffective due to its high density, the plan has not been modified.

The Elyssar plan has not been implemented yet, and it is increasingly less likely that it will be due to the continuing Lebanese political stalemate. Several driving forces lay behind this failed implementation: first, the difficulties in land expropriation from the myriad of proprietors of a territory that has been illegally occupied since the war; second, the bureaucracy and the lack of transparency characteristic of post-war Beirut's governance; and, third, the speculation associated with this land's location and its potential for private development (45 out of 550 hectares are coastline terrain). However, the largest obstacle remains the difficult communication between the main actors, namely the Lebanese Government and the Shia Community. Hizbullah and Amal, both Islamic fundamentalist groups, represent this community in the Elyssar's agency and tend to control the information that the inhabitants receive.

THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF MARTYR'S SQUARE DESTRUCTION

In summary, the reconstruction plan has not contributed to social healing and reconciliation due to the absence of effective initiatives for bridging the existing divide among communities. The intended economic development that the central district was supposed to bring never reached the 'misery belt.' The Elyssar project, although poorly designed and conceived, never became a reality. In addition to the above-mentioned obstacles to implementation of this project, some authors affirm that the fact that Elyssar was perceived by the Shia as another 'Hariri plan' constituted the key in the failure of negotiations among the parties that composed the public agency,[12] showing the difficulties that social division creates in the aftermath of the civil strife.

Furthermore, the way the reconstruction process has been carried out has not only enhanced but created new sources of inter-communal social segmentation among Beirut's citizens. In this sense, the impact that the destruction of Martyrs Square has inflicted upon its citizens should be highlighted. Historically defined as a contested space for which different groups struggled, it represented the union point between the East and the West side of the city. In the pre-war years, it housed a multiplicity of activities; from cafes, hotels and gardens to the government's headquarters.

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Due to its inclusive character, it constituted the unique heart of the district, from and to which transportation lines steered and where social encounters were possible. In this regard, it can be stated that the central district followed a monocentric structure, being Martyrs Square the core of the neighborhood.

Realizing the vitality that Martyrs Square reflected in the pre-war era can help to assess the impact of its destruction and the longing to recover this open public space in the post-war city. From 1975 on, it was taken as the center of combatants. Although Solidere's works have been going on in the Central District for over ten years, the building of housing compounds has been prioritized to that of recovering public spaces. Hitherto, and despite several provisionary unclear plans for the site, Martyrs Square has not been defined. Despite the current emptiness of the site, massive demonstrations occupied the place after Rafiq Hariri's assassination, demanding the complete withdrawal of Syrian forces in Lebanese territory.

Understanding the importance of public spaces is essential in achieving reconciliation in divided societies, as they have the dual characteristic of being perceived as neutral and at the same time offer the possibility of contact and social interchange. According to Samir Khalaf, urban places that were sources of national pride have become inaccessible to citizens or transformed into spaces for commercial speculation in the aftermath of the civil conflict.[13] The social impact of the deprivation or

destruction of these landmarks is explained as follows:

> Urban changes inevitably affect the habits of a few people, perplexing and troubling them….Groups designed their boundaries and defined their reactions in relation to a specific configuration of the physical environment.[14]

> The way Beirut's reconstruction has been implemented might be enhancing casual contact rather than acquaintance or residential contact and thus increasing prejudice and division among the different communities. …
> The lack of real knowledge of individuals belonging to a different socio-ethnic group only further entrenches existing prejudices.

Associated with the absence of inclusive public spaces that would be able to engender inter-communal social interaction is the reinforcement of communal segregation along sectarian lines that occurred during the civil strife. Before the war, inter-communal mixing was a significant characteristic among the different communities that comprise the totality of the Lebanese population. Although there was always a Christian majority living in East Beirut, the percentage of Muslims living in the eastern suburbs of the city reached forty percent in 1975. As it has been described, social encounters were very much taking place in the central district area, especially in Martyrs Square, due to the myriad and type of activities located there: the parliament, financial institutions, religious centers, traditional souks, etc.[15] East and West neighborhoods found their connection in one common spot: Martyrs Square.

During the war, diverse forms of forced displacement were experienced by almost two-thirds of the population. Ranging from home or neighborhood to country, the population shifts that occurred during the conflict reinforced the creation of community-based identities rather than forging a unitary national Lebanese identity. Hence, the percentage of Muslims living in the eastern suburbs of Beirut decreased to five percent in 1980.[16] In search of protection and shelter, members of the same communities tended to resettle together, leading to the formation of territorial identities[17] and the configuration of a multi-centric city model. Nowadays there is no evidence of reversing this trend of community territorialization. Unfortunately, the reconstruction plan for the center has deprived original habitants from returning to their properties. The high prices of the housing compounds built in the central district have excluded many citizens, making them affordable only to a small minority of Lebanese or to foreign investors.

Although the process of communal territorialization is understandable in the context of a civil war, it poses a threat to coexistence in such a pluralistic society. In the aftermath of the civil war, the Lebanese society is more fragmented than it was before the conflict. The reconstruction process, which constitutes an opportunity for planners, architects and politicians to contribute to achieve reconciliation and social integration in this highly divided society, is not only repeating the problems of the past but actually only exacerbating them further. According to theories of conflict resolution based on social contact, the absence of contact among communities sets the basis for prejudice, which can originate hostility. The way Beirut's reconstruction has been implemented might be enhancing casual contact rather than acquaintance or residential contact and thus increasing prejudice and division among the different communities. Prejudice is defined as an aversive or hostile attitude toward a person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to a group, and is therefore presumed to have the objectionable qualities ascribed to the group.[18] The lack of real knowledge of individuals belonging to a different social-ethnic group only further entrenches existing prejudices.

CONCLUSION

Urban factors are intimately intertwined with human conflict. In a complex interaction, the built environment affects human behavior; meanwhile the city form is very much shaped by human

needs as security. In the aftermath of protracted conflicts in which societies are highly divided, the urban environment can play a role in decreasing social tension. Therefore, urban planning interventions in post-conflict situations can be considered as an opportunity to change factors that were creating social conflict, as well as a tool to foster reconciliation in divided societies.

The Lebanese civil war resolved none of the conditions that generated the initial confrontation. Like any other type of violence, it generated fear, suffering and destruction. In the process of recovery, there was no political plan for social reconstruction. The current plans for urban reconstruction reflect past mistakes that should not be repeated. Approaching urban reconstruction through the theories of conflict resolution provides a framework that might give guidance on how to intervene in the city in post-conflict settings. At the same time, making an effort in trying to understand the root causes of conflict constitutes a premise in designing a long-term vision for peaceful coexistence.

The process of reconstruction can be seen as an opportunity to change factors that were creating social conflict, and as providing a chance to analyze what was not functioning correctly in that society and how to establish a basis for reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. In the case of Beirut's reconstruction, understanding the importance of recovering urban public spaces that promote social contact between the Lebanese communities is essential in helping to set the basis upon which national reconciliation could be built. Moreover, learning from the inclusive character of Martyrs Square might offer guidance to promote the type of social activities that can engage members from different communities. However,

all of these efforts might be futile unless the numerous Shia community participates in this urban experience. For that, not only urban interventions but also significant changes in the power-sharing formula are needed in the Lebanese political realm.

The different number and character of factors that intervene in the complex process of social conflict and conflict resolution go far beyond the scope of city planning. However, the opportunity that post-conflict reconstruction poses to architects, planners and politicians should be seized in the effort to bring healing and reconciliation to divided societies. In this sense, the concentration of the reconstruction efforts in Beirut's Central District have had negative consequences in eroding the role of the Lebanese state that have led to the current political stagnation of Lebanon. Instead of spreading the reconstruction process throughout the metropolitan area, which could have helped to bridge urban and social gaps, all efforts were concentrated in downtown, which is now perceived as an exclusive zone for a greater part of the population. Therefore, it can be stated that Beirut's urban reconstruction is a missed opportunity for enhancing social cohesion and community reconciliation since it failed to address one of the root causes of the civil conflict, this is to intervene in ameliorating the dreadful living conditions of approximately thirty-five percent of the city's population.

The views and opinions expressed in articles are strictly the author's own, and do not necessarily represent those of al Nakhlah, its Advisory and Editorial Boards, or the Program for Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (SWAIC) at The Fletcher School.
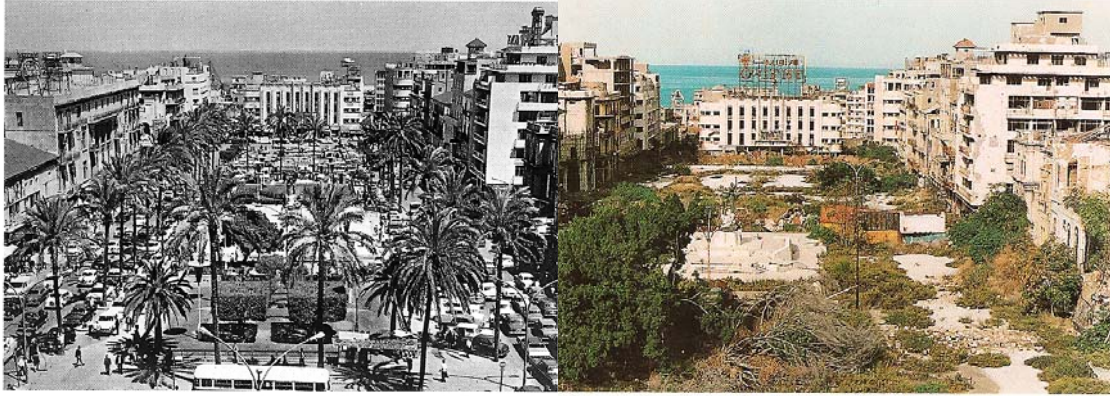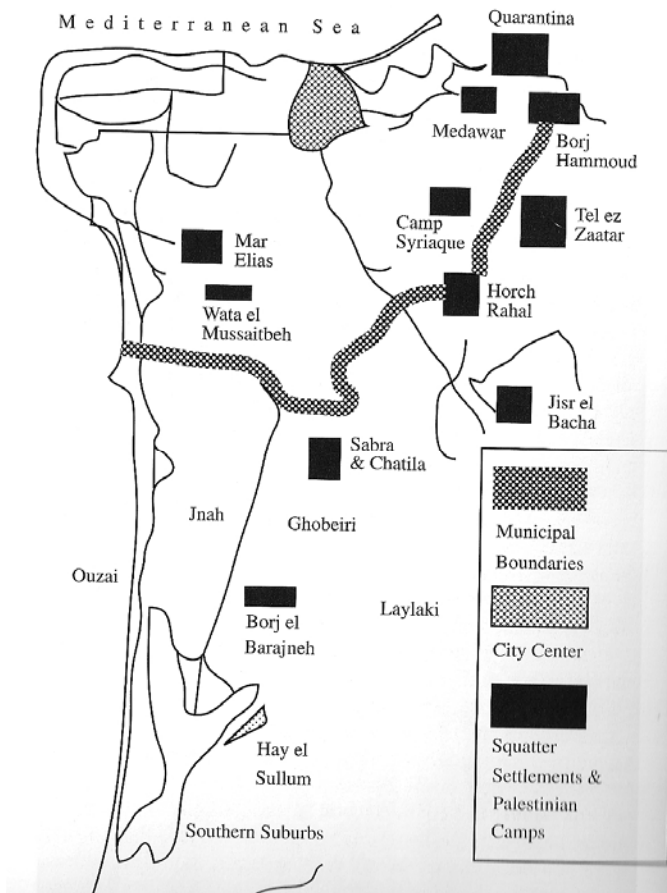
Image 1. Martyrs Square before and during the civil war
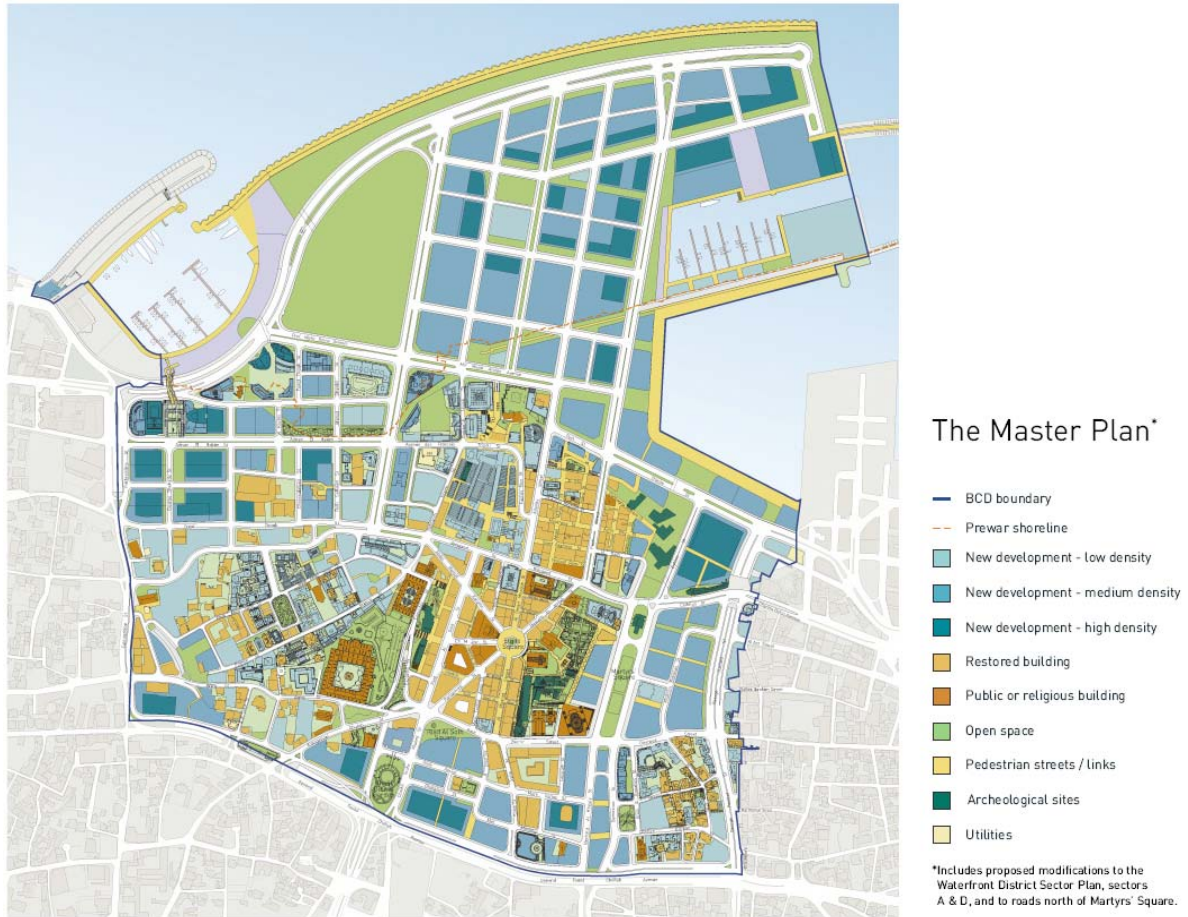

Image 2. Belts of Misery in the pre-war era

The Master Plan*

— BCD boundary
-- Prewar shoreline
New development - low density
New development - medium density
New development - high density
Restored building
Public or religious building
Open space
Pedestrian streets / links
Archeological sites
Utilities

*Includes proposed modifications to the
Waterfront District Sector Plan, sectors
A & D, and to roads north of Martyrs' Square.

Image 3. Solidere's Master Plan for the reconstruction of the central district
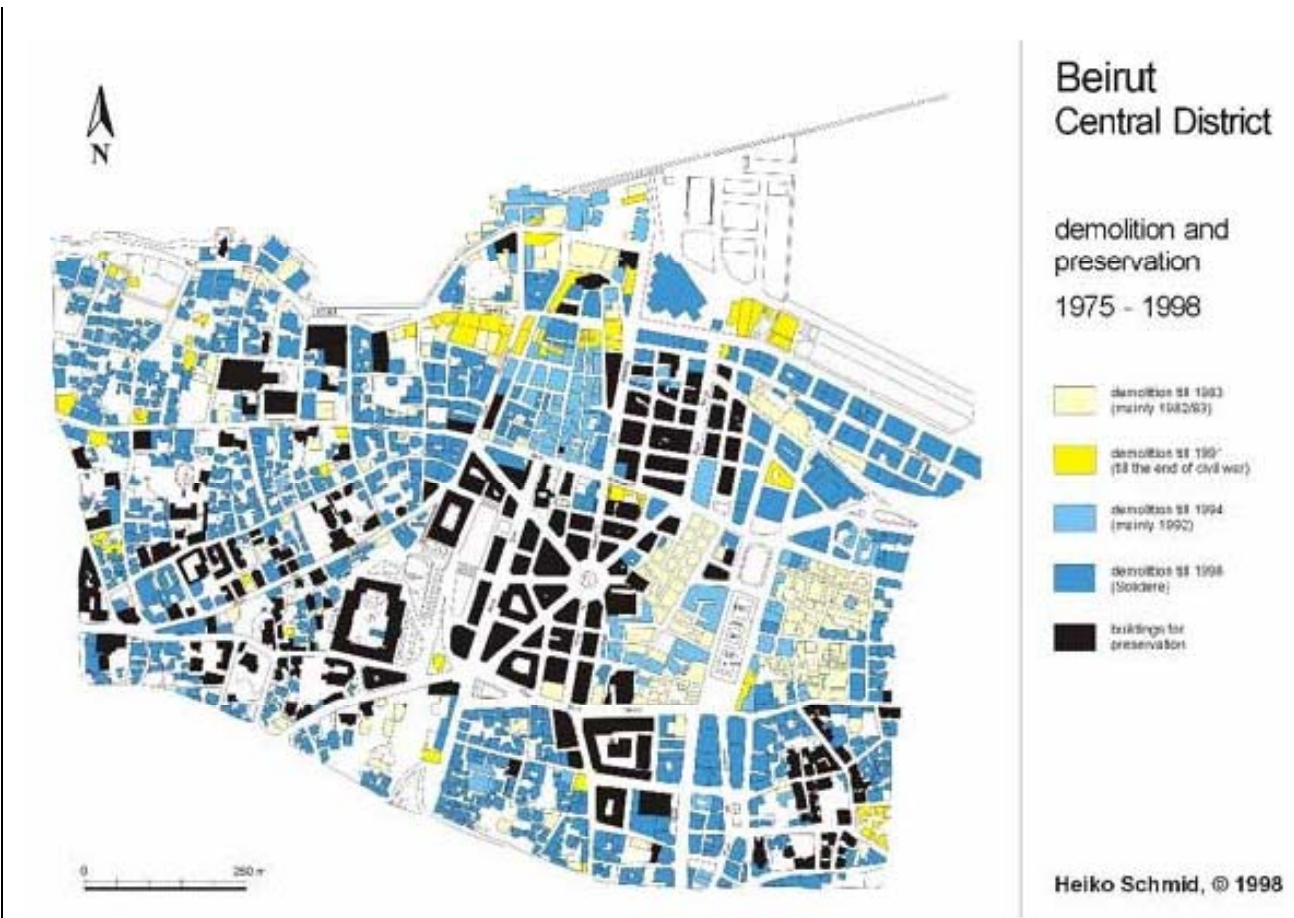
Image 4. Map showing a comparative study of the buildings destroyed during the war and the ones destroyed by Solidere

Image 5. Aerial view of Solidere's plan   **Image 6. Example of housing compound**

Image 7. Example of Solidere's restoration works: Restored quarter in Beirut's Central District

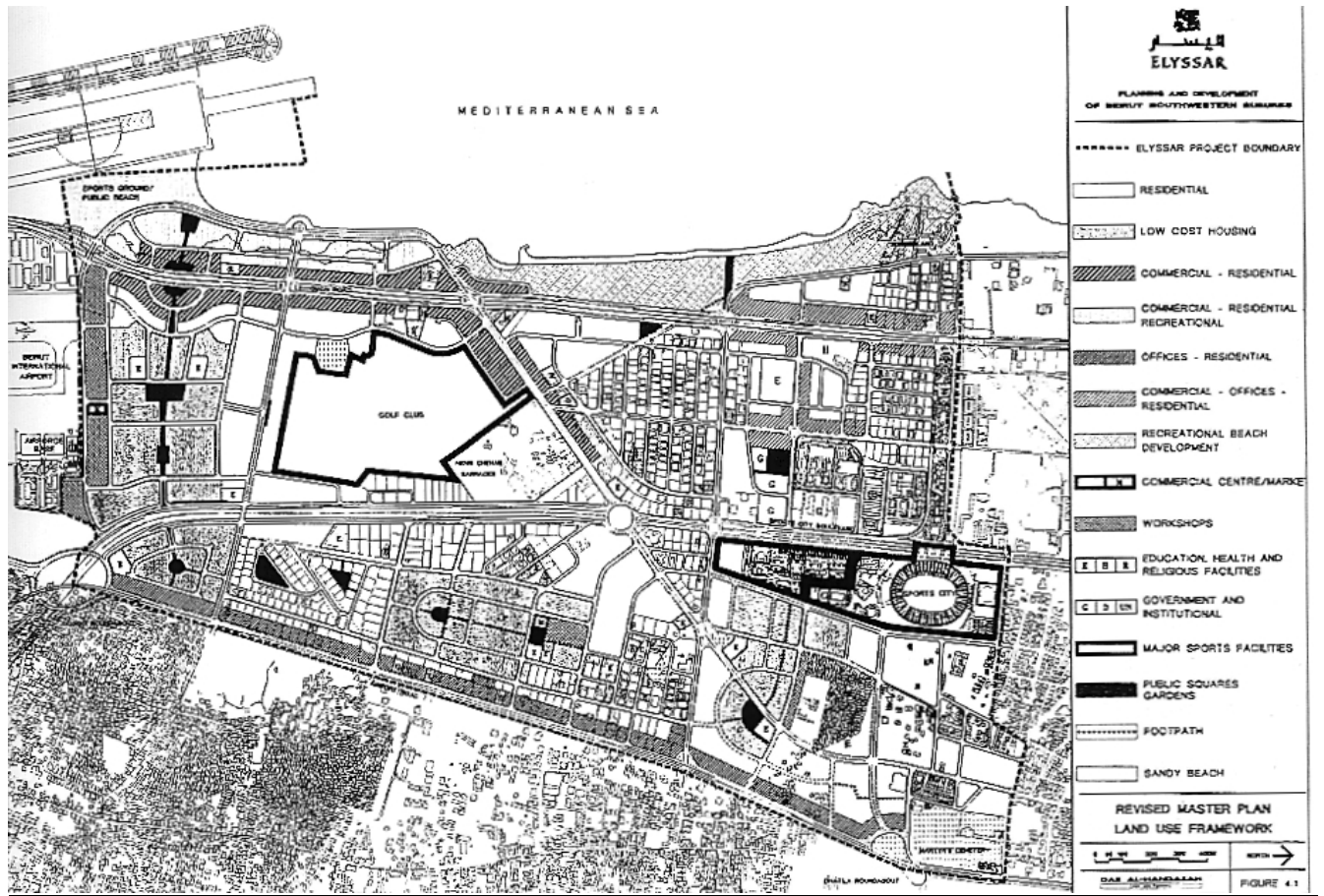**Image 8.Squatter settlement, 1957**   **Image 9. The Southern Suburb**

Image 10. Elyssar Plan for the Transformation of the Southern Suburb
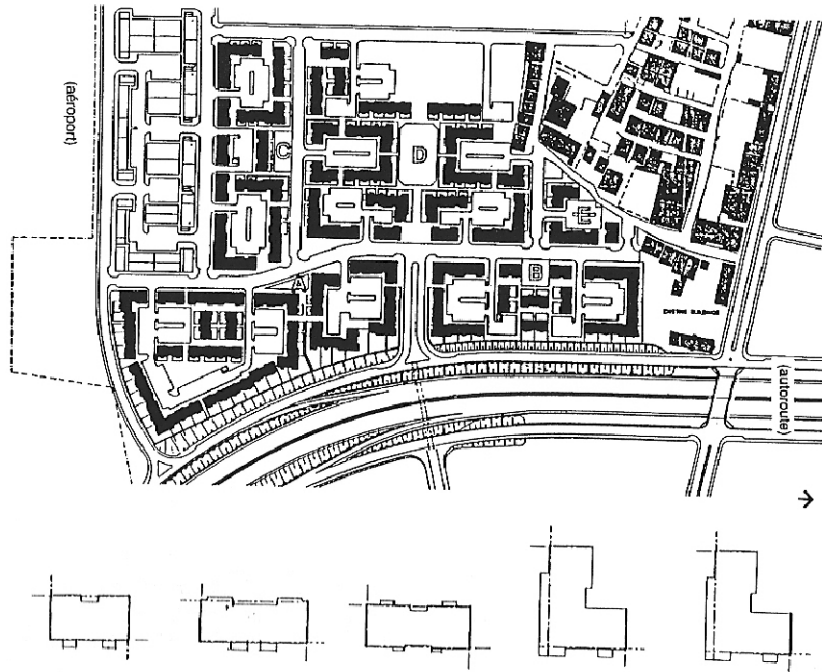
Image 11. Elyssar Plan: mass plan of 7,500 low-income housing units
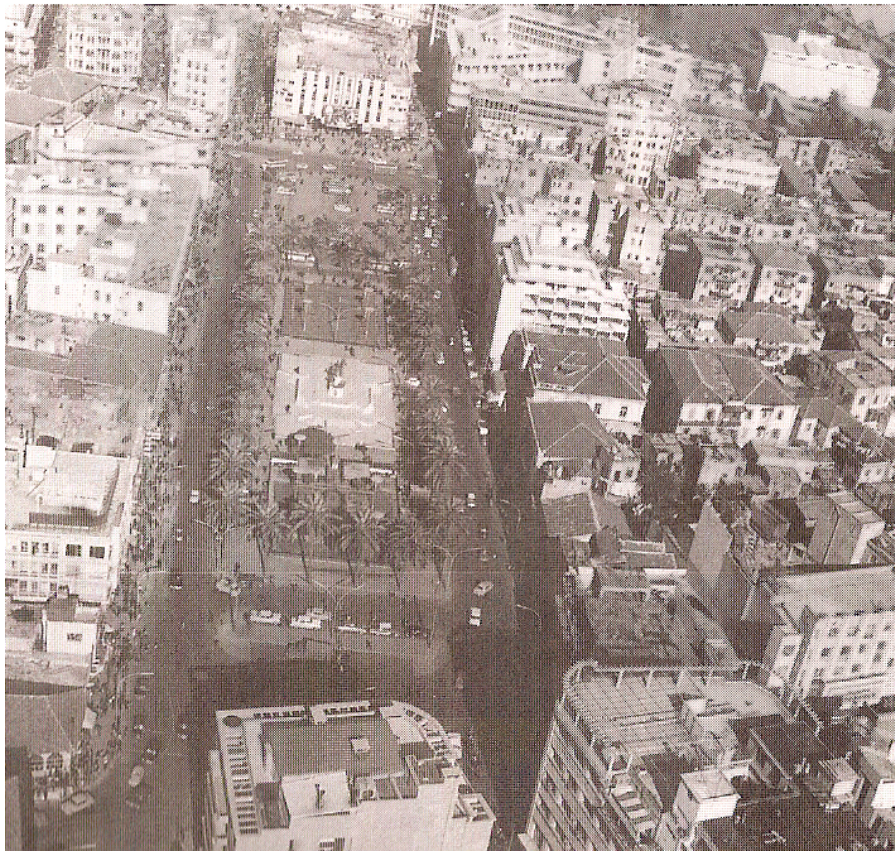
Image 12. Aerial view of Martyrs Square in 1960s

Image 13. Demonstrations after Hariri's assassinations

Image 14. Current view of Martyrs Square

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