

The Slow Erasure of a City: Heritage Demolition, Urban Memory, and the Reconstruction of Identity in Beirut

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Abstract:

The architectural heritage of Beirut has been deeply shaped by post-war reconstruction and rapid urban redevelopment, leading us on asking some important questions about the preservation of urban identity. This study examines the relationship between Beirut's heritage demolition and the urban development leading to the transformation of Beirut's environment through a qualitative case study of Solidere redevelopment project in 1994. Analyzing the heritage legislation, and academic literature, the research evaluates how redevelopment has influenced Beirut's historic fabric. The findings suggest that even if the Solidere project contributed to the economic recovery and physical reconstruction, it has accelerated the replacement of traditional architecture by erasing completely Beirut's old traditional souks, affecting the continuity of the city's rich heritage. The study concludes that a sustainable urban development would mean that development should integrate heritage conservation into planning policies to preserve as much as possible Beirut's architectural identity while always supporting future growth..

**Keywords:**

Beirut, Architectural Heritage, Urban identity, collective memory, Solidere.

Introduction: "The What & Why"

Cities are much more than a collection of buildings, they are living hearts of archives and history, culture and most importantly collective memory. They preserve experiences and identities of successive generations. However, historic architecture represents more than aesthetic value, it gives more meaning by strengthening the relationship between the people and the place. Its disappearance would threaten not only the built environment but also the identity it sustains.

Beirut is a great example to this challenge. Decades of war, political instability, economic collapse, and market driven redevelopment that have progressively erased and replaced Lebanese traditional houses with high rise developments. While it is true that modernization addresses evolving urban demands, it has also accelerated the loss of our architectural heritage, that has gradually transformed the city's historic fabric and cultural character.

This raises fundamental questions: Can a city preserve its identity when the history spaces that have embodied the memory of the previous and current inhabitants systematically be erased? Unlike the destruction caused by conflict, heritage loss in Beirut is also related to neglect, and speculative real estate development. Some interventions may appear isolated, but their cumulative impact reshapes completely the city's identity over time.

An important turning point in Beirut's urban transformation was the actual post-civil war period of reconstruction of the city center through the Solidere development project. The initiative has played a major role in rebuilding and modernizing Beirut's infrastructure and even reviving the capital's economic activity. However, it also intensified debates about the demolition of historic buildings and the preservation of the city's architectural identity.

This paper argues that the gradual demolition of Beirut's Architectural heritage represents a huge process of urban memory erasure that would extend beyond the loss of individual buildings. The study examines how architecture functions as not only as architectural archives but how the gradual disappearance of the identity would impact the reconstruction of Beirut's urban identity. By exploring Beirut being a city shaped by continuous crisis and development projects, this paper highlights the importance of preserving the architectural identity and the natural charm of the city for the future generations.

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Literature Review: "The story so far "

The actual relationship between architecture, collective memory, and urban identity has been significantly reviewed and examined through architectural theory and heritage studies. Scholars agree that that the built environment do function as a physical archive through which societies always preserve their values, historical and cultural values. Traditional buildings possess meaning and significance beyond their actual architectural qualities, as they primarily contribute to a city's sense of place and most importantly, it is what keeps the people anchored in their city. Demolishing such buildings would not only mean the loss of physical fabric but the gradual weakening of cultural identity.

Beirut has become one of the most studied examples of a city transformed by successive political, social and economic instability. Researchers have shown that decades of conflict have altered the morphology of the city. Rather than evolving through a continuous planning process,

Beirut has experienced fragmented redevelopment where the economic priorities often outweigh cultural preservation and sustainability due to the financial distress in the country and poor governance (Athari et al., 2023), even though this is an era when green economies and ESG are becoming increasingly important (Kaspard et al., 2026).

Among the leading scholars who have documented Beirut's urban transformation, Prof. Dr. Antoine Fichfich has made a significant contribution through his research on the evolution of Beirut's urban and architectural forms from the nineteenth century to the present. His work demonstrates how all the instability in which the country has gone through and the planning decisions that followed with the uncontrolled expansion and the preservation of the architectural heritage. In collaboration with Karim El Jisr, he further examined the environmental and urban impact of this anarchic urbanization, by emphasizing the need for sustainable planning policies that would balance the development with the preservation of the heritage.

Other important contributions include the work of May Davie, that has documented Beirut's Historical urban development throughout the years with the integration of its expanding neighborhoods, illustrating changing the special organization of a city would reflect larger social and political transformations. Similarly, Robert Saliba analyzed the emergence of modern architecture in Beirut during the 20th century. He demonstrated how architectural evolution is closely connected to cultural and historical contexts instead of stylistic change.

Prof. Mona Fawaz (2009-2016) shifts the discussion by analyzing the post war reconstruction, emphasizing about how the redevelopment and real estate dynamics have deeply transformed the social and spatial structure of Beirut.

Despite these valuable contributions, the previous studies largely cover heritage conservation, urban planning, or architectural history as separate fields. Comparatively not a lot of attentions has been given to the cumulative effect of the gradual heritage demolition on Beirut's collective memory and the evolution of the urban identity. Few studies reflect how the continuous demolition of historic traditional buildings gradually reconstructs the cultural identity of the city itself.

This research addresses that gap by incorporating architectural theory, urban memory, and heritage preservation into one analytical framework. In doing so, this study argues that architecture actually does not only function as a physical structure of a city but by means of its identity would be preserved and transformed.

Methodology: "The how we did it "

This study adopts a qualitative case study methodology to examine the connections between heritage demolition, collective memory, and the transformation of the urban identity of Beirut. This qualitative approach is appropriate because the research seeks to explain the cultural and spatial consequences.

This examination relies on a document-based analysis of primary and secondary sources in which, the primary data include Lebanese heritage legislation, urban planning documents, historic research records, and reports issued by governmental and international organizations. These documentations are primarily supplemented by academic publications, expert evaluated journal articles, and academic research addressing Beirut's urban development, heritage conservation, and architectural history.

To further evaluate the actual impact of redevelopment on the city's historic fabric, this research examines a selection of meaningful urban transformations, with particular emphasis on the Solidere development project (1994) as the major turning point in Beirut's post war development.

The analysis is guided by concepts from the collective memory, place identity, and the



conservation of our heritage. This would allow the built environment to be interpreted as a cultural record rather than a simple physical setting. These theoretical perspectives would allow us to provide a framework for better understanding how those important changes in architecture throughout the years can influence the relationship between people and the place.

To strengthen the validity of the findings, evidence is verified by using historical records, documents, maps, photographs, and other existing academic literature. The data collected are then

examined by identifying recurring themes related to heritage loss and identity transformation. This methodology would then provide a comprehensive approach of the long-term effect of the progressive heritage demolition of Beirut's urban character.

Results: "The facts "

The analysis of the documentation reveals that the transformation of the urban landscape of Beirut has occurred through successive phases of development, with the Solidere reconstruction project that represents one of the most influential turning points in the city's post war history. Even though the project successfully revitalized Beirut's central district, it significantly altered the historic urban fabric by demolishing numerous traditional buildings. The problem that Beirut's central district is facing now is that it has been built in an artificial way that does not resembles the majority of Beirut's population.

The best example to give here is the obvious comparison between Beirut's central District and Bourj Hammoud, which is located on the outskirts of the capital. Bourj Hammoud always feels alive, people go there to shop and eat, and most importantly the prices are really affordable. It is where the majority of the Armenian immigrants are based in Lebanon. However, Beirut's central district, even if it is aesthetically more pleasing than Bourj Hammoud, does not reflect the culture of the Lebanese people. The majority of the population wouldn't go walk or shop in a place that they cannot afford. Beirut's central district feels empty most of the time because it was designed as a modern, luxury, and commercial hub. This matter led to a huge gentrification by expropriating private property, displacing low-income



residents, and prioritizing high end real estate. The development process led to a forced relocation of an estimated 40 000 to 60 000 individuals.

BOURJ HAMMOUD SOUKS

Furthermore, the loss of historical buildings extends beyond physical transformation. Replacing the traditional architecture and the old souks has reduced the presence of cultural landmarks that historically reflected the city's social diversity.

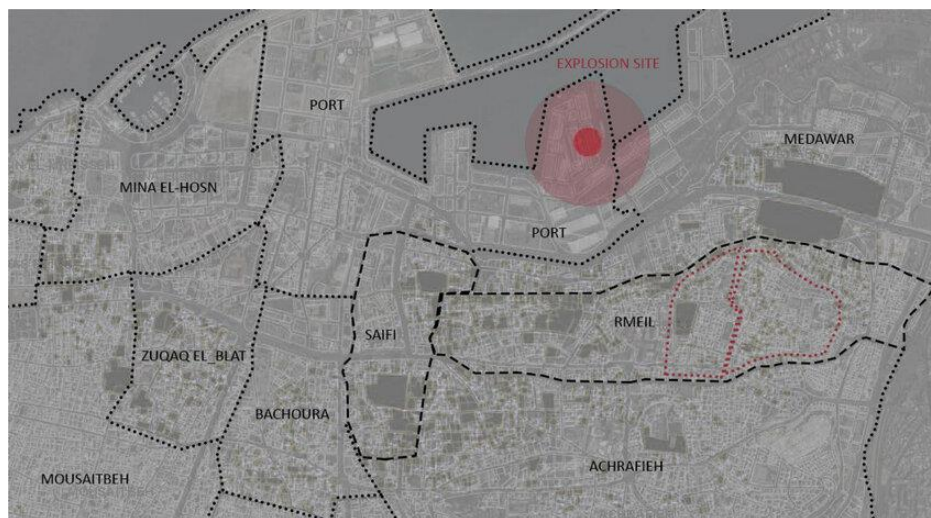
As a consequence, it created a boring, homogeneous central district. The dominance of international style architecture means that many of the distinctive characteristics associated with Beirut's historical identity have become less evident, if not completely altered.

A review of Lebanese heritage legislation and planning policies also highlights limitations in the protection of historic buildings. Even if legal mechanisms for heritage conservation exist, redevelopment pressure always limits their implementations.

The economic value of centrally located land would make it really hard to maintain the remaining traditional buildings. If we take the example of a traditional Lebanese house located in the central district in which the land value is extremely high, this matter would attract investors, demolish the traditional buildings and build a high rise building instead. The ministry of culture has been working really hard on this matter to maintain as much as possible of what's left of the traditional part of Beirut.

After the port explosion in 2020, traditional buildings were heavily damaged by the blast. The areas most affected are the Saify and Rmeil districts.

DOWNTOWN BEIRUT



https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Rmeil-neighborhood-location-2-modified-by-A-Dikmak_fig1_384429125

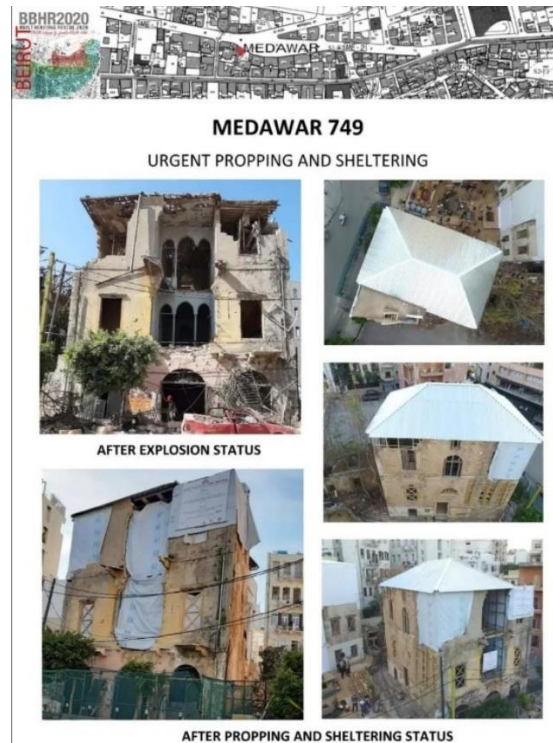
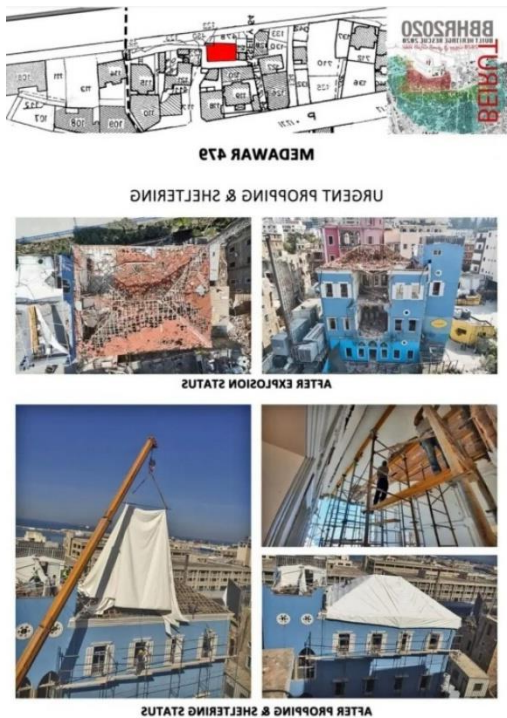


Directly after the blast, the Ministry of Culture formed a team of specialized architects: **The Beirut Built Heritage Rescue (BBHR2020)** that consists of collective architects, structural engineers, restorers, and academics. The group focused on emergency structural consolidation, and damage assessment across severely hit historic districts. Operating in close coordination with **Directorate General of Antiquities (DGA)** and the **Lebanese Order of Engineers and Architects (OEA)**, BBHR2020 relied on a dedicated network of local professionals and institutional coordinators. Key figures, and allied experts driving the urban recovery framework included architects **Yasmine Dagher, Nadine Harake, and Pierre Asmar**, alongside of institutional experts like **Prof.Dr. Antoine Fichfich**, who helped synchronize academic, and international emergency efforts.



BBHR TEAM

The findings overall lead us to the conclusion that Beirut's architectural transformation is not related to a single event rather than a series of continuous crises throughout the years. Within those post-war reconstruction and redevelopment projects, the solidere project emerged as an example of this complex relationship between urban renewal and our heritage conservation. This illustrates how the pursuit of modernization can simultaneously contribute to a huge economic recovery while on the other hand reshape the architectural and most importantly cultural identity of the city.



Discussion and conclusion: "The so what ? "

This study examined the relationship between heritage demolition and the transformation of Beirut's urban identity through the analysis of its post-war/disaster reconstruction, focusing on post-war projects like solidere, how it affected and altered the urban fabric of the city. This means that architecture serves more than a physical component, it incorporates cultural values and historical continuity. The study therefore emphasizes on the importance of preserving and balancing between urban development and the preservation of our architectural heritage. From a planning perspective, stronger heritage legislation should be implemented with adaptive reuse strategies should definitely be prioritized to protect the traditional buildings while creating a suitable urban development. Investors and private developers should be encouraged on preserving the historically significant buildings by creating a huge project of preserving Beirut's architectural identity while responding to the necessary urban needs. The future of Beirut should not be defined on choosing between the preservation of the traditional buildings and the city's modernization and development, but by recognizing that a city's greatest asset is its historical background and its ability to modernize without affecting the architectural memory that defines its identity.

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