
THE ARCHITECT-CITIZEN: THE NATURE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN POSTWAR RECONSTRUCTION PROJECTS IN LEBANON

MARWAN GHANDOUR
Iowa State University

SOLIDERE, Wa`d, and Nahr elBared Camp are three urban reconstruction projects in Lebanon that targeted neighborhoods destroyed through armed conflict in the 1970-80's, 2006 and 2007 respectively. Even though these urban areas were produced over decades of multiple social interactions and economic considerations, reconstruction projects regenerate the whole area within contemporary political and social prerogatives, which may diminish the diversity of actors and discourses in the process. Along these lines the three projects illustrate three different approaches for urban production revealing a different relationship between the developer, the architect and the user community. Depending on who one asks, the three projects may be considered successes or failures but as public projects I will focus in this presentation on the engagement of the user community in the project production and the role that architects played in this engagement.

This presentation will propose that civic engagement should be considered a creative process that is located in the methods of communication and perception of professional architects. To make this argument, I will first discuss Wa`d and SOLIDERE, the two projects with strong political profile in Lebanon. Both projects are situated in a neighborhood in the capital city Beirut, with a strong hierarchical process of production. I will later discuss Nahr elBared project which is located in North Lebanon and is politically less prominent.

SPATIAL CLEANSING: WA`D AND SOLIDERE¹

SOLIDERE is the offspring of the neo-liberal government that took power in Lebanon in the early nineties, immediately after the end of the fifteen-year civil war (1975-1990). The project targeted downtown Beirut that included the historical markets of Beirut in which all economical and confessional sectors of the Lebanese communities were represented. Situated along the green line, downtown Beirut was a site of continuous armed conflict throughout the war, which resulted in the evacuation of most of the buildings, extensive destruction in some areas and the settlement of low income families displaced from other parts of the country. In an effort to lure global capital, and quickly turn over the legacy of violence, the project triggered radical demographic change by transforming all property and entitlements in downtown Beirut into shares that eventually will constitute SOLIDERE, a publically owned, privately managed real-estate company.² In contradiction to SOLIDERE, Wa`d was conceived, or

publicly presented in the aftermath of the war with Israel in 2006, as an alternative for reconstruction that is centered on demographic stability. The main area of intervention of the Wa`d project is Haret Hreik, a dense residential neighborhood in the southern suburbs of Beirut. Hizbollah, the main opposition group to the government at that time, spearheaded the project. Before becoming the stronghold of Hizbollah in the 1990s, Haret Hreik urbanization was directly linked to the conditions of the civil war where waves of displaced families settled into the neighborhood. Making use of the political conditions of the civil war and its aftermath, a handful of developers transformed Haret Hreik from a suburban neighborhood of Beirut in the seventies to a very dense urban neighborhood with stringent spatial conditions in the 1990's.

Judging by their approach to urban form, SOLIDERE and Wa`d may be viewed as conceptually different projects since SOLIDERE re-configured the physical space of downtown Beirut while Wa`d largely preserved Haret Hreik's urban form. The influence of these two projects on the city are however strikingly similar in the way they contribute to its 'partitioning' through the 'cleansing' processes of production that they initiated within their urban environments.³ SOLIDERE cleared all individual claims on space, which allowed the free flow of global capital and transformed its area into a high-end retail hub for tourists and a main attraction for regional investors. The project hence reduced the symbolic meaning of Beirut downtown to the neo-liberal agenda of the late Prime Minister Rafic elHariri and his followers, in total disregard of the diversity of actors who historically produced the space. This is eloquently reflected in the way most Lebanese now refer to Beirut's downtown as SOLIDERE, following the name of the company. Similarly, by describing reconstruction as the embodiment of its victory against Israel in 2006 and the Lebanese government that it accused of collaborating, Hezbollah also denies to Haret-Hreik the multiple layers and histories of spatial production. Instead, the neighborhoods' physical fabric is reduced to its symbolic function as the social, political, and economic headquarters of the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon.

This process of spatial 'cleansing' was based on three spatio-political operations that I would like to elaborate on. These operations are namely, proclamation of a state of spatial exception, privatization of spatial governance and reproduction of exchange value of urban space.

Proclamation of a state of exception

Both projects define an area of exceptional jurisdiction, where decision-making structures and the space that they legislate is addressed in isolation from the rest of the city. The conditions of urgency that characterize postwar reconstruction project facilitate the establishment of this state of exception, albeit in the context of addressing the humanitarian crisis and the influx of international support funds. As a result, both projects conceptualize the areas to be reconstructed as special intervention zones that are placed under an exceptional authority,⁴ which is separate from the national planning agency and where unusual building regulations are applied. Hence, SOLIDERE redefines Beirut as a narrow territory of the old historic core, which is then designed in relation to the supra-national scale of other world cities, severing its ties to the rest of the city's neighborhoods while, Haret-Hreik is rebuilt as a unit of Dahiyeh, that is distinguished from the rest of the city in relation again to supra-national scale of regional and global resistance to forces of imperialism.

However, both Wa'd and Solidere construct a negative imagery of the city of Beirut, which forms a background for their 'positive' intervention. Thus, Solidere's downtown is a haven of beautiful buildings where cleaning standards include the regular dusting of traffic lights and street lamps, amidst a polluted, run-down city that is boldly separated from it by an array of large highways that delineate clear cut boundaries. Similarly, Wa'd delimits a socially responsible and pious neighborhood, committed to the military resistance against Israel, which marks the center of the southern suburbs of Beirut, its Dahyeh, and opposes this area to profit-driven, immoral practices elsewhere in the city.

Privatization of spatial governance

Both Wa'd and SOLIDERE were orchestrated by private actors with clear visions and agendas that they imposed on their respective areas of intervention. Managed by private parties, the two projects were positioned against the national state, which is portrayed by both actors (Islamist and neo-liberal) as slow and inefficient. However, and in line with what has been described elsewhere, these private parties define the "common good" according to their own interests, which is the accumulation of political capital for Hezbollah through the maintenance of its popular base, in the case of Wa'd, and the accumulation of financial capital for the company's shareholders, in the case of Solidere. These definitions of the "common good" de-facto exclude many groups since they are determined by the project's decision-makers. Furthermore, in the absence of clear venues of accountability of the managers of SOLIDERE and Wa'd, the projects' "beneficiaries" or "users" are confined to market channels if they have concerns. Thus, former property owners may elect to exit the area, and sell their shares or their property, but not withdraw support from the project and change its course. While SOLIDERE is quiet advanced in 'weeding out' users that were at odds with the project through the market channels, it is still too early to confirm this trend in the case of Wa'd.

Reproduction of exchange value

Finally, in their approach to post-war reconstruction, both projects have privileged the material value of space over the history of lived experiences that produced it. SOLIDERE transformed property rights and claims into company shares that do not give their holders entitlement over participation in the future production of space. This process allowed the company to eventually impose a rigid break between the downtown area and its history, redefining, hence, the producers of the future space. In contrast, Wa'd retained presence for all its residents. That presence, however, was again largely defined according to its material value, as Wa'd defined reconstruction on the basis of the maintenance of the same exploitation ratios, apartment sizes, building heights, and other quantitative elements of the built environment. The poor urban quality of the neighborhood such as the extreme traffic congestion and pollution as well as the lack of access to natural lighting and ventilation in some cases was not addressed. In reality, both projects missed on the opportunity to be informed by the history of social production of space for the sake of fast delivery of 'material goods' in the name of defiance/resistance in the case of Wa'd and an image of economic prosperity in the case of SOLIDERE. Ironically, the reconstruction of material goods reproduces the exchange value of space which contributes to spatial cleansing by facilitating the sale of these goods by members of the community that are at odds with the project or its authors.

THE ARCHITECT AND THE LOCATION OF THE USERS

Both companies relied on well-known architects to give credibility to their designs. In order to position Beirut downtown on the global network for capital investment, SOLIDERE initiated a series of competitions and commissioned world-renown architects, such as Raphael Moneo, Kevin Dash, Velode et Pistre, Steven Holl among others. Wa'd alternatively targeted national credibility by commissioning a multi-sectarian group of well established Lebanese architects lead by Rahif Fayyad, a Lebanese University architecture professor and renown practitioner. Through the recognized status of these architects and operating within a state of exception, the projects implemented measures that would otherwise be unacceptable: SOLIDERE has demolished significant historical landmarks of Beirut downtown while Wa'd is building high density, poorly lit apartments, heavily congested streets with minimal consideration for public space. Furthermore, these companies hire architects and planners as employees that respond to their directives and work with their guidelines. From the perspective of the project users in both projects, the architect played the role of the alienating agent that brought cultural value and legitimacy to the reconstruction project through the agency of the profession with minimal involvement of the community that historically occupied the space of the projects. Structurally, the architects had minimal communication with the users in the case of Wa'd and complete lack of communication in the case of SOLIDERE. This, as mentioned earlier, placed the private developer agency/company as the controlling central hinge in the process of production of the neighborhood.

Nahr elBared camp reconstruction project,⁵ however, present a significantly different relationship between the architect and displaced community of users. The project went through two phases of structural organization. From 2007 to 2010, the architect/planner played the central authority in coordinating the needs of the community with the development agency. After 2010, the architect/planner was contained within the administrative structure of the developer for reasons I will discuss below. Unlike Wa'd and SOLIDERE, the reconstruction of Nahr ElBared refugee camp was characterized by a highly participatory process with only few targeted interventions from local Lebanese political figures. The camp was completely erased to the ground in 2007 through an armed conflict between the Lebanese Army and Fath al-Islam causing the displacement of 27000 residents. For the fifty years preceding its destruction, the camp evolved informally within its limited boundaries, designated as extra-territorial, hence outside official Lebanese building and urban regulation under the auspices of United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). During the heat of the battles of 2007, a group of architects and planners, later named Nahr el Bared Reconstruction Commission (NBRC), volunteered to collect stories from the residents, displaced outside the camp, about their destroyed neighborhood. These stories, which included description of residence interiors, residence locations, building heights, was later traced on the only existing map of the camp, created by UNRWA in 2007 to upgrade the camp sewage system. The maps generated out of this base map transformed the experiential data into professional representation. Following this phase, community meetings were conducted to discuss and agree on a masterplan and eventually every family worked with an architect to develop the plans for their own residence and signing off on the square meters allocated for it.

The first 'package' of buildings, 110 residential units, was delivered to residents in the fall of 2010. Residents have been moving in since then while the construction of the remaining seven packages is under way. Even though the whole project was developed in communication with the residents with their direct participation in community meetings and workshops, their reaction to the actual built product showed a complete misunderstanding of the meaning, function and size of public space and neighborly adjacencies that were discussed in the meetings and workshops. Furthermore, the residents understood building elements such as stairs and rooms experientially, such as accommodating family gathering, thresholds of privacy, but professionals discussed rooms through their numerical dimensions. Eventually, and due to rising popular demonstrations, UNRWA as the developer, will restructure the process to include the architects and planners under its administration and control their relationship with the community. Paradoxically, compared to Wa'd and SOLIDERE, the new Nahr elBared organizational structure makes the developer acquire more exclusive authority over the project production. In parallel, the community dissatisfaction is becoming more intense and violent manifested lately in the raiding of the UNRWA offices in the camp.

In conclusion, by surveying the three reconstruction projects, it is evident that the direct participation of the user community in the

project production did not result in better alignment of the project with the community needs as demonstrated through Nahr elBared project. Nevertheless, the process of participation empowered the camp community by making them more articulate in discussing their built environment, which eventually made them more vocal in expressing their dissatisfaction with the residences that were delivered to them. Nahr elBared project shows the importance of civic engagement in creating an environment that is not overpowered by central political authority that may result in urban cleansing such as the case of Wa'd and SOLIDERE. However, the productive potential of civic engagement lies in how expansive is the professional methods of communication and perception rather than the number of people that contribute to the community meetings or workshops. It is through the limitation of those professional methods that the architects of the three projects failed to fully integrate the user community in the process of production of their neighborhood.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The research on SOLIDERE and Wa'd was conducted in collaboration with Professor Mona Fawaz of the American University of Beirut.
- 2 SOLIDERE was enabled by a law 117 passed on 7 December, 1991. See Saree Makdisi, "Laying Claim to Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidere." *Critical Inquiry*. Vol. 23, No.3. Spring, 1997. Pp. 660-705.
- 3 See Mona Fawaz and Marwan Ghandour, "Spatial Erasure: the reconstruction of Haret Hreik," *ArteEast Quarterly*, December 2009. <http://www.arteeast.org/pages/artenews/extra-territoriality/254/>.
- 4 see Fawaz, Mona, "Beirut: the city as a body politic." *ISIM Review*. 20. Autumn 2007.
- 5 The research on Nahr elBared Camp reconstruction project was conducted in collaboration with architect/urbanist Abir Saksouk-Sasso of Bawader Architects.