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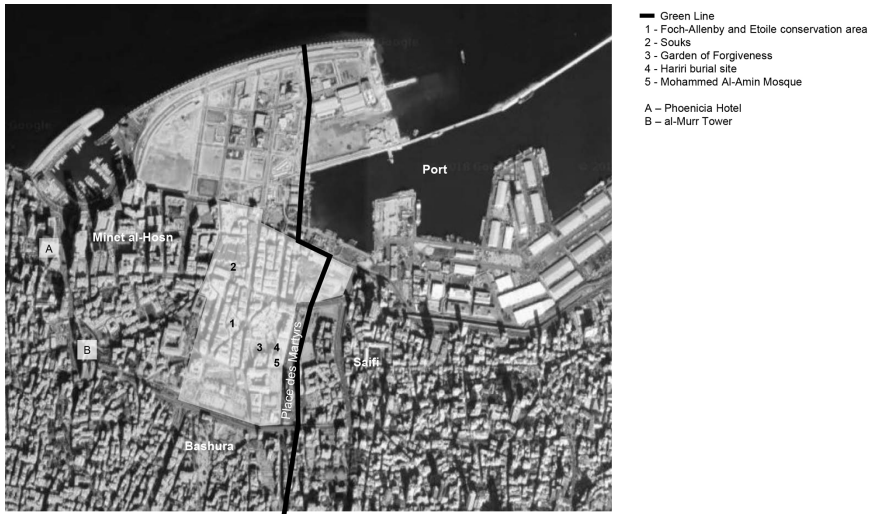
# 11

## AN ISLAND IN SECTARIAN SEAS?

### Heritage, memory and identity in post-war redevelopment of Beirut's central district

*Scott Bollens*

The Lebanese Civil War (1975–90), a catastrophic haemorrhage in which different internal parties and external parties changed positions as leading instigators of violence (Hanf 1993), killed an estimated 120,000–150,000 civilians, displaced more than 30 per cent of the entire Lebanese population, and destroyed an estimated 177,000 housing units (53 per cent in Beirut and its suburbs). The central district of Beirut, the Lebanese capital city, was devastated due to extensive targeting throughout the war (United Nations Development Programme 1997). The district was a key site of fighting between Muslim/Palestinian and Christian militias because of its central strategic geography amidst the broader military conflict. It contained historically significant buildings from both the late Ottoman (late nineteenth century) and French Mandate (1920–43) periods, and it had one of the highest concentrations of religious buildings (29 mosques and churches) in the world. It was a place of mixture and interclass economic interaction (particularly in the souks and bazaars filled with artisans and traders) and of centrality (containing the major transportation node of the city and region). The wartime violence turned it into an evacuated area which was divided along sectarian (religious/ethnic) lines by warring Muslim and Christian militias into a Muslim West and a Christian East, with traditionally mixed areas cut by the 'Green Line'. The Green Line, which passed through the central district and cut a wide swathe through Martyrs' Square, left a void in the downtown filled with painful memories which needed to be addressed post-war (see Figure 11.1). The central core, like the city at large, became a 'politicized space of competing meanings rooted in the region's turbulent history' (Nagel 2002) of antagonism between Muslim/Palestinian and Christian militias fighting to secure greater political control of the country. Further complicating sectarian tension in the city, the basic fault line in Beirut has been transformed since 2005 into conflict between Sunni Muslims and Shiite Muslims.



**FIGURE 11.1** Downtown Beirut and the Green Line

© Scott Bollens. Adapted from Alexandre Medawar, cartographer (alex@retisweb.com)

This chapter examines the rebuilding of the war-torn and divided city centre of Beirut, since the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990. The construction and rehabilitation of over 50 million square feet of buildable space in a location of historic buildings, by a private company (Solidere), upon a war-torn substructure robust with sectarian territoriality and memories, and amidst global and Lebanese proclivities towards economic neoliberalism, have all contributed to innumerable and unavoidable conflicts over political control, future vision and consideration of history, memory and identity. Redevelopment has had to confront several types of heritage in Beirut's central district – an archaeological substratum from Phoenician and Roman times, late Ottoman and French Mandate historic buildings and physical environments, and the imprints upon the central core of destructive Civil War-period sectarian animosities that linger today. The focus of this chapter is on contentious post-war heritage and religious sites and memory places, including the Beirut Souks retail area, the Garden of Forgiveness, and Martyrs' Square.

Based on field research and 24 interviews with urban planners, public officials, architects, and scholars in Beirut conducted during extensive field research in 2010, I analyse how rebuilding of the central district confronted issues of heritage preservation and rehabilitation. Reconstruction of the destroyed central district constituted an important potential bridge in reunifying the post-war city and reconnecting west and east Beirut, yet the 16 years of civil war fighting created a deeply divided central district of contested heritage, memory and identity. Rebuilding needed to contend with pre-war historic memory of the central district in the context of deeply divided sectarian identities. The chapter pays close attention to the difficult

challenges of whether, and if so how, to acknowledge the Civil War amid new Sunni/Shiite Muslim sectarian fault lines emergent since 2005.

This analysis of the redevelopment of Beirut's central district contributes to our understanding of the limits of post-war redevelopment in constructing a collective identity in a divided city with a divided heritage, in particular the challenge of dealing with contested heritage and deeply divided wartime and post-war sectarian identities and memories. The chapter shows that, despite aspirations for neutrality, reconciliation and integration, Beirut's redeveloped centre contains emotive imprints of antagonistic and divisive forces that obstruct its capacity to act as authentically shared urban space. Divisions in the city in terms of sectarian identity and income class remain unreconciled by central district redevelopment.

### Post-war redevelopment

Since the end of the Civil War in 1990, two different plans for redeveloping the central district have been produced. A 1991 plan was prepared with a focus on city centre reconstruction. Publicly commissioned by the Lebanese Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) but privately financed by the Hariri Foundation (headed by construction magnate Rafik Hariri, later to become Lebanese prime minister), the plan sought to redevelop the city centre as a mixed-use centre with open space and modern infrastructure. It was associated with substantial demolition of the historic core (a *tabula rasa* approach), and called for its replacement by modern buildings, skyscrapers, underground expressways and the building of a Champs-Élysées-type boulevard passing through the historically focal area of Martyrs' Square (Shwayri 2008; Kassir 2010). Controversially, the 1991 plan forwarded the idea that the city centre's reconstruction should be in the hands of a private real-estate company created for this express purpose, and that land ownership in the city centre would be converted into shares in this company. Criticism of the plan by architects and academics focused on the large bulldozing and destruction of heritage and its production of an image of the city centre as an urban island of wealth and power. This criticism resulted in the termination of the plan and the production of a new revised plan.

The 1994 plan, approved by the Lebanese Cabinet, established a private shareholding company to manage the city centre reconstruction process, including supervision of a master plan, the financing and rebuilding of infrastructure, real estate development and rehabilitation, and property management (Shwayri 2008). The company, formally called the Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut, became known by its French acronym: Solidere. Amidst the fragmented and highly sectarianised political landscape of Lebanon, Solidere was established to institutionally protect it as a corporate, profit-making entity able to pursue its own agenda of city centre redevelopment with minimal intrusion by political officials. The argument put forth for such an arrangement was that there needed to be greater centralisation of power to rebuild the central district amidst the political fragility and instability of Lebanon, and that central city redevelopment

was such a massive venture that supervision of it needed to be undertaken by a private institution freed from the country's antagonistic and dysfunctional politics. At the end of the Civil War, in addition to the physical centre city, most national state institutions were in shambles due to the severe fragmentation of wartime public authority. This marginalisation of formal state public authority allowed a private-sector actor, Rafik Hariri (a Lebanese Sunni Muslim, head of the Hariri Foundation that had financed the 1991 plan and head of the main construction firm used by the Royal family in Saudi Arabia), to become Lebanon's prime minister from 1992 to 1998 and from 2000 to 2004, and thus the leading political figure in the post-Civil War period. Able to insert loyal supporters in key state economic institutions and in the local government of Beirut, Hariri and the Solidere company were able to monopolise the reconstruction of central Beirut. Hariri was a building contractor, and he saw central city rebirth as fundamentally a physical rebuilding challenge but also as an opportunity to move into a political career (Oussama Kabbani, former Manager, Town Planning, Solidere, interview). Focusing Beirut's reconstruction strategy exclusively on the central city district was based on the premise that revitalisation of the core would stimulate social reconciliation, spread economic benefits to peripheral areas and most productively boost the national economy.

Solidere is a private tax-exempt, joint-stock corporation made up of property rights holders and investors holding stock in the downtown area. It was formed pursuant to Lebanese legislation from the 1960s that enabled the creation of real-estate companies to direct and manage reconstruction, subject to a duly approved master plan, in severely war-damaged areas. Solidere, as allowed under Lebanese law, expropriated almost all property in the central district and transformed these parcels into shares that formed the capital of the company. This controversial action was deemed necessary because property ownership was severely fragmented into about 60,000 previous owners and tenants, and complex in ownership titles because many properties had been passed down through the generations (Angus Gavin, Head, Urban Development Division, Solidere, interview). The company was initially capitalised with over \$1.8 billion, about 60 per cent as contributions in kind of property rights holders and about 40 per cent as cash subscriptions from outside investors.

The land-use component of the 1994 plan by Solidere downsized some of the gigantism proposed in the 1991 plan and showed greater sensitivity to the historic core and heritage buildings. Buildings dating back to the 1920s and 1930s in the Foch-Allenby and Etoile sector were now to be restored rather than demolished. Modifications to the 1991 plan gave the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) the right to excavate and document archaeological heritage during the reconstruction period. In response, Solidere increased its emphasis on preserving archaeological remains from the Phoenician and Roman periods that had been exposed during earlier demolitions. Opponents from the architectural world that had criticised the 1991 plan were also brought into Solidere's planning network. The planning area in the 1994 plan covered 472 acres, of which almost 40 per cent was to be a new extension of the district reclaimed from the sea. When completed, roads would make up 31 per cent of the central

district's area, new developments 37 per cent, retained buildings 11 per cent, and public open space 20 per cent. The plan subdivided the city centre into ten sectors, each with its own character. These sectors included conservation (the historic core), hotel, park and waterside, new waterfront, Souk (market), and Martyrs' Square. The plan's 'built-up area' (BUA) guidelines were used to indicate preferred floor space densities within each sector; overall, 50.5 million square feet of new built space is anticipated. 'We don't have a land use plan per se', said Solidere urban development chief Angus Gavin (interview), 'but rather flexible mixed use policies and guidelines'. The master plan emphasises building volumes and streets, 'with a degree of flexibility built in' (Oussama Kabbani, interview).

When fully built out, the vision called for about 100,000 residents living in the central district alongside about 40,000–60,000 jobs (Angus Gavin, interview). Progress in achieving these goals has been difficult. Economic stagnation since 2011 has meant that residential developers in the central district have struggled to attract clients to buy their properties. One source cites 3,600 unsold apartments in the district as of 2017 (Preston 2018). Luxury apartments targeted at expatriates and foreign clients stand empty as potential buyers became wary of the Lebanese investment climate since 2011. Much of Solidere's downtown sits uninhabited by permanent residents (Preston 2018).

From a purely architectural perspective, Solidere's success is impressive. The rehabilitated buildings from the French Mandate period in the Foch–Allenby and Etoile district are immaculate in detail, with clean reconstructed stone facades, wrought-iron balconies and window fixtures, and modernised building interiors (see Figure 11.2). Streetscape improvements are also striking, with great attention given to the scale of buildings relative to streets, and to shop fronts and signage, landscaping and hardscaping, lighting, street furniture and public signage. Before and after photograph panels showing individual buildings and streets during war-time and as they now are reconstructed and restored are remarkably striking (Trawi 2003). Kassir (2010: 529) describes such rebirth through architecture as 'a fitting piece of revenge by buildings that for a time were doomed to disappear'.

Such architectural achievement is frequently overshadowed, however, by strong criticism by local architecture and urban professionals and academics of the central city district as an island of privilege cut off from the rest of the city. The main contention is that its reconstruction and rehabilitation serve an international network of investors and customers more than the indigenous communities of the city (such as Shiites in Beirut and its suburbs and the Maronite Christian community in east Beirut). Many commercial outlets are oriented towards high-income consumers, while luxury residential towers and buildings have targeted expatriates and foreign clients, based mainly in the Gulf. Because of Solidere's private sector and profit-motivated orientation, return on investment has been a guiding criterion of the central city redevelopment. The post-war reconstruction thus became chained to the profit motive (Calame and Charlesworth 2009).

In the early years, the Solidere board of directors stressed consistently that the project had to be financially sound, and this usually meant constructing buildings



**FIGURE 11.2** Architecture of the Foch-Allenby and Etoile district  
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with floor areas and heights as much as allowable under the 1994 plan. The Board chairman, recalls Angus Gavin (interview), was consistently ‘trying to rationalise more built up space in proposals’. While the details of specific project planning and design were left to architects and planners in the company, the Board needed investment returns for its stockholders (Oussama Kabbani, interview). Pushing hard and early to rebuild the centre was also intended to effect changes on the ground before the country’s strong antagonistic influences might intercede. Kabbani (interview) recalls, ‘We had absolute power for about four or five years because the government was a weak body; we had a lot of money, an approved master plan, and we could do anything we wanted as long as it was in the confines of that plan’. ‘Hariri himself said, “we have a grace period”’, recounts Kabbani (interview).

Solidere’s primary planning and design vision for the downtown’s reconstruction has primarily been to reposition Beirut as a world city and a major capital of the Middle East region. Its development has been strongly influenced by global capital and neoliberal economic strategies that emphasise reliance on the private sector and are part of a massive transformation of many other Arab cities (Elshehtawy 2008). Solidere’s programme is premised on creating a global city, which sociologist Saskia Sassen (2006) describes as a place which prioritises connections to the global economy and disregards national and regional elements of an urban system. The new central city is rebuilt to accommodate tourists and outside investors who

are plugged into a world capitalistic circuit, thus downplaying the needs of the local population.

The clean and cordoned-off quality of the central district certainly supports the criticism by some urban professionals and academics that the profit-making criteria used by Solidere in its city-building has led to an elitist and exclusionary zone. In a city where chaos, disorder and physical degradation are common, maintenance workers in the central district dust off street furniture and lights in the mornings, and privatised, uniformed security personnel are everywhere to protect the private domain and ongoing development projects. The street network surrounding the district appears easily sealable and closable, with security checkpoints and military personnel positioned especially around central state institutions. In many aspects, Solidere's precinct seems to exist in a universe separate from the remainder of the city.

'It's an incredibly elitist place', states Solidere's former town planning manager (Oussama Kabbani, interview). He goes on to say, 'I think a decision was made by Solidere management not to make it easy for the poor to be there'. Kabbani does not feel that Solidere should be held responsible for rescuing the whole country. Its job, after all, was to rescue downtown and it had to make profits. Nonetheless, 'you can't hide behind a marketing rhetoric when you are doing an urban transformation that is this substantial'. Hana Alamuddin (Architect and Urban Designer, Principal of Al-Mimariya, Beirut, interview) takes the district to task for its architectural separateness, asserting that it constitutes more a 'Saudi urbanism' of compounds, enclosures, order, isolation and privacy than the more organic Ottoman urbanism of its past. In its evacuation of old owners and the creation of a new Beirut for a particular economic class and foreigners, Alamuddin views Solidere not as a neutral, benign force but as a 'tool of conflict' in a society already troubled by the legacy of deep wartime conflict. The building of a global downtown constructs a layer of income segregation transposed onto a society already handicapped by sectarian separation. To the extent that Sunnis are more economically endowed than Shiites, on average, and investors in Sunni-dominated Gulf states are a targeted clientele in downtown commercial and residential development, the emphasis on profit-making by Solidere is likely intensifying the Sunni-Shiite sectarian fault-line emergent since 2005.

Solidere's urban development division head acknowledged an exclusive quality of the residential market in the district (Angus Gavin, interview). 'Downtown Beirut is a victim of its own success', he observes, noting that many downtown apartments are being bought by rich absentee individuals from Gulf states and the Lebanese diaspora. He admits that it may be exceedingly difficult to build more affordable housing and this has implications for the type of district central city will be one – consisting more of virtual than actual residents. Although the master plan envisions a 24/7 living, working, mixed-use city centre, 'land is close to filling up, yet we still don't have the critical mass of people here to make it a vibrant place' (Amira Sohl, manager of Urban Planning Department, Solidere, interview). Sociologist Samir Khalaf (Professor of Sociology, American University of Beirut,



interview; see also Khalaf 2006) describes the pre-war history of the central city as one of mixture and interaction, but says that now 'Solidere is the problem'. Profit criteria have driven Solidere towards an emphasis on non-residential development in the first 20 years of the company's existence and, when housing is built, to focus on the upscale market.

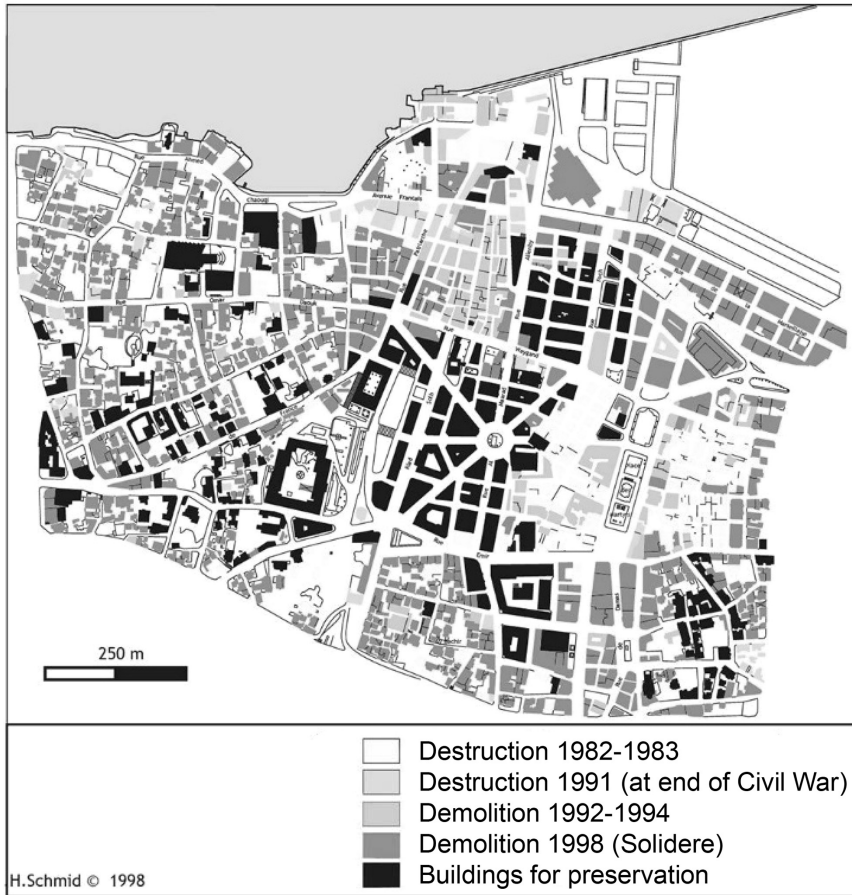
## Heritage, memory and identity

Reconstructing a central city district has the potential to act as glue or a bridge in a polarised sectarian city such as Beirut. If the post-war investment had been directed to 'Muslim' west or 'Christian' east Beirut rather than to the central district, there certainly would have been sectarian overtones about what side 'won the war' and associated tensions would have resulted. In contrast, downtown was more 'everyman's land' before the war with a significant amount of heterogeneity (Oussama Kabbani, interview). It was one of the few places in Beirut where people did not know which sect they belonged to (Mona Harb, Associate Professor of Architecture and Design, American University of Beirut, interview). Indeed, this heterogeneity and hybridity made the central district an early target in the Civil War by those needing to paralyse and dismantle intersectarian space. Thus, the hope in focusing on the post-war rebuilding of the central district was that the pre-war qualities could be rekindled, and that the area would be a foundation for bringing the divided city together.

However, when building for the future in places like central Beirut, one must also negotiate the past. The past in Beirut's centre is inscribed in physical heritage and buildings from earlier periods of Beirut (Phoenician, Roman, late Ottoman, and French Mandate) and also in the memories of destructive sectarian territoriality that decimated the district during the Civil War. In addition, in 2005, former prime minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated in a massive car bomb explosion in downtown Beirut and Shiite Hezbollah adherents were implicated. This incident ignited Sunni-Shiite tensions in the city and country, which today have largely superseded the Muslim-Christian axis of conflict associated with the 1975–90 Civil War. The primary wartime Muslim-Christian sectarian fault line has since 2005 been surpassed by Sunni Muslim versus Shiite Muslim frictions which has energised entirely new volatile geographic interfaces where these two communities reside in proximity.

### *Pre-war heritage*

The protection of material heritage in the central district since the Civil War has been uneven. In the years leading up to the 1991 plan until its revamp in 1994, substantial demolition work was carried out, including major sections along both the east and west sides of Martyrs' Square, the Souk markets, a residential neighbourhood and in the old Jewish quarter then host to significant numbers of illegal Shiite refugee settlements (Kassir 2010) (see Figure 11.3). Beyhum (1992) estimated that about 300 buildings were demolished in the old city centre, destroying some of the



**FIGURE 11.3** Demolition and preservation in Central District (1982–98). The darkest black areas have been preserved; all other areas were either destroyed during the war or demolished during the post-war years (1991–8)

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last Ottoman and medieval remains in Beirut. Urban fabric that was spared tended to be of the French Mandate period. Destruction in the first years after the war in the form of demolition may have approximated, or been even greater than, the amount of building space destroyed during the war (Maha Yahya, Regional Adviser, Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, United Nations, interview; Makdisi 1997). As indicated before, one consequence of the early demolition and clearance of built fabric was that it inadvertently led to the discovery of significant archaeological sites in the central district from the Phoenician, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Mamluk and Ottoman cultures, many of which have since been preserved.

After the Civil War ended, about 850 buildings were still standing in the central district, although many in a war-damaged and dilapidated state. About one-third of these (291 buildings) have been retained, and of those about two-thirds are of architectural and heritage value (Angus Gavin, interview). Critics of the city centre renewal claim that substantially less of the surviving post-war urban fabric has been retained, citing usually a figure of 10 per cent. In defence of Solidere's performance, Angus Gavin (interview) points to comparatively less protection of architecturally significant buildings outside Beirut's centre, in the pericentral districts surrounding Solidere's jurisdiction.

Partially in response to sharp criticism by urban professionals and academics over the earlier bulldozing approach to city renewal, the approved 1994 plan was shifted more towards rehabilitation of damaged urban fabric rather than wholesale demolition. Restoration of heritage buildings since the 1994 plan has been a more evident feature of Solidere's city centre renewal. The company in 1994 adopted a slogan, 'An Ancient City for the Future', emphasising historical continuity rather than *tabula rasa* rupture. A heritage trail is now part of the central district, linking archaeological sites, historic public spaces and heritage buildings in a 1.5-mile marked walking circuit. Solidere has focused considerable attention on preservation and rehabilitation in one of the master plan's sectors – the historic conservation area of Foch-Allenby and Etoile. This is the political, cultural, religious and financial focal area of the city centre. In this district, in order to assure height and scale compatibility with historic objectives, development rights otherwise allowable under the master plan have been transferred to other subareas of the central district, in particular to the high-rise waterfront district. The area surrounding Etoile Square has been created as a pedestrianised setting with restaurants and shops lining the radiating streets.

Notwithstanding Solidere's efforts at rehabilitation in parts of the central district, substantial demolition elsewhere of old central precincts (such as the Souks), the dismantling of the structure of pre-war land ownership and the domination by an urban redevelopment regime aimed at attracting large foreign corporations and investment has erased the district's pre-war heritage as a locale of heterogeneous interaction and mixing and considerably reduced its ability to spatially integrate the numerous income classes and sectarian interests of the city. The transformation from local interests to higher-income cosmopolitan interests is conspicuous in the reconstruction of the Beirut Souks. The old souks were entirely demolished by Solidere in 1994. These souks were connected with the ancient history of Beirut as a port city, a place where the city's mercantile population exhibited and traded local and imported resources and products. Fundamental to this sort of trade was the familial character of many crafts and shop owners. The variety of trades represented the various classes and groups that inhabited the city (El Chami 2012). The new souks, although architecturally emulating the built fabric of what was there, are now inhabited by stores selling international and corporate brands that have superseded the historic individuality and character of the old souks. The process of reconstruction by Solidere obstructed the ability of redevelopment to reconstitute the historic

social fabric of the souks. The expropriation of property deeds of existing tenants and shop owners in exchange for corporate shares, combined with transformation of the shape and size of ownership plots, made it next to impossible for most original owners and shopkeepers to return and use their old premises. The souks' link to the original Lebanese identity and the character of the pre-war markets has been replaced by a concentration of luxury brands and high-end retail outlets (El Chami 2012). Former owners of properties in the central district who want to rebuild are often required to build according to very strict standards often incorporating high-cost imported materials. Due to these higher costs, many restaurants in the district, for instance, are forced to cater to higher-income customers and international tourists (Battah 2014). Samir Khalaf (interview) observes that 'we hide the heritage we are destroying, then we mystify, glamorise and romanticise what we are building'. In this process, architectural enrichment of the central district is being achieved at the expense of the loss of pre-war local social fabric.

### *Memories of the Civil War*

In redeveloping the central district, difficult challenges have arisen about whether, and if so how, to acknowledge the Civil War and the sectarianism claims and divisions that still permeate Lebanon so forcefully. Endeavours to create public space inevitably run into countering sectarian claims on such places, while the meanings behind what would constitute 'neutral' or 'non-sectarian' space are unclear in both operational and theoretical terms. In rebuilding the district, there was the strong desire by Solidere to reverse the partitioning process by physically eradicating the division: 'from the start of Solidere, the division was not something that was allowed', recalls Oussama Kabbani (interview). Sectarian claims have not been an explicit part of city-building decisions for Solidere. 'We were never supposed to mention anything, to talk about, to show or illustrate the destruction of the civil war', observes Angus Gavin (interview). He continued, 'It's like it never happened. It puzzled me when I first got here, that nobody seemed to want to talk about it'. Amira Solh (Manager, Urban Planning Department, Solidere, interview) observes that the focus has not been on directly addressing Civil War impacts but rather 'there has been an attempt to integrate the multiple historic layers that constitute Beirut'.

Acknowledgement of the war and its physical impacts, and how to connect the central district to east and west Beirut as a way to stitch the city back together, has not been foregrounded in central district reconstruction. While thoroughfares that connect the central district to the sea are highlighted, east-west axes and routes are narrow that could increase linkages from east to west Beirut and restore the area's old purpose as a meeting place for people of different confessional backgrounds. As of 2010, 20 years after the end of the Civil War, there still did not exist a formal public memorial to the Civil War and its victims. The one place that is emerging as a place of remembrance is Hadiqat as Samah (Garden of Forgiveness), a significant area of discovered archaeological remains from Roman and Phoenician times.

This place is envisioned as a multiconfessional space for contemplation and will stress tolerance, understanding and reconciliation, although explicit references to the Civil War appear limited in conceptual plans with interpretations left open to visitors. The Garden of Forgiveness site is in a strategic cross-sectarian location – surrounded by three mosques, three churches and the seat of government. Yet, for many years there was a de facto territorial claim of the site by the Parliament speaker, the leader of the Shiite Amal movement, who has used the northern part as a parking lot for his security personnel. This is a ‘Shiite claim on this site’ of ruins and history, and ‘we are unable to move them’ (interview, confidential, 2010). The project has faced delays in implementation of its memorial site design, with the Solidere website listing the project’s development ‘on hold’ as of 2017.

Despite its hands-off approach toward sectarianism, creating public space that is not coloured by sectarian and religious hues has been a near-impossible undertaking for Solidere. Another contentious site is the Martyrs’ Square area, a historic central node that has taken on numerous meanings through the years (its name links back to protests against Ottoman control of Beirut). Most recently it constituted a wartime battle zone during the Civil War. The centrality of this area was reduced through substantial demolition around it in the early planning years. In addition, plans call for a major thoroughfare that cuts through the area to the sea, threatening to create a de facto boundary between east and west Beirut. In efforts to recreate the Martyrs’ Square area as a cross-sectarian public space, Solidere has had to contend with the fact that the burial and remembrance site for the slain Sunni former prime minister Rafik Hariri was established along its western edge (see Figures 11.4 and 11.5). ‘How are we to deal with this memorialisation at the same time as we try to recover this space as the most important public space in Lebanon?’ asks Angus Gavin (interview). In addition, the post-war building of the impressive and large blue-domed Mohammed Al-Amin Mosque at the southwest corner of the square constitutes a ‘physical-political statement’ by the Sunni Muslim community (Robert Saliba, Associate Professor of Architecture and Design, American University of Beirut, interview). The symbolic meaning of Martyrs’ Square and all that has happened there produces a major challenge for aspirations to create a space truly open to all sects. Such a challenge is inherent in many locations in the central city district. In such an environment, ‘how does one create neutral space?’ asks Amira Solh (interview). Elsewhere in the central district, the Roman Baths archaeological park is located near the seat of Parliament (an oft-conflicted arena in sectarianised Lebanon), the recreated Place Etoile is proximate to the Greek Orthodox Church and Parliament, and the Lebanese government’s extensive use of checkpoints and gates that establish fortified enclaves around state institutions further obstructs the accessibility to public space.

Beyond the challenges of specific sites in the central district is consideration of the political nature of the district itself in a sectarian environment. From 2005 to 2008, the central core was transformed into a site of political demonstration and protest amidst growing Sunni-Shiite conflict stimulated by the Hariri assassination. Three major squares in Beirut downtown (Martyrs’ Square, Debbas Square and



**FIGURE 11.4** Martyrs' Square statue, Hariri burial and remembrance site (tented), and Mohammed Al-Amin Mosque (2010)

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Riad al-Solh Square) all changed function in 2005 and 2006 to political stages for revolution and political opposition. A large-scale Hezbollah-led demonstration supporting Syria was held in these areas on 8 March 2005. Then, a massive anti-Syrian rally was held on 14 March 2005 in Martyrs' Square. From December 2006 through May 2008, a 'tent city' composed of Shiite and other protesters in opposition to the then-Sunni-Christian government appropriated the central city district south of Martyrs' Square extending onto Riad al-Solh Square. It constituted an 18-month struggle over public space in the downtown district. Not only did this political demonstration, and others, transform the central district into a political forum, but it also brought people to the centre city that had rarely been there since the Civil War. Many in the opposition tent city were lower-income persons who had not come to the central area in a long time (Hana Alamuddin, interview). Countering the common criticism of the central district as separated from the rest of the city, Robert Saliba observes that '2006 and after showed us that Solidere has not created a gated downtown after all' (interview).

Most dispiriting when contemplating the future of Solidere's central district, there exists the possibility that it could become the target of sectarian hostilities. Far from being perceived as a non-sectarian commercial enterprise, many view downtown redevelopment as the 'embodiment of a body politic – a Sunni one,



**FIGURE 11.5** Hariri burial and remembrance site 2010. This area has since been transformed into a permanent mausoleum

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whose identity is inscribed within the government' observes Mona Fawaz (Assistant Professor of Architecture and Design, American University of Beirut, interview). Initiated and financed by Sunni leader Rafik Hariri, Solidere and central city redevelopment is exposed in this view as, itself, a sectarian project with the Shiite community sceptical that there is a place for them in this new Hariri downtown. The heterogeneous social heritage of the pre-war central district has been reduced substantially. In a nightmare scenario, the central district could become a military target of Shiite aggression should sectarian violence break out. Although its rebuilding has isolated it from the rest of the city in many respects, the central district could be an unfortunate target in future urban conflict because the district is a symbol for many of the post-Civil War Hariri era. 'It is a heart-breaking thought', ponders Oussama Kabbani (interview), 'to think that Solidere could become a symbol of yet another failure'.

## Conclusion

Despite efforts by Solidere to restore and conserve primarily French Mandate-period heritage buildings and to preserve archaeological substratum artefacts, the pre-war downtown as a microcosm of the diversity of the country has been

radically transformed into a sterile island of commercial rationality cut off from the rest of the city. Large-scale demolition of many old central precincts associated with pre-war mixing of income and sectarian groups, the dismantling of the structure of pre-war land ownership and domination by a profit-motivated privatised urban redevelopment regime perceived to be under Sunni influence has obstructed the ability of the central district to spatially and socially integrate the different income classes and sectarian interests of the wider city. The heterogeneous social fabric of pre-war mixing and interaction in the central district has been superseded, and acknowledgement of the Civil War and its physical impacts has been submerged – lessening opportunities for the central district to play a key role in mediating and reconnecting class and sectarian divisions in the city.

Opportunity spaces exist for the district to become more an authentic central place for a city which needs places that bridge sectarian and income divisions, and which are able to meet the needs of a broader range of incomes in its housing and retail developments. Planned projects involving the spawning of creative industries (through Solidere's discounting of land), a cultural strategy for Martyrs' Square, a new congress centre and a large movie complex promise to bring greater diversity to the district's resident and customer base. Most potentially stimulating of spontaneous mixing across incomes and sects is the large amount of future planned open space. Over 90 acres of green space will be present in the district when all is done, with much still to be developed in the waterfront area and in the extension of the seaside corniche (pedestrian walkway) (Angus Gavin, interview). This new part of the corniche along the marina waterfront promises to open up greater opportunities for sectarian mixing due to its central location.

Nonetheless, based on more than 20 years of redevelopment activity, Solidere's redevelopment project has not brought back the vital integrative function of the central district. Witnessing a central city reconstruction that is impressive in some measures but operating in isolation from larger city and regional needs, Kassir (2010: 530) calls it 'an illusion' that has played a decisive role in 'ensuring that the opportunities of post-war Lebanon would be squandered'. While connections to external and global audiences have strengthened, it is the central district's internal value to all Beirutis and Lebanese that remains a significant challenge.

The rehabilitation and reconstruction of the central district has achieved impressive on-the-ground architectural and design outcomes, yet there is a sense of missed opportunities for Solidere to have engaged more fully and equitably with the non-profit-making aspects of city-building. Former town planning manager Oussama Kabbani (interview) asserts that Solidere should have acted more as a corporate citizen having wider social responsibility to the city. The funding of small projects such as playgrounds, community centres and educational facilities in 'pericentral' locations outside the central district but adjacent to it could have improved these areas, connected them to central district redevelopment and illustrated that Solidere was there for Beirutis of all classes and neighbourhoods (Layla Al-Zubaidi, Director, Middle East Office, Heinrich Böll Foundation, Beirut, interview). Serge Yazigi (Director, MAJAL Urban Observatory, Institute of Urbanism, University of



Balamand, interview), questions why so much money has been spent in the central district, while these nearby pericentral areas have been excluded from attention for 20 years.

A common-sense instinct in cities divided by sectarian antagonists is to adopt a neutral, hands-off approach to city-building that is free of sectarian meaning. I have explored such an approach both in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina (Bollens 2012). A version of this neutral strategy is Beirut, where there has been deference to market forces in the rebuilding of the city district; this tactic is viewed by proponents as ‘neutral and nonpartisan – guided by the invisible hand of the market rather than a political agenda’ (Calame and Charlesworth 2009: 184). Yet, this invisible hand has predilections and biases towards rewarding itself. In the Solidere case, one bears witness to the substantial distortions introduced into city redevelopment when profit-making is insulated from the political arena and used as the prime barometer for assessing central city welfare. In addition, the sense that Solidere redevelopment – led as it was by a powerful Sunni leader connected to Saudi investments – would be perceived by all interests in the city as an intervention free of sectarianism appears naive and disingenuous. Different types of heritage and memory constitute a multilayered and volatile mix of conflicting alignments in Beirut and Lebanon, a reality that post-war central district redevelopment has not effectively overcome, and indeed may be deepening.

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