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Nostalgia and Belonging in Art and Architecture from the MENA Region

Essay Collection

Research project conceptualized and edited by Laura Hindelang and Nadia Radwan

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Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts, Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region

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Manazir is a platform of exchange that aims to connect researchers interested in the study of visual arts, architecture and heritage in the MENA region (Middle East & North Africa) in Switzerland.

The term "Manazir" refers to landscape, perspective and point of view in Arabic, Ottoman Turkish and Persian. Thus, Manazir is oriented toward a diversity of transcultural and transdisciplinary "landscapes" and "points of views" and open to a multiplicity of themes, epochs and geographical areas.

It is a non-hierarchical platform that will connect scholars, PhD candidates and art professionals working in Swiss universities and institutions, in order to give higher national and international visibility to a rich but yet relatively unknown field.

The Platform disseminates information regarding conferences, workshops, publications and exhibitions taking place in Switzerland. Research results are also promoted through *Manazir Journal*, a peer-reviewed online journal that regularly publishes thematic issues in open access.

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Figure 9: Beirut Souks site with L'Orient-Le Jour Building and Ibn Araaq monument. 1995. Beirut, Lebanon. © Solidere. Photograph by Mosbah Assi.

When futures are constructed upon nostalgic foundations, do they stand, or float, or topple? Can we occupy these immaterial structures or do they even exist?

In the traditional sense, nostalgia is defined by longing—longing for a time or a place that no longer exists or has never existed (Boym viii). Due to its ambiguity, nostalgia is often used as a tool for constructing collective identities where local histories have become inaccessible or remain a source of conflict (xvi). In this way, nostalgia, operating like a blanket of oblivion, offers space for re-beginning and imagining new futures (Khayyat 44). In this dreamlike space, everyone can feel they belong. However, Svetlana Boym warns against the pairing of nostalgia and belonging: "longing can make us more empathetic toward fellow humans, yet the moment we try to repair longing

with belonging… we often part ways and put an end to mutual understanding. In extreme cases it can create a phantom homeland" (359).

The reconstruction of the Beirut Central District (BCD), and more specifically the reconstruction of the Beirut Souks, is an example of a post-war reconstruction project built upon nostalgia. The BCD was heavily damaged during the Lebanese civil war, which lasted from 1975 to 1990 and violently divided the city of Beirut along sectarian lines. During an early ceasefire in 1976, the State Council for Development and Reconstruction began drawing plans for reconstructing the BCD as "a site in which a new sense of national identity could be given spatial expression" (Makdisi 666). The center of the nation's capital was to be commonly and collectively reinvented to embody a non-sectarian and unified people (666). However, planning was interrupted by fighting in 1977 and did not resume until the 1980s under the oversight of the private engineering firm OGER Liban. Based on a revised and unapproved master plan for the total reconstruction of the downtown area, OGER Liban began the systematic clearing of all structures in the BCD (667). Although more than half of the cleared structures—beautiful examples of Ottoman, French mandate, and modern-era architecture—were structurally sound, they were not preserved (Tabet 83–105). Despite public outcry, demolition continued until the end of 1992, at which point the entire area had been cleared and all that was left of the city center was an expansive field of dirt (Makdisi 674).[1]

This tabula rasa was then handed to the private real-estate company *Société Libanaise pour le Développement et la Reconstruction de Beyrouth*, better known as Solidere, who assumed total control of the reconstruction of the BCD. Moving away from earlier futuristic proposals that had been criticized for negating the surrounding urban fabric, Solidere took the opportunity presented by contemporary archaeological excavations of the downtown area to rebrand their master plan. "An Ancient City for the Future" became Solidere's slogan for the new BCD: a modern city formed around architectural fragments of Beirut's pre-modern history (Makdisi 666–675). Clouded in ambiguity, the slogan aimed to promote the reconstruction of a generalized past as the foundation for a totalized future. Beirut in its present state was to be forgotten.

The former souks, which had been a popular place for commerce and intersectional encounter since their construction under Ottoman rule in the late nineteenth century, were targeted as one of the first areas to be reconstructed by Solidere. By recalling the economic and social successes of the historic souks, the new souks were to symbolize the rebirth of a united Lebanese nation (Solidere). However, rather than employing Lebanese nationals for the design, Solidere selected the internationally renowned Spanish architect Rafael Moneo, a western-oriented architect who had no former building experience in Lebanon or the Middle East but who was supported by the Beirut architecture firm Samir Khairallah and Partners (Solidere). According to Moneo, "the charge for the project… entailed finding an architectural solution that revitalizes the familiar character of a souk while accommodating contemporary needs of shopping and retail" (263). The former souks, which had been obliterated only three years before, were not to be reconstructed but rather reinvented based on the generalized idea of an "oriental" marketplace reinterpreted for retail shopping (Makdisi 667).

Based on this premise, Moneo designed an indoor-outdoor shopping complex embedded with vague references to the former souks. With a surface area of over 45,000 square meters, the complex takes up an entire city block. Pedestrian streets aligned according to the rediscovered Phoenician city grid cut through the block and define the principal shopping areas. The shopping

[1] At the time, OGER Liban was run by Rafiq Hariri. Saree Makdisi identifies the CDR's abdication of the city center reconstruction to OGER Liban as marking the beginning of "Harirism", a political-economic discourse culminating in 1992 with Rafiq Hariri's appointment as Prime Minister of Lebanon.

streets, named after the former souks al-Jamil, al-Arwam, al-Tawileh, and Ayyass, are covered by glass roof structures and remain open to air and light (Moneo 266–270). The glass coverings are a reference to the makeshift awnings and sunshades that dominated the streetscape of the former Beirut souks. However, unlike the former souks, the complex exudes a homogeneous character emphasized by the unvaried facade cladding as well as the serial roof landscape, a signature of Moneo's architectural style.[2] Moneo argued that the "generic" architecture would allow individual shop owners to define the identity of their own stores. Although reminiscent of the makeshift formation of the former souks, this idea is undermined by the standardized storefronts of the global retail chains that could afford space in the new Beirut Souks.[3]

As a final effort in proving the historical authenticity of the new souks, Moneo isolated and exhibited selected archaeological finds that were uncovered during the excavations required for the new building foundations and underground parking. Elements of the city settlement from the sixth century B.C., the city walls from the ninth century A.D., as well as monuments such as the Zawiyat Ibn Arraq from 1517 A.D. were restored and re-integrated into the architecture and consumer experience of the new souks. For example, the Zawiyat Ibn Arraq, originally a monastic complex, later a shop in the former souk al-Tawileh, and most recently visited as a shrine, today stands on display between a three-meter high "I (Heart) Beirut" sign and a high-end jewelry store (Al-Harithy 215–218). Stripped of its complex history, the ruin appears as a frozen theater set dislocated from space and time.

The Beirut Souks were constructed on nostalgic foundations: ancient ruins, vague signals, and, to a large extent, language. The insistence on the terms "reconstruction" and "souk", though inaccurate, form the very basis of Solidere's and Moneo's project. The souks, which no longer exist, are preserved in the idea that the Beirut Souks are one and the same. But the high-end commercial center, which has been criticized since its initial conception, continues to be rejected by Beirutis as a valid public space (Shayya 30). To many, it cannot function as a symbol for national rebirth and belonging because it has obliterated all material memory and meaning of the former souks and their role in the city center. Instead, the commercial center is seen as a void in the local environment, merely an attraction for wealthy tourists.

Yet, despite public rejection, the new souks do exist as a material part of contemporary Beirut. Their space influences the way the public experiences and interacts with the city, whether they are read as a void or an attraction.[4] Today, the souks may be rejected and unoccupied, but they do have the potential to be re-imagined, re-claimed, and re-futured. Nostalgia is, after all, ambiguous.

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[2] See for example the San Pablo Airport in Sevilla, Spain, or the Moderna Museet and Arkitekturmuseet in Stockholm, Sweden (Website of Rafael Moneo Architects).

[3] "Beirut Souks" was the marketing label given to the new souk area.

[4] In fact, opposition to Solidere has provoked countless counter-projects, such as Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury's Evolving Scars from 1991, or the cultural center Beit Beirut, also known as "The Yellow House". In a way, these can be read as indirect products of the reconstruction project.

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