Politecnico di Torino

1859

Reclaiming the City
Strategies for Inclusive Urban Development
in Beirut's Central District

Master's Thesis in Architecture for the Sustainable Design Project

Department of Architecture and Design

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Thesis Structure, Methodology and Research Questions

I- Methodological Framework

1- Literature and Theoretical Review
A wide body of academic literature and policy documents informs the theoretical foundation of this work. Sources include: Urban planning theory in divided/post-conflict cities, texts on public space democratization and collective memory, architectural and socio-spatial analyses of Beirut's urban evolution and studies of grassroots organizations and community-led regeneration. The literature review establishes the conceptual basis for understanding Martyr's Square not as solely a geographic site but as a social, political, and symbolic construct.

2- Historical and Archival Research
To contextualize Martyr's Square within Lebanon's complex planning history, archival maps, historical photographs, planning documents, and academic sources were studied. Particular emphasis was placed on colonial-era planning under the French Mandate, post-war reconstruction and the Solidere intervention and shifts in planning governance and legal frameworks across periods. This historical tracing clarifies how political and economic forces shaped the square's spatial form and public meaning.

3- Site-Based Spatial Analysis
A field-based photographic and spatial survey of the Beirut Central District was conducted (Summer 2025). Analysis tools included visual documentation of architectural conditions, boundaries, and accessibility barriers, Lynchian spatial legibility mapping, and connectivity assessment to adjacent neighborhoods (Gemmayzeh, Bachoura, Hamra, Ain el Mreisseh). These methods help evaluate how physical form influences public experience, access, and identity.

4- Comparative Case Studies
Three international case studies; Berlin, Barcelona (El Raval), and Canelli were selected for their relevance in reconstructing or reviving central public spaces following periods of division, degradation, or displacement. Each case was examined in terms of the planning governance model used, degree of community involvement and strategies for balancing heritage, memory, and contemporary needs. These comparisons allow for the identification of adaptable strategies rather than direct transplantation.

5- Semi-Structured Stakeholder Interviews
Interviews were conducted with local residents and community organizers, planners, architects, and urban activists, representatives from grassroots organizatioins involved in Beirut's urban interventions. The interview process aimed to understand perceptions of Martyr's Square as a lived and symbolic site, identify existing obstacles to participatory redevelopment and inform revisions to the proposed design intervention. Interview findings supplement academic research with insights rooted in local knowledge and lived experience.

II- Thesis Statement

This thesis argues that reclaiming Martyr's Square as an inclusive, community centered, and publicly governed civic space; grounded in historical memory, participatory planning, and multi-scalar urban connectivity, is essential for repairing Beirut's fragmented urban fabric and re-establishing a democratic, socially cohesive city center.

III- Research Questions

How can Martyr's Square be reclaimed as an inclusive civic space after decades of privatization, infrastructural disruption, and political fragmentation?

What planning, design, and governance strategies can reconnect Beirut's Central District to its surrounding neighborhoods and repair its fractured urban fabric?

How can historical memory, grassroots engagement, and participatory planning be mobilized to shape a renewed, socially cohesive city center?

IV- Thesis Structure

Part 1 - Theories
Establishes foundational theoretical frameworks related to public space, participatory urbanism, collective memory, and the socio-political role of Martyr's Square. It also introduces comparative international case studies to identify transferable lessons.

Part 2- Historical Background
Traces the evolution of the Martyr's Square and urban planning in Lebanon with attention to how state institutions, colonial legacy, and post-war privatization shaped Beirut Central District's spatial and political form.

Part 3 - Beirut Planning and Community Participation
Examines the post-crisis conditions of Beirut, the failures of centralized planning, and the emergence of grassroots actors advocating for urban rights and public space reclamation. Martyr's Square is positioned within this contemporary dynamic.

Part 4 - Proposal
Presents an architectural and urban design proposal for reimagining Martyr's Square, informed by site analysis, memory-based spatial interpretation, and neighborhood connectivity strategies.

Part 5 - Interviews
Discusses stakeholder interview results, synthesizing insights to critically assess the proposal and incorporate feedback for further refinement.

Part 6 - Conclusion and Modified Proposal
Concludes with reflections on the findings, revised final vision, and recommendations for future research, policy reform, and community-based planning practices.

V- Use of AI Tools

In the development of this thesis AI tools were used strictly as supportive instruments to streamline the research and writing process. They assisted in proofreading the grammar and clarity of all written sections and cleaning the transcripts of conducted interviews to improve readability while preserving original meaning. AI was also used to generate concise summaries of interview content, helping to organize insights and identify recurring themes. All analytical interpretations, conceptual frameworks, and final arguments presented in this thesis are solely the work of the author.

ABSTRACT

Beirut's Central District, specifically Martyr's Square has historically served as Beirut's civic and symbolic core, yet decades of war, privatized reconstruction, and political fragmentation have left it disconnected, underutilized, and largely inaccessible. The August 4, 2020 Port blast further exposed the fragility of the area's spatial and institutional structures. In the absence of effective state-led planning, grassroots and non-governmental organizations emerged as key actors in reactivating neglected public spaces, offering alternative forms of stewardship and civic engagement. Despite their potential, these initiatives face obstacles such as limited funding, institutional resistance, and the lack of an integrated vision for the city center. This thesis addresses the gap in inclusive, community-driven urban strategies for Martyr's Square by investigating how grassroots practices can inform its spatial regeneration. The research employs spatial analysis, historical and morphological mapping, on-site observations, comparative case studies, and interviews with planners, architects, activists, and local users. Findings reveal that grassroots interventions help restore continuity, foster social interaction, and reintroduce civic meaning across fragmented urban tissues. Based on these insights, the thesis proposes a framework for inclusive urban regeneration that positions Martyr's Square as a connective civic landscape shaped through participatory processes. The framework outlines strategies to enhance accessibility, reclaim public space, and promote social integration, demonstrating how community participation can guide the reimagining of Beirut's Central District as a cohesive and inclusive urban environment.

Demonstrators during an anti-government protest in downtown Beirut. October 20, 2019. (Reuters)

Literature Review

This thesis is grounded in three main theoretical and contextual pillars: the political geography of divided cities, the theoretical mandate of the Right to the City, and the practical dynamics of grassroots intervention against a history of failed, top-down urban planning in Beirut.

1- Theoretical Framework:

The theoretical foundation of this thesis rests on three intersecting intellectual currents: urban division theory, the "Right to the City," and the role of community participation in shaping inclusive urban environments.

Urban Division and the Politics of Planning

Scholars such as Fainstein, Castells, and Marcuse (1991; 1995) articulate how capitalist urbanization perpetuates socio-economic division within global cities.

The "Divided Cities Discourse" (Boal, 1994; Bollens, 1998, 2007; Yiftachel, 2006) explores how ethno-national conflicts spatially and politically fragment cities such as Beirut, Jerusalem, and Belfast.

Bollens' (1998) analytical framework delineates four interlinked dimensions; territorial, procedural, economic, and cultural, through which urban planning can entrench or mitigate division.

Yiftachel (2006) further introduces the concept of ethnocratic planning, wherein planning becomes an instrument of political dominance rather than reconciliation.

Amin (2002) and Leclair-Paquet (2013) highlight the rehabilitative potential of shared public spaces as "neutral meeting grounds," fostering trust, coexistence, and social resilience in fragmented cities.

The Right to the City and Inclusive Urbanism

Henri Lefebvre's seminal Le Droit à la Ville (1967) conceptualizes the city as a collective oeuvre shaped by its inhabitants.

David Harvey (2008) extends this by linking it to Marxist geography, asserting that the Right to the City entails a collective capacity to reshape urban life toward justice and inclusivity.

Institutionally, the United Nations (2017) operationalized the concept into three pillars; spatial justice, political agency, and cultural diversity, defining a global policy framework for inclusive urban governance.

Community Participation and Grassroots Urbanism

Gallent and Ciaffi (2014) identify community participation as the connective tissue of sustainable urbanism, mediating between state mechanisms and civic agency.

Delanty (2003) and Innes and Booher (2010) emphasize that communities are heterogeneous entities defined by negotiation and contestation rather than consensus. This complexity shows the importance of participatory planning models that prioritize inclusive governance and shared authorship of urban space.

2- Historical Evolution of Urban Planning in Beirut:

The historical section of the thesis reconstructs Beirut's urban planning trajectory through the framework developed by Lebanese architect Assem Salam.

Colonial and Early Modern Planning (1918–1943)

The earliest planning interventions under the French Mandate, exemplified by the 1930 Danger Plan and the 1940 Ecochard Plan, introduced imported modernist ideals emphasizing zoning and circulation. Scholars such as Khodr (2017) and Ragab (2011) critique these efforts for disregarding Beirut's organic social and spatial patterns, entrenching socio-sectarian segregation under the guise of modernization.

National Reforms and Post-Independence Development (1943–1975)

The Chehabist period (1958–1964) marked an earnest attempt at national planning, with the IRFED Mission pioneering data-driven surveys of Lebanon's socio-economic resources. However, implementation remained partial due to political instability and the absence of a cohesive institutional framework.

Post-War Neoliberal Reconstruction (1990–Present)

Critical urban scholarship of Salam, 2005; Ragab, 2011; Irving, 2009 assesses post-war reconstruction as a form of neoliberal urbanism. The privatized redevelopment of Beirut's Central District by Solidere, initiated through the Oger Plan (1983) is described as a process of "erased memory," in which heritage was sacrificed for commercial gain.

Ragab (2011) characterizes Solidere's model as a continuation of division by other means, producing a sanitized urban aesthetic devoid of public agency.

Salam (2005) and Irving (2009) reinforce this critique, arguing that the state giving the planning authority to private developers reinforced fragmentation that Martyr's Square had historically symbolized.

3- Contemporary Challenges and Grassroots Intervention:

Planning Failures and Post-Crisis Fragmentation

The Beirut Port explosion of 2020 exposed the institutional collapse of formal planning mechanisms. Research from the Beirut Urban Lab (2020, 2021) documents the decentralized nature of recovery efforts, led largely by NGOs and community organizations.

Valsamos, Larcher, and Casadei (2021) argue that resilience oriented planning must now integrate safety, sustainability, and participatory governance.

Grassroots Responses and Urban Reclamation

Al-Harithy and Yassine (2024) advocate for a paradigm shift toward community-centered reconstruction, in which local needs and narratives shape redevelopment.

Initiatives such as theOtherDada's Beirut RiverLESS Project employs ecological urbanism to restore biodiversity and public agency through grassroots ecological design.

Sinno documented the 2019 October Revolution which positions Martyr's Square as a reclaimed civic forum, a symbolic and physical "common ground" for collective dissent and reassertion of urban rights.

Chapter 1 cover photo:

The "Green Line," a fortified demarcation zone that divided Beirut, Lebanon, during its civil war. The photograph highlights how nature began to reclaim the abandoned, war-torn urban landscape.

Source:
Abbas/Magnum Photos/IBL Bildbyrå.
https://www.adnym.com/the-green-line/

1- Urban Planning Approaches in Divided Cities

1.1- The Potential of Urban Design and Public Spaces in Reuniting a Fragmented City Center

The term "divided city" reveals multiple divergent scholarly interpretations. One interprets urban division through the lens of capitalist production, focusing on class, race, gender, and the socio-economic segmentation between affluent and deprived areas in global cities such as New York, London, and Tokyo (Mollenkopf and Castells, 1991; Fainstein et al., 1992; Marcuse, 1995; Marcuse and van Kempen, 2002). These scholars examine urban inequality and segregation as byproducts of global capitalist urbanization.

A second interpretation centers on a more extreme and spatially explicit form of division: physical, political, or ethno-national fragmentation in cities such as Belfast, Jerusalem, Nicosia, Mostar, Beirut, and Berlin (Safier, 1997; Boal, 1994; Kliot and Mansfeld, 1999; Bollens, 1998, 2007, 2009; Calame and Charlesworth, 2009; Gaffikin and Morrissey, 2011). This body of work is often referred to as the "Divided Cities Discourse" (DCD).

Urban planning in divided cities cannot rely on traditional land-use frameworks alone. It must be redefined to confront political contestation, ethnic tensions, and spatial inequalities. Scholars like Bollens (1998, 2002, 2007) and Yiftachel (1995) argue that planning in such contexts involves four interrelated urban dimensions: Territorial: the spatial control of ethnic groups through zoning, boundary-drawing, and displacement (Ellis, 2000)

Procedural: inclusion or exclusion from decision-making processes

Economic: allocation of resources and services, which often leads to systemic deprivation or dependency

Cultural: the reinforcement or suppression of group identities through education, religious institutions, and public narratives.

Benvenisti (1986) initially distinguished between "partisan" and "resolver" approaches to urban planning where the former supports the dominant group and the status quo, while the latter seeks to engage with and mitigate the causes of division. Bollens (1998, 2007) expands on this foundation by identifying four models of planning strategies:

Table 1. *Models of urban policy strategies (adapted from Benvenisti, 1986; Bollens, 2007).*

Urban Planning Model	Strategies
Neutral Strategy *Tactic*: Address urban symptoms of ethnic conflict at individual level	• Employs technical criteria in allocating urban resources and services • Distances itself from issues of ethnic identity, power inequalities and political exclusion
Partisan Strategy *Tactic*: Maintain/Increase disparities	• Furthers an empowered ethnic group's values/authority and rejects the claims of disenfranchised group • Strategies seek to entrench and expand territorial claims or enforce exclusionary control of access
Equity Strategy *Tactic*: Address urban symptoms of ethnic conflict at ethnic group level	• Gives primacy to ethnic affiliation in order to decrease inter-group inequalities • Allocation of urban services and spending is based on group identity
Resolver Strategy *Tactic*: Address root causes/sovereignty issues	• To connect urban issues to root causes of urban polarization • Impacts and authority of government policy is challenged

Models of urban policy strategies (adapted from Benvenisti, 1986; Bollens, 2007)
Source: Caner, Gizem, and Fulin Bölen. "Urban Planning Approaches in Divided Cities." ITU Journal of Faculty of Architecture, vol. 13, 2016

Yiftachel and Yacobi (2003) push this further by defining an "ethnocratic" planning strategy, wherein all dimensions of planning are mobilized to establish dominance by one ethno-national group. Ethnocratic cities present as "mixed," yet structurally privilege a dominant identity. In such contexts, planning becomes a tool of control, rather than reconciliation (Yiftachel, 2006). To counter this, scholars like Gaffikin and Morrissey (2011) advocate for collaborative planning, which aims to foster inclusive dialogue among stakeholders and facilitate consensual public policy. Related frameworks include communicative, deliberative, and dialogic planning (Brand et al., 2008). However, divided cities are marked by multiple, rival publics. For collaborative planning to succeed, shared spaces must be intentionally created, places of both contact and engagement, not just passive coexistence. Amin (2002) terms these "sites of cultural transgression of a prosaic nature," such as gardens, schools, and neighborhood cafés.

The psychological aspect is as vital as the physical. Shared spaces foster emotional security, social trust, and a renewed sense of urban citizenship. This shift transforms public spaces from neutral zones to symbols of unity and shared identity (Leclair-Paquet, 2013).

Misselwitz and Rieniets (2009) provide a classification that helps explain the role of planning under different conflict intensities: In mediated conflicts, planning mechanisms absorb tensions and prevent escalation, akin to what Amin and Graham (1997) call "ordinary cities." In unmediated conflicts, these mechanisms break down, making cities more prone to destructive confrontation. Yiftachel (2006) critiques that much of the literature centers on planners rather than the planning process itself. However, professional approaches are crucial. Calame and Charlesworth (2009) outline four responses:

Compliance: aligning with Bollens' neutral model, planners follow political directives, often ignoring deeper conflicts.

Avoidance: planners withdraw from contested issues until clear political outcomes emerge.
Engagement: can manifest through centralized, collaborative, or privatized planning, depending on the institutional environment.

Advocacy: aligns with equity and resolver models, as planners actively challenge sources of division and promote social justice.

In this context urban design and public spaces offer powerful tools for reunification. As Leclair-Paquet (2013) argues, well-designed public spaces can serve as neutral meeting grounds where cross-cultural interaction unfolds naturally. Streets, parks, and markets become platforms of reconciliation, where daily social exchange breaks down stereotypes and fosters shared experiences.

Urban design amplifies this effect when it ensures open-ended, accessible, and culturally sensitive spaces. Inclusive design principles can mitigate segregation by intentionally promoting mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly environments. The physical environment shapes the psychological: a well-planned plaza or park doesn't just accommodate bodies; it builds emotional resilience and belonging. Community participation in the design and decision-making processes ensures that urban interventions reflect real needs and aspirations. These participatory processes transform urban space into collective narratives, where diverse groups contribute to and recognize their place in the city's identity. Finally, reuniting a fragmented city center requires more than physical reconstruction. It demands a reimagining of public space as a site of healing, integration, and democratic engagement. When urban design and planning operate through inclusive, collaborative frameworks, they can challenge division, foster coexistence, and reconstruct the physical and emotional fabric of divided cities.

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Kliot, N., Mansfeld, Y. (1999), Case Studies Of Conflict and Territorial Organization in Divided Cities. Progress in Planning, Vol. 52, 167-225.

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Misselwitz, P., Rieniets, T. (2009), Jerusalem and the Principles of Conflict Urbanism. Journal of Urban Technology, Vol. 16, No. 2, 61-78.

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Yiftachel, O., Yacobi, H. (2003). Urban Ethnocracy: Ethnicization and the Production of Space in an Israeli "Mixed City." Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, Vol. 21, No. 6, 673-693.

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1.2- The Right to the City: A Framework for Urban Inclusivity

The right to the city is a holistic approach to improving the quality of everyday life in cities. The initial concept originated from Henri Lefebvre with his book Le Droit à la Ville (Lefebvre, 1967). Lefebvre saw the city as a work of art constantly being remade (Butler, 2012), as a space of encounter, generating possibilities and opportunities for collective action and requiring collective participation. Where individuals and groups are excluded from meaningful participation in the collective and creative act, optimal outcomes for society and its neighborhoods cannot be achieved.

Butler, C. (2012). Henri Lefebvre: Spatial Politics, everyday life and the right to the city: Routledge.

Lefebvre, H. (1967). Le droit à la Ville. (Vol. 29).

David William Harvey (born 31 October 1935) is a British American geographer and social theorist best known for his influential concept of the right to the city. Harvey argues that the right to the city goes beyond individual access to urban resources; it is a collective right to reshape and transform cities through shared power and social justice. This idea challenges traditional urban planning by emphasizing that urban inhabitants should actively participate in redefining the social, political, and economic processes that shape urban life. Harvey's work is foundational in linking Marxist theory with urban geography, inspiring movements for equitable and democratic urban change worldwide.

"The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights."

-David William Harvey

Harvey, David. (2008) "The Right to the City." New Left Review 53

This means that having access to things like housing, parks, transport, or public services isn't enough. It's not just about being allowed to use the city's resources. The "right to the city" means people have the power to actively shape and transform the city environment around them. Because how a city is built and organized deeply affects people's lives, identities, and opportunities, changing the city also changes the people living in it. This right isn't just something one person can claim alone. It requires communities and groups to come together and collectively influence urban planning, policies, and development. It's about having control over how cities grow and develop, not just passively accepting what happens, but actively deciding what kind of city people want to live in. Harvey argues this collective power to shape cities and, by extension, our social lives, is a fundamental human right that has been overlooked or ignored in many societies.

A 2016 United Nations policy paper, titled "The Right to the City and Cities for All," serves as a framework for the New Urban Agenda, discussed at the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III). The paper advocates for the "right to the city" as a new urban development paradigm to address challenges like rapid urbanization, poverty, social exclusion, and environmental risks in cities and human settlements.The concept of the "right to the city" is explored through three main pillars:

Spatially just resource distribution:
This pillar addresses issues such as land for housing and livelihoods, the de-commodification of urban space, urban commons, public spaces, biodiversity, access to basic services and infrastructure, pollution control, and resilience to climate change and disasters.

Political agency:
This involves inclusive governance, inclusive urban planning, and fostering citizenship that enables participation, transparency, and democratization.

Social, economic, and cultural diversity:
This pillar focuses on recognizing social actors including gender, migrants, and refugees, embracing identity, cultural practices, and heritage, and promoting safe cities, livelihoods, well-being, and welfare.

The paper also identifies core challenges that hinder the implementation of the "right to the city," including urban spatial strategies, urban governance, urban economy, social aspects, and the urban environment. For each pillar, specific issues are detailed, and concrete recommendations referred to as "transformations" are provided, along with key actions to achieve these goals. Effective implementation of an inclusive urban agenda requires the active engagement of various key actors, such as central and local governments, academia, civil society organizations, the private sector, and social movements. To ensure proper implementation and evaluation of this framework, the document proposes incorporating suitable financing and monitoring components across all three pillars. The paper concludes that the "right to the city" offers an alternative framework for rethinking cities, serving as a cornerstone for the New Urban Agenda. It defines this right as the entitlement of all inhabitants, present and future, to occupy, use, and produce cities, considering them a common good essential for quality of life justly, inclusively, and sustainably. This also implies responsibility for governments and people to claim, defend, and promote this right.

United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, Habitat III Policy Papers: Policy Paper 1 The Right to the City and Cities for All (New York: United Nations, 2017), www.habitat3.org

1.3- The Role of Community Participation and Grassroot Organizations in Urban Transformation

Key to good urbanism is the connective tissue: infrastructure, public space, and community participation (Ellin, 2013). There is an increasing enthusiasm for direct community engagement in policy and planning as a response to growing dissatisfaction with traditional, top-down government models (Gallent and Ciaffi, 2014). Community action itself can originate from two primary sources: either as grassroots initiatives driven by communities seeking local solutions, or as a deliberate strategy by governments aiming to improve citizen connection and service delivery. This action can serve to challenge existing authority or complement established governance models. The definition of 'community' has evolved from a geographically defined, often passive, entity to one characterized by active exchange within social networks (Gallent and Ciaffi, 2014).

Delanty (2003) differentiates between 'static' socio-spatial communities and more 'fluid' communities shaped by shared identity, political mobilization, or technological connections. It is recognized that communities are inherently heterogeneous, encompassing diverse values and beliefs, rather than presenting a unified voice (Panelli, 2006). This inherent complexity often means that policymakers may engage only with a narrow segment of community interests, thereby missing opportunities to address broader social complexities (Innes and Booher, 2010).

Key drivers for community mobilization often include eroded trust in the state, a recognition of the virtues of self-help, dissatisfaction with particular decisions, or responses to external threats. Such mobilization can manifest in forms of protest, lobbying, and the development of community-led plans to articulate consensus or opposition. Community planning is markedly different from conventional state planning, distinguished by its varied processes, forms, and content, driven by specific local interests rather than abstract public good (Gallent and Ciaffi, 2014). Bookchin (2005) represents the view that community action can actively challenge existing authority, while Benedikter (2008) suggests it can also complement established government models.

A study from 2023 highlights the benefits of community engagement in smart sustainable cities which includes increased project acceptance, citizen-centered services, and greater public interest in urban development. Although there is a lack of holistic studies on community participation approaches, through a semi-systematic literature review, the study examines how cities can foster engagement using digital and physical methods, proposing a community engagement ecosystem for co-creating urban innovations. A model is developed to show how stakeholder involvement supports smart, resilient, and socially inclusive cities. The study also addresses challenges and recommendations for improving community participation. Future research will validate the model using interviews and surveys with statistical analysis (Boktolo, 2023).

Anthony Jnr, Bokolo. (2023). The Role of Community Engagement in Urban Innovation Towards the Co-Creation of Smart Sustainable Cities. Journal of the Knowledge Economy.

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Chapter 2 cover photo:

The Martyr's Square statue, sculpted by Renato Marino Mazzacurati, stands today with severe wartime damage, its bullet holes and missing limbs intentionally preserved as enduring reminders meant to prevent the repetition of past violence, symbolising sacrifice, national struggle and enduring hope.

Source:

2- Contextualizing Martyr's Square

2.1- Timeline:
Historical Significance and Collective Memory
(Sourced from Beirut Shifting Grounds)

1840 - Maidan / Sahat Al Burj

The square in its earliest form was a free space, an open field to the east of the intramural city's fortification walls. With its watchtower, Burj el Kashaf, naming it as 'Sahat al Burj', the open field was as a military training ground and the occasional traveler's stop, a gateway to the city from the east. On the eastern hills, houses amid orchards rise, after the city started to grow out of its walls in 1840. On its eastern walls, a main gate, "Bab Al Saray" allowed entry into the old city, flanked by the Emir Fakhr Eddine Palace (Seraglio).

1841 plan source: https://beirutshiftingrounds. com/Temporal

1860 – Sahat Al Burj / Place du Canon

By the 1860s, the field had already transformed into a vibrant space with shops, French-run cafes, locandas, and houses and villas outside the city walls. Its location made it a vital transport and trade node, linking southward to Damascus and northward to the port of Beirut, by way of caravans and omnibuses. During this period, 'Burj el Khashaf' was demolished, although its name remains attached to the square today. It bore a new designation however at the time, Place du Canon, because of French canons deployment in 1860, interfering to end local massacres in Mount Lebanon.

1876 plan source: https://beirutshiftingrounds. com/Temporal
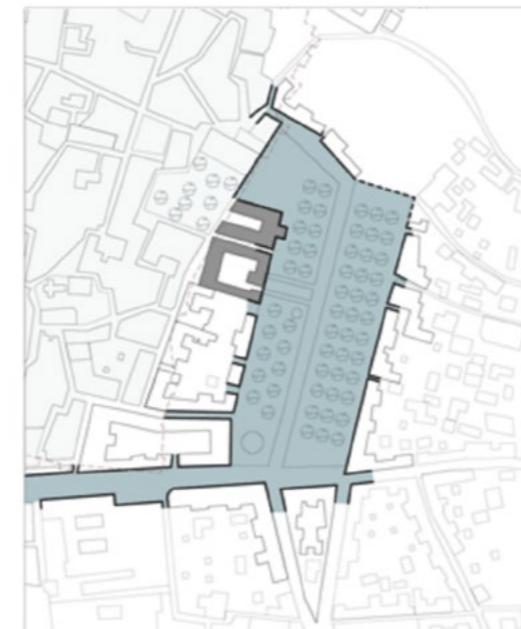
1890 - Muntazah / Al Hamidiyah / Union Square

During a period of Ottoman urban and infrastructural development (Tanzimat), the city rapidly grew in population and urban density outside its walls, with the square spatially forming as a closed and central urban space. Beirut governor advanced the redesign of the square as a garden for leisure (Muntazah), with an iconic government building at its northern edge, the Petit Serail. The period witnessed the Great famine of Mount Lebanon and the hanging of local martyrs on the square, sealing its designation as Martyr's square.

Drawing of the first park 1891
Source: www.lebanoninapicture.com

1920 - Muntazah / Place des Canons

The 1920s witnessed radical changes as the French took over remnants of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. The French proclaimed Greater Lebanon, and initiated their mandate with ambitious urban renewal projects, affecting the old city and reshaping its historic quarters. The Beirut International Fair was hosted in the city with Pavilions installed inside the garden. Furthering this transformation, the square was redesigned as a modern French garden, fountain and tram lines, emphasizing its centrality. TThe square flourished with hotels, cafes, and theaters prospered. However, it also witnessed political demonstrations amid demands for local governance.

1920 plan source: https://beirutshiftingrounds. com/Temporal

Source: https://ajdadalarab.wordpress.com 1889
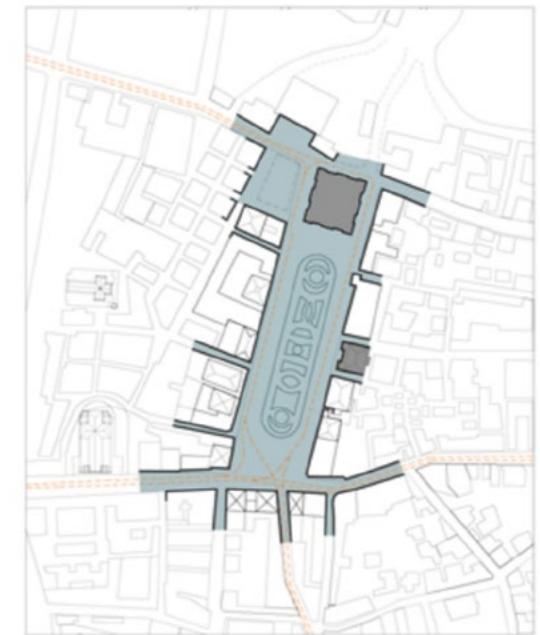
1930 - Place des Canons / Place des Martyrs

The redesigned square was renamed Martyrs square with the installation of the Weeping Women statue, commemorating the Martyrs of 1916. The collision between the local government and the mandate escalated in 1943, and the square witnessed mass demonstrations supporting local leaders, arrested for defiance. Following the local leader's release and the declaration of Lebanon's Independence, the square amassed huge celebrations and signaled a new future. Its role, however, as a commercial and political center gradually shifted towards the recently completed Place de l'Etoile.

1930 plan source: https://beirutshiftingrounds.com/Temporal
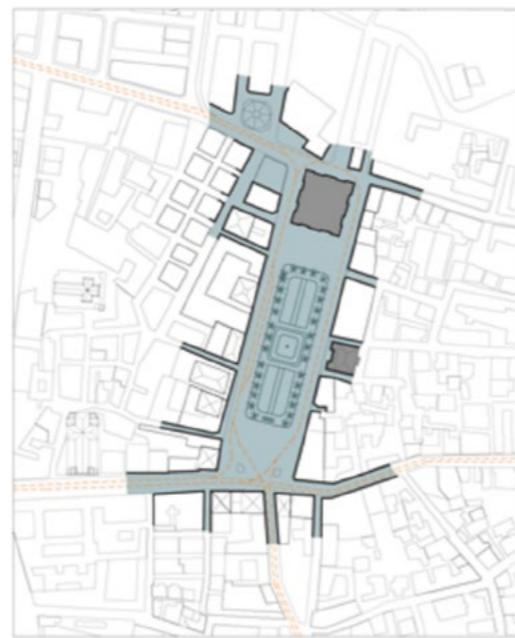
1950 - Place des Martyrs

The 50s established the square as a leisure and cultural center, with the proliferation of theaters, cinemas, and hotels. After the controversy surrounding it, the Weeping Women statue was removed as plans to redesign the square in the Chehab administration period were underway. An ambitious urban plan by Michel Ecochard proposed the opening of the square to the sea. The Rivoli Cinema was built instead in the 1960s bordering its northern edge, and a new martyr's monument was installed in its center. A short war in 1958 of local conflict amid regional political shifts, positioned the square as a political node.

1950 plan source: https://beirutshiftingrounds.com/Temporal

Source: https://oldbeirut.com/post/183378437578/martyrs-square-1910s

Source: https://picryl.com/media/beirut-el-burj-principal-city-square-also-called-the-place-de-cannon
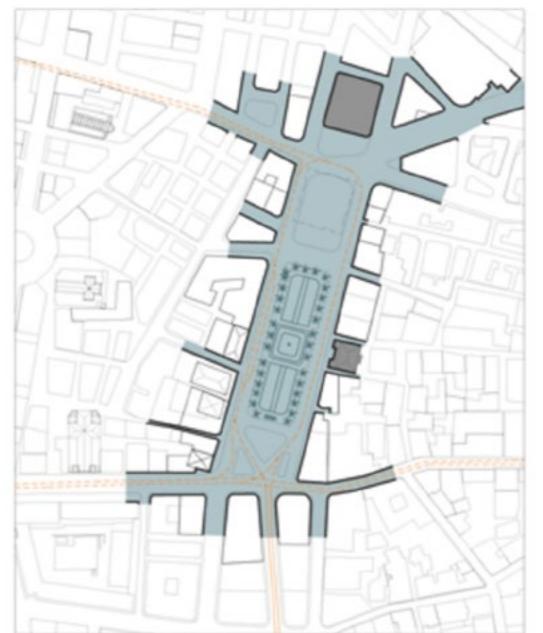
1970 - Place des Martyrs / Sahat Al Burj

The square's role as a transportation and cultural hub manifested strongly in the 70s, with taxis, buses, congested streets, and daily performances, with international and Arab movie screenings, as well as theater groups. Rising tensions escalated with student demonstrations in the period preceding 1975, when the 15 year-long civil war ignited. The square transformed into a center of conflict along a divisive line between East and West Beirut. Heavy with checkpoints and snipers, the square, once a uniting center, became a junction of fear and division.

1970 plan source: https://beirutshiftingrounds.com/Temporal

Source: https://photorientalist.org/easymedia/beirut-color-1960s/attachment/lbc0142/1960s
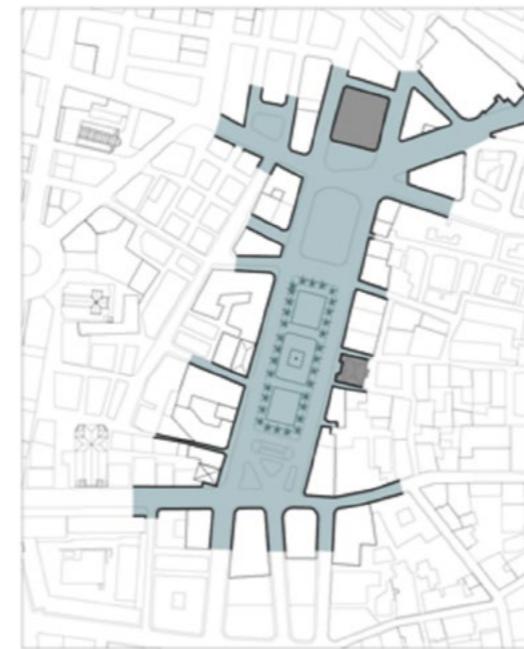
1990 - Demarcation line / Greenline

The 15-year war distorted the square, turning it into a demarcation zone and wild no-man's land. Its buildings and surrounding urban fabric were heavily destroyed, with bullet ridden facades as its central monument remained standing. After the war, the square sat in limbo, with the occasional visitors, journalists, and local vendors selling souvenirs of its lost history.

Source: Robert Zebib Photography 1990

1990 plan source: https://beirutshiftingrounds.com/Temporal
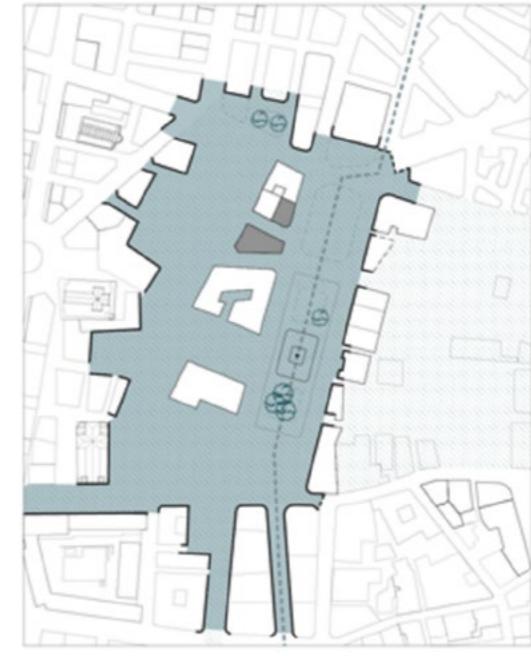
Source: Johnny Saunderson 1993

1994 - Martyrs Square / BCD

After the establishment of Solidere, a private company for reconstructing Beirut, the square witnessed major demolitions, with only two buildings surviving its mass transformation. The area shifted into a re-construction ground with hangars, trucks, and piles of rubble, while the Martyrs monument was relocated for restoration. After the site was cleared, the first concert by Fairuz in the square signaled a new era, pushing the war into a distant memory, contributing to a long collective social amnesia. Popular market events and artwork around the square attempted to bring people back to their lost center, now mostly functioning as a void road junction.

Source: https://www.souar.com/details.php?image_id=13843 1995

1994 plan source: https://beirutshiftinggrounds. com/Temporal

Beirut residents watch a controlled demolition during rebuilding efforts in the Lebanese capital, which is recovering from 16 years of civil strife. Source: AFP

2004 - Martys Square / Freedom Square

The Martyrs monument was reinstalled in 2004 as Solidere launched an international competition for the redesign of the square aligning with their open sea-axis plan. The 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri drew millions of people to the square, protesting against Syria's role and occupation. This 2005 Cedar revolution gave the square back its role as a political and collective symbol of resistance, labeling it Freedom Square. Different camps and political groups took the square as a space of sit-ins and demonstrations, escalating in 2015 with the trash crisis. Despite the tensions, New Year's Eve celebrations were hosted for several years on the square.

2004 plan source: https://beirutshiftingrounds.com/ Temporal
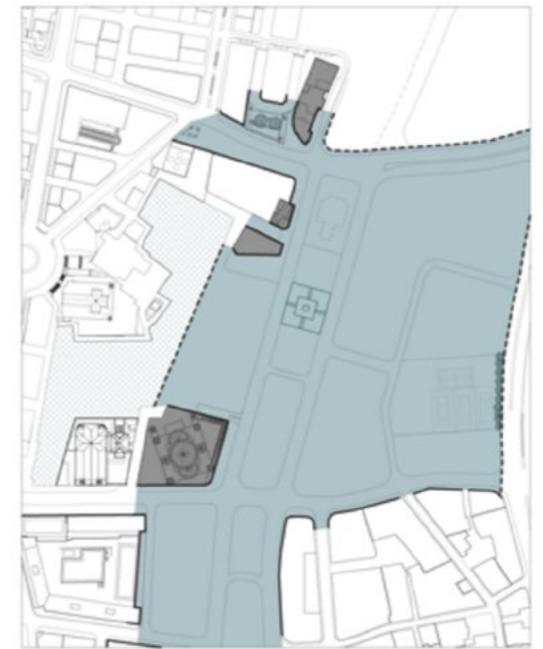
Source: Reuters Karim Sharif 2006

2019 - Martyrs Square / Al Saha

Today's square, an almost complete real estate project, features high-end developments with privatized ground floors, while it remains a high-way junction. After the October revolution, a new spatial transformation emerges, one that takes back the square as a space of collective appropriation; a reclaimed ground by grassroots groups and civil society activists. New informal spaces emerge, from debate areas, independent camps and kiosks, stages for festivities and celebrations, to street vendors and informal markets. Equally affected by the catastrophic blast of 2020, the square, as an open field, is reinterpreted and re-centralized, from a space of resistance to post-blast relief efforts and as a gathering ground.

2019 plan source: https://beirutshiftinggrounds.com/Temporal

Source: Reuters Louisa Gouliamaki 2023

2.2- Symbolism During Political and Social Movements

Martyrs square, a symbolic space in the heart of Beirut, has always had the capacity to shape a local collective. Through the ages, the square in its drastically changing forms and names, has proven to remain the people's central space of urban, social, and political reclamation. The continuous erasure of its built fabric has formed its identity and solidified its symbolism and significance. Over its 180-year history of transformation, the square has evolved from a maidan, an open field serving as an extramural meeting point and marketplace into its present form as an open junction and public space that is continuously reclaimed, re-appropriated, and re-imagined by the people. Through its shifting forms and boundaries, the square has fostered collective gatherings and the continual renewal of a hybrid local identity. Even in times of division and conflict, it has maintained its role as a unifying space, underscoring the imperative of togetherness as the fundamental social act capable of driving progress.
Referenced from Beirut Shifting Grounds. Temporal.

Pre-Civil War Symbolism (early to mid-20th century): Initially a thriving cultural hub, it was an emblem of Beirut's cosmopolitanism, literary license, and political freedom. The square gained its name from the hangings of Beirut's "original martyrs" under the Ottomans in 1915 and 1916. These individuals, many of whom were journalists, sought to end Ottoman rule and criticized city governors. Their commemoration solidified the square's connection to martyrdom. It became the ultimate destination for public demonstrations by the 1940s, indicating its role as a central space for collective expression. (Dados, 2009) The first statue commissioned for the memorial in 1930 depicted two women weeping over a martyr's grave, intended as a symbol of unity, though it was later criticized for its "avowed sectarian motif" (Khalaf, 2006). The current Martyr' Statue, inaugurated in 1960, depicts a woman holding a torch embracing a young man, with two martyrs at the base, symbolizing the struggle for freedom.

During the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990): The square was transformed into a "line of demarcation" or "green line" between Beirut's "Eastern" and "Western" sectors, losing its function as a city center. It became a place associated with fear, terror, and death, inhabited by snipers. The Martyr's Statue, bullet-riddled and war-damaged, silently bore witness to the conflict, eventually being removed for repairs and then returned with its damage visible, including one martyr having lost part of his arm. Narratives of division from this period are notably absent from current public memory, highlighting a "creative amnesia" (Sarkis, 2006).

Post-Civil War to Present: After the civil war, the statue's presence became less about the 1915-1916 Independence martyrs and more a reference to the square itself as a "martyr of the civil war". Old postcards of the undamaged square from the 1960s have become "monuments" themselves, representing a lost, imagined past that continues to "haunt Beirut's mental landscape". This reflects a desire to return to a pre-war past. The assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 and his burial nearby led to Martyr's Square again becoming a site of pilgrimage and protest, re-inscribing it with connotations of martyrdom. Martyr's Square is one of many protest sites, with locations determined by political affiliation, signifying that it is no longer the sole ultimate destination for public demonstrations as it was in the 1960s. The square's "vital void" (Sarkis, 2006) and malleable characteristics encourage "a proliferation of memory narratives that resist ownership by a single group", remaining fluid and subject to unfolding events. This fluidity allows for it to be a potential "affective site of memory" (Dados, 2009). As it is today, people still flock to it naturally whenever in a state of crisis or unrest as seen during the most recent war of 2025. People from all over the country sought shelter from the Israeli bombs and found themselves in the barren square setting up tents transforming the square into a sort of temporary safe camp ground.

Dados, Nicole. "Revisiting Martyr's Square Again: Absence and Presence In Cultural Memory." Moment to monument: the making and unmaking (2009)

Khalaf, Samir. Heart of Beirut: Reclaiming the Bourj. London: Saqi, 2006.

Sarkis, Hashim. "A Vital Void: Reconstructions of Downtown Beirut." Two Squares: Martyr's Square, Beirut, and Sirkeci Square, Istanbul. Eds. Hashim Sarkis, Mark Dwyer, Pars Kibarer. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.

2.3- The Square's Decline: Weak Public Policies and Commercialization

Martyr's Square became "Ground Zero" during the 15-year Lebanese Civil War (1975-1991), experiencing significant clashes and destruction. Ironically, this space both bisected and simultaneously connected the divided city. Following the war, a 500 meter wide area of the city center, including Martyr's Square, remained vacant, symbolizing the failure of Lebanon's social conciliation (Ragab, 2011).

The post-war rehabilitation efforts, particularly by Solidere, a private company entrusted with the reconstruction, have been heavily criticized for their commercialization and perceived neglect of the square's historical and social significance. Solidere's management approach prioritized monetary objectives, often at the expense of cultural preservation. A salient example of this commercialization was the demolition of historic buildings in Martyr's Square, which were allegedly removed because they "obstructed the view of the sea" to make way for luxury residential buildings

(Ragab, 2011). This decision highlights a disregard for the square's existing heritage in favor of more lucrative developments.

Many nationalists and urban scholars deplored the resulting loss of "heritage of memory", arguing that Solidere's vision for a "modern" Beirut facilitated this destruction. Critics questioned Solidere's commitment to genuine preservation, anticipating the negative cultural implications of their conservation approach (Ragab, 2011). As one urban scholar noted, "to pretend to protect this memory by preserving a few monuments while obliterating the context onto which they were inscribed can only diminish their real nature". The fact that "eighty percent of the old fabric of the Beirut-Downtown was devastated for no reason other than to make the project more lucrative" further underscores the commercial motivations behind the reconstruction (Irving, 2009).

The government's role, through its endorsement of Solidere, also reflects the neglect of the preservation of collective memory. The project "concretized the division of the city by ignoring the

most important elements of an urban plan aimed at national reconciliation, namely: preserving a common memory of the city, finding a tie to the past, and encouraging former occupants to return to the locations they had abandoned" (Salam, 2005). While Solidere later made efforts to preserve more buildings and respect archaeological sites, and even donated funds for religious building restorations, critics often dismissed these actions as mere "public relations exercises and an effort to co-opt religious leaders" rather than a genuine shift in approach. (Irving, 2009).

Ragab, Tarek Saad. "The Crisis of Cultural Identity in Rehabilitating Historic Beirut-Downtown." Cities, vol. 28, 2011

Irving S (2009) Lebanon's Politics of Real Estate. Electronic Lebanon. www.electroniclebanon.org.lb

Salam, A (2005) The role of government in shaping the built environment. In Projecting Beirut: Episodes in the Construction and Reconstruction of a Modern City Prestel, New York.

Martyr's Square today largely used as a parking lot
Source: Solidere.com

Ottoman ruins of the Martyr's Square
Source: Lensleb

The "green line'" dividing the city during the civil war passing through the Martyr's Square.
Source: Gizem Caner Beirut's Division (1974-1990)

Chapter 3 cover photo:

Berlin, Canelli and El Raval

Sources (from top to bottom):

https://birdinflight.com/en/architectura-2/20221226-postwar-berlin.html

http://canelli.italiavirtualtour.it/

Nicolas Vigier. 2017. El Raval, Wikimedia Commons
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:El_Raval_(36518643791).jpg

3- Comparative Case Studies

3.1- Berlin's Post-War Reconstruction

The urban reconstruction of Berlin post-WWII was a long and complex process. Early reconstruction involved further destruction by clearing ruins, shaping the city's future by erasing historical traces to create a "blank slate". Discussions on who would shape the new Berlin, including figures like Mies van der Rohe or Walter Gropius, occurred but their direct influence was limited (Bocquet). Reconstruction was influenced by pre-existing Nazi era urban planning, which had planned massive destructions and demolitions (Reichhardt and Schäche, 1984). The head of Berlin Planning in May 1945, ordered the destruction of totalitarian landmarks and aimed for a modernist master plan based on the Athens Charter. In East Berlin, reconstruction from the 1950s to 1970s was heavily influenced by Soviet ideology, rejecting Bauhaus principles and promoting a "new German architecture" that created new urban structures (Bocquet). West Berlin saw demolitions for large infrastructural programs, termed the "second destruction" by some scholars (Bodenschatz et al., 1987). Protests against destructive urban renewal from the mid-1960s, particularly from squatters, led to a shift towards "softer methods" of reconstruction. This shift toward softer methods contributed to a rediscovery of historical built heritage, paving the way for "critical reconstruction" that respected existing block and city structures (Bocquet).

Bocquet, Denis. "Urban reconstruction as a complex process: reflections on post-1945 Berlin."

Reichhardt, H. and W. Schäche. Die Zerstörung der Reichshauptstadt durch Albert Speers Neugestaltungspläne [The destruction of the imperial capital by Albert Speer's redesign plans]. Transit Buchverlag, 1984.

Bodenschatz, H., H. Claussen, K. Heil, W. Schäche, W. J. Streich, U. Dittfurth, E. Herden, S. Metz, A. Schleicher, and R. Villnow. "Nach 1945: Wiederaufbau, zweite Zerstörung und neue Tendenzen [After 1945: reconstruction, second destruction and new tendencies]." 750 Jahre Architektur und Städtebau in Berlin [750 years of architecture and urban planning in Berlin], edited by J.P. Kleihues, Hatje, 1987

The view of Berlin Cathedral in 1945. Source: Berlinische Galerie

3.2- Barcelona's El Raval Regeneration

Barcelona's El Raval neighborhood has undergone significant urban transformation since the 1980s, driven by a combination of public policies and community participation. In the mid-1980s, the city council initiated the Special Plan for Integral Reform (PERI) to address El Raval's structural deficits, such as inadequate public spaces, poor housing conditions, and high population density. This plan led to the demolition of numerous buildings to create new public spaces and the construction of social housing. The Plan for Integral Action (PAI) was launched in 1986 to further these efforts, focusing on reducing urban congestion, renewing health and welfare infrastructures, and promoting economic regeneration. A public-private partnership, PROCIVESA, was established to manage the complex program, combining administrative and operational tasks (Callejo et al., 2005). In the 2000s, the Tot Raval Foundation promoted the Community Development Plan (PDC) to foster local socio-economic regeneration while preserving the neighborhood's authenticity and cultural diversity (Artsmetric.com, 2020). Community involvement has been integral to El Raval's transformation. The CO-HAB-Raval project, for instance, involved local residents in co-designing and co-manufacturing microprojects to improve living conditions in five properties (Barcelona City Council, 2021). Neighborhood unions have developed in recent years to provide advice and support in various parts of the city. In Raval, for example, the local neighborhood union occupied an abandoned building and set up a community center. There, activists offer advice if the mortgage or rent can no longer be paid, organize food, sports activities and self-organized participation in social life. Through the collective practices, the neighbors in the district themselves become activists and thus establish a local participation infrastructure that simultaneously becomes an infrastructure for welfare provision. This type of collective problem solving is linked to having a sense of belonging to the district. This connection between participation and belonging crystallizes in the neighborhood union and points to a possible consolidation of the self-organized infrastructure (Tietje, 2025). El Raval's urban transformation reflects a complex interplay between policy-driven initiatives and grassroots community participation, aiming to revitalize the neighborhood while preserving its unique character.

Artsmetric Data and resources for cultural organizations. 2020 https://artsmetric.com/el-raval/?qsk=el%20raval

Barcelona City Council Website 2021. https://www.habitatge.barcelona/en/

Callejo, María & Walliser, Andres & Fuentes, F.J.. (2005). National and City Contexts, Urban Development Programmes and Neighbourhood Selection. The Spanish Background Report.

Tietje, Olaf. (2025) Collective solutions for individual problems: self-organised participation structures in Barcelona.

Raval Streets Source: www.oh-barcelona.com

3.3- Community action and planning in the town of Canelli

In 2007 public outrage in Canelli; a small town in Piedmont erupted over rapid urban expansion and the removal of 100 plane trees. This led the mayor to involve planning experts from Politecnico di Torino and local stakeholders in revising the town's master plan. The planning process evolved into a participatory model, incorporating community voices. The Politecnico team used visual tools to discuss urban revitalization, greenways, traffic management, and reuse of industrial areas. The mayor became a symbol of open, community-led governance. His successor maintained the participatory approach, focusing on regenerating the town center through inclusive design. The result was the "urban living room" project, developed with input from residents, businesses, and even children which successfully revitalized Piazza Cavour. Despite criticism during construction, the project was hailed as a model of participatory planning, achieving significant urban transformation in five years. (Gallent and Ciaffi, 2014)

Gallent, Nick, and Daniela Ciaffi, editors. Community Action and Planning: Contexts, Drivers and Outcomes. Policy Press, 2014 (pages 209-214)

Piazza Cavour Canelli. Source: Michele Vacchiano 2013

3.4- Strategies that could be used in Martyr's Square Regeneration

Based on the case studies of Berlin, Barcelona's El Raval, and Canelli, the urban regeneration of Beirut's Martyr's Square can draw the following key lessons:

1- Embrace Historical Continuity in Reconstruction
(From Berlin)
Avoid "blank slate" approaches that erase historical memory. Instead, engage in reconstruction that respects and reintegrates existing urban fabrics and heritage. Rather than continuing Solidere's top-down tabula rasa redevelopment, future regeneration should reconnect with the history of Martyr's Square, restoring symbolic structures and urban patterns that reflect Beirut's identity.

2- Prioritize Equitable Urban Interventions
(From El Raval, Barcelona)
Urban regeneration should address social, economic, and housing inequalities. Projects like the PERI and PAI integrated social housing, health infrastructure, and public space improvements. Martyr's Square regeneration should include affordable housing, social amenities, and inclusive economic opportunities, making it a symbolic and accessible one space.

3- Balance Between Policy and Grassroot Involvement
(From Barcelona)
Regeneration should not be purely state-led or NGO-driven, but a collaborative effort across institutions, communities, and urban professionals, working together to produce the future of the square.

4- Long-Term Grassroots Participation
(From El Raval and Canelli)
Lasting transformation requires institutional and empowered community involvement. Neighborhood unions, co-designed projects, and public participation are what shaped Raval's and Canelli's success. Local grassroots organizations should be central to the planning and design process for example, those that were active post-Beirut blast. Establishing permanent participatory infrastructures like citizen assemblies or co-design labs could build trust and a collective spirit of ownership.

5- Public Space to Promote Social Cohesion
(From All Three)
Public spaces can serve as "urban living rooms" or self-managed welfare infrastructures, as seen in Canelli and Raval. Martyr's Square should be reclaimed not just physically but socially and symbolically, becoming a platform for civic life, solidarity, and public expression.

Chapter 4 cover photo:

Robert Saliba's Mental Imaging of Downtown Beirut, synthesis map for all age groups. Mental image of the Beirut Central Business District, is based on a design studio that Robert Saliba coordinated in the then Department of Architecture at the American University of Beirut in 1990.

Source:

Saliba, Robert, and American University of Beirut, Department of Architecture. Morphological Investigation of Downtown Beirut: Towards an Urban Design Framework. Part 1, American University of Beirut, 1991.

MORPHOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF DOWNTOWN BEIRUT
TOWARDS AN URBAN DESIGN FRAMEWORK بيروت

4- Historical Evolution of Urban Planning in Beirut
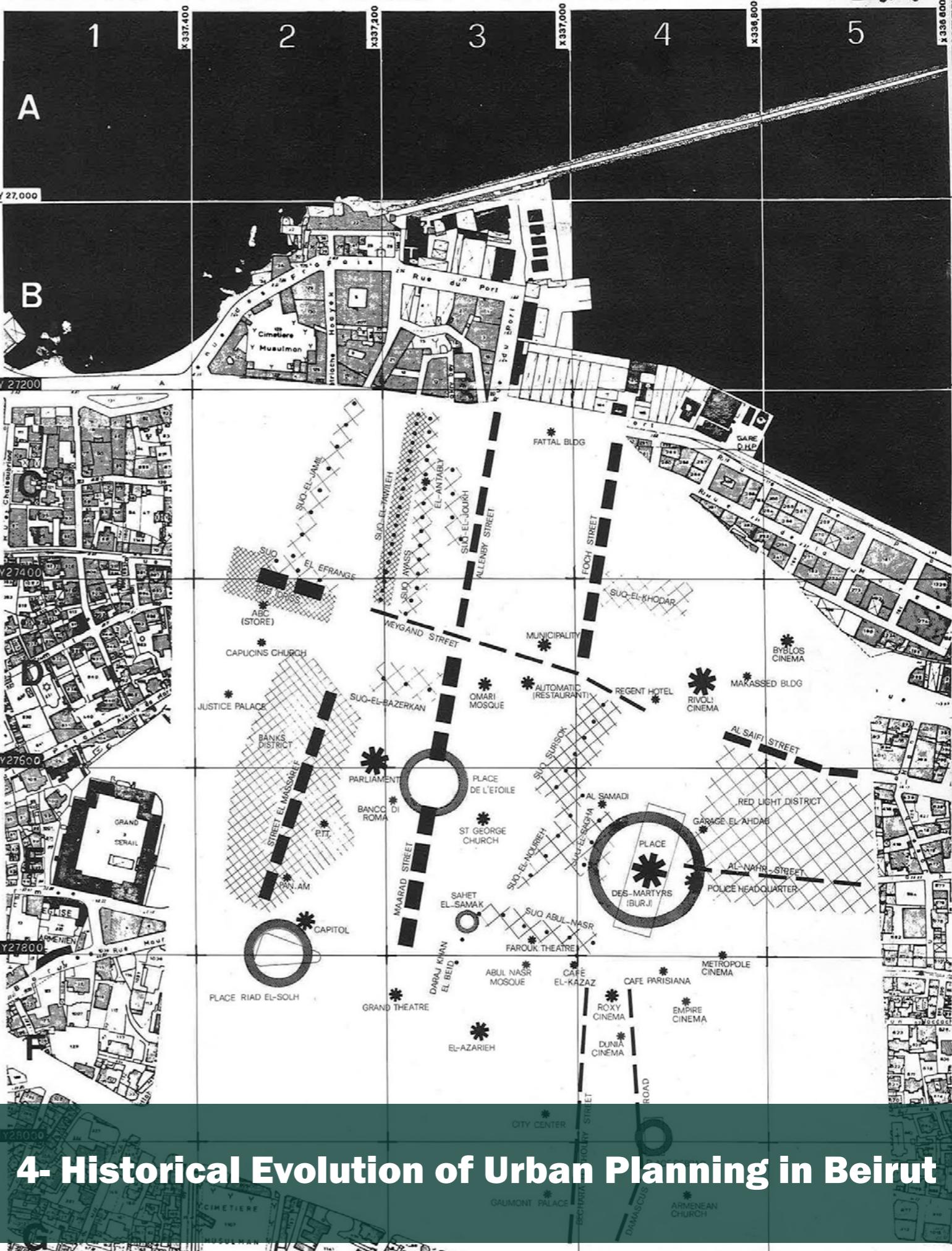
4.1- Three Stages of Urban Planning in Lebanon

Assem Salam (1924 - 2012) was a prominent Lebanese architect, urban planner, and public intellectual known for his influential role in shaping modern architecture and urban policy in Lebanon. A graduate of the University of Cambridge, Salam combined architectural practice with a deep engagement in public affairs, serving on various governmental and planning bodies. He was a vocal advocate for preserving Beirut's cultural and urban identity amidst rapid modernization and post-war reconstruction. Through his book "Reconstruction and the Public Interest", he critiqued the privatization of urban planning and emphasized the importance of public interest and community participation in rebuilding efforts. He details three stages of urban planning in Lebanon: Pre-Colonial and colonial urbanism, post-colonial independence and national planning, post-war urbanism and neoliberal influence.

Stage One:
1943 - 1958 Independence and French Mandate Influence

This stage was marked by weak administrative institutions inherited from the French mandate. These institutions lacked clear frameworks for accountability and were based on loyalty to colonial authority. Under Presidents Khoury and Chamoun, they remained ineffective, failing to keep up with a rapidly growing private sector. Rather than serving the public or protecting state interests, the institutions primarily served the ruling elites' personal agendas.

Stage Two:
1958 - 1964 Chehabist Reforms and Establishment of Higher Council of Urban Planning

The era of Chehabist reforms, during which the foundations of the modern Lebanese state were laid, was the first serious attempt at administrative reform, establishing the structure, hierarchy, and accountability mechanisms of public administration. Key institutions such as the Council of Public Administration, Central Inspection Agency, Public Audit Agency, Institute of Public Administration, Central Bank, and Social Security system were created. Concerning urban development, this period saw the introduction of Lebanon's first urban planning legislation. Bodies like the Higher Council for Urban Planning and the General Directorate for Town Planning were founded, while the IRFED Mission conducted a comprehensive survey of national resources and development needs. Sectorial five-year plans were introduced, and the Conseil Exécutif des Grands Projets was tasked with executing major infrastructure projects. Modest public housing initiatives were also undertaken. The state began reclaiming malfunctioning concessions from the private sector and took on the responsibility of building vital infrastructure in transport, energy, and water. For the first time, Lebanon had the tools and institutions necessary for effective administration and sustainable development. However, these promising structures quickly began to show signs of dysfunction, not due to flaws in their design, but because the reforms failed to address Lebanon's deeper political issues. The political system remained untouched, and soon the administration itself was undermined by politicization, confessionalism, and favoritism, which eroded its efficiency and credibility

Stage Three:
1975 - 1990 Civil war and the Creation of Council for Development and Reconstruction CDR Ultimately Leading to Privatization
The outbreak of the civil war revealed an administration too weak to shoulder the burdens of reconstruction. In the brief moment of recovery following the first two years of conflict, the Sarkis regime established the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR), a body empowered to circumvent bureaucratic inertia and deliver swift, efficient results reminiscent of the private sector. Designed to support, not replace, existing institutions, the CDR was tasked with streamlining development and assisting public agencies in overcoming institutional paralysis. In its early years, the CDR remained cautious not to evolve into a parallel state. It focused on planning, securing funds, and intervening only when other agencies proved incapable. However, the prolonged war continued to erode public institutions, and the CDR itself began to mirror the fractured nature of the nation. For nearly five years, Lebanon was governed by two parallel administrations, each answering to different political authorities. The 1990 Taif Accord marked a turning point, restoring centralized political authority. Yet the damage inflicted by sixteen years of conflict left behind a hollowed out administration; ineffective, fragmented, and marred by sectarian divisions. Basic services like water, electricity, and telecommunications were increasingly managed through private initiatives or informal networks, exposing the alarming retreat of state institutions. This vacuum paved the way for unchecked privatization, which now threatens the very essence of the state. The aggressive encroachment of the private sector, in the absence of strong public oversight, risks transforming public governance into a marketplace dictated by profit rather than public interest. Privatization, when pursued without institutional strength, becomes a perilous course, one that must be resisted until the state is equipped to define policy, oversee implementation, and engage the private sector from a position of authority. The delegation of Beirut's Central Business District redevelopment to the CDR exemplifies the dangers of such abdication. Handing over one of the country's most critical postwar projects to a private developer whose trusted associate was appointed to head the CDR and whose firm acts as its in-house consultant, sends a troubling message. It signals a broader governmental tendency to relinquish control over national reconstruction, setting a precedent that could shape future schemes with similar opacity and imbalance.

Salam, Assem. Reconstruction and the Public Interest - In Architecture and the City. Dar Al Jadeed, 1995, p. 150 - 153.

4.2- Colonial Planning: Imported and Exported Urbanism

Colonial Planning

Beirut's colonial planning unfolded in two distinct phases: the late-Ottoman period (1830s - 1910s) and the French Mandate period (1920s - 1930s). During Ottoman rule, Beirut's modernization followed Western planning models initially applied in Istanbul and later adapted to provincial capitals like Beirut and Cairo. This process, part of the Tanzimat reforms, introduced modern building regulations and infrastructure improvements. Under the French Mandate, urban planning shifted to a Beaux-Arts/Haussmannian approach, replacing Beirut's medieval fabric with wide boulevards and monumental squares. Unlike other colonial cities where old and new areas coexisted, Beirut's transformation involved replacing its historic core entirely. This erasure is a crucial factor in shaping the city's modern identity (Saliba, 2001).

Contemporary Trends and Manifestations Resulting from Colonial Planning

Since the 1980s, a new generation of historians in Lebanon has critically examined colonial planning, focusing on early twentieth-century developments to better understand Beirut's urban evolution. Unlike earlier approaches that primarily assessed the physical impact of colonial planning on the city's modern landscape, these historians have adopted a broader perspective, analyzing the ideologies and processes that shaped colonial urbanism. This shift is linked to growing skepticism toward modernist planning, which emphasized state-led initiatives, and the rise of new perspectives advocating for decentralization and participatory planning. As a result, researchers have explored whether colonial planning was solely imposed by governing authorities or if it involved negotiations with local stakeholders. A notable example of this new historical approach was the 1998 "Imported - Exported Urbanism" symposium at the American University of Beirut (AUB), which highlighted fresh perspectives on urban history. Some scholars argued that the French, in designing Place de L'Etoile, engaged in negotiations with wealthy landowners and religious institutions, leading to modifications in the original radial plan. The 1931 Danger Plan illustrates this partial implementation, with adjustments made to accommodate existing religious sites and economic priorities such as upgrading Beirut's port to compete with Haifa. This case demonstrates that colonial planning in Beirut was not a unilateral imposition but involved local negotiations. Historically, Beirut's urban development has resisted rigid planning models due to its complex mercantile and sectarian dynamics. Unlike cities such as Cairo, Alexandria, or Damascus, where colonial urban strategies were more effectively applied, Beirut's fragmented governance and sociopolitical structure have led to persistent planning challenges. This resistance to structured urban planning has contributed to a state of "planning chaos," shaping the city's modern development struggles.

Addressing the Destruction of Beirut's Colonial Heritage

One of the most controversial urban changes in Beirut has been the demolition of colonial-era buildings, particularly on the periphery of the Central District. Many of these structures are being replaced with high-rise developments that capitalize on pre-war zoning regulations allowing for high built-up area ratios. The surge in land and real estate values, driven by the reconstruction of Beirut's Central Business District to international standards, has further incentivized these large-scale projects. In response to the ongoing loss of colonial heritage, new conservation efforts have emerged, including academic research and practical interventions. Since the 1990s, extensive studies and surveys have documented Lebanon's colonial architecture and urban planning. These initiatives aim to integrate the colonial period into the country's national heritage narrative, though resistance to fully acknowledging this legacy remains.

Al-Asad, M., & Musa, M., in association with Saliba, R. (2001). Emerging trends in urbanism: The Beirut post-war experience. Center for the Study of the Built Environment. www.csbe.org/material-on-water-conservation-1-1

4.3- Key Urban Plans and Their Impact

1930 Danger Plan

The 1932 Danger Plan, developed by French urban planners René and Raymond Danger, marked Beirut's first comprehensive urban planning initiative under the French Mandate. French colonial cities became a field of experimentation for planners. This plan was known as Société des Plans Regulateurs des Villes or Danger Frères et Fils. The plan dealt not only with downtown Beirut but also with the Beirut Municipality in its entirety. The project was not fully implemented, except for a few sections of lanes and the circular boulevard (Lorens et al., 2022) The urban planning approach advocated by the Danger Plan allowed for the strengthening of the hygienic approach to urban space. This began the debate about the relationship between design and regulations (Hanna, 2020). The Danger Plan's is a foundational attempt at structured urban planning in Beirut, setting a precedent for future initiatives, even as it highlighted the difficulties of imposing top-down planning models in a city characterized by diverse communities and interests.

Hanna, N. (2020). Construction, destruction, reconstruction: Historique des plans et projets pour le centreville de Beyrouth [History of plans and projects for the city center of Beirut] [Unpublished Master's thesis]. Université Libre de Bruxelles.

Lorens, Piotr, Dorota Wojtowicz, Jankowska, and Bahaa Bou Kalfouni. "Redesigning Informal Beirut: Shaping the Sustainable Transformation Strategies." Urban Planning, vol. 7, no. 1, 2022. Cogitatio Press

The development, embellishment, and extension plan of Beirut by SPRV, Cabinet Danger Frères et Fils, 1932. Source: Hanna (2020, p. 40)

1940 Ecochard Plan

In contrast to Danger's 1930 plan which emphasized "urbanism of continuity", Ecochard offered a visionary plan identifying extension lines and major axes overlooking the city's urban fabric. Ecochard's plan was military in nature as it aimed to facilitate the liaison with other port towns, Tripoli and Sidon. However, this plan met limited success. (Ragab,2011) The plan faced criticisms for its top-down approach, which overlooked Beirut's complex social and sectarian fabric. Scholars argue that Ecochard's interventions, while modernizing, did not fully account for the city's socio-political divisions, potentially exacerbating sectarian tensions. (Khodr, 2017) The implementation of the Ecochard Plan was limited and often compromised. Many of its ambitious proposals were not fully executed, leading to a fragmented urban development that sometimes conflicted with the city's historical and cultural identity (Speetjens,2012). While the 1940 Ecochard Plan introduced modernist ideas to Beirut's urban development and contributed to the city's infrastructure, it also faced criticisms for insufficient consideration of Beirut's social complexities and for its incomplete implementation (Khodr, 2017). It may be the first instance in which urban planning in Beirut was overtly shaped by the interests of a capital-driven real estate developer. It is also the plan that first introduced the "ring" boulevard which would eventually be the Fouad Chehab Bridge that divides the city center from its surrounding neighborhoods.

Ragab, Tarek. The crisis of cultural identity in rehabilitating historic Beirut-downtown, Cities, Volume 28, Issue 1, (2011)

Khodr, Ali, Planning a sectarian topography : revisiting Michel Ecochard's master plans for Beirut between 1941-1964. (2017) http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/111541

Peter Speetjens (2012), Michel Ecochard's Broken Beirut Dream, Lebanon. https://peterspeetjens.com/2012/05/11/michel-ecochards-broken-beirut-dream/

1954 Masterplan

The 1954 plan focused on a street network, including a coastal highway linking the north and south, echoing Ecochard's earlier vision. Archival analysis suggests its major roadways were imposed onto the urban fabric in a Haussmann-like manner, with little sensitivity to existing structures (El-Hibri, 2009). Unlike the Ecochard plan, it failed to consider Beirut within its broader regional context (Saliba, 2000).

Saliba, Robert. In association with Al-Asad, Mohammad, and Majd Musa. Emerging Trends in Urbanism: The Beirut Post-War Experience: An Essay on a Presentation Made by Robert Saliba to Diwan al-Mimar on April 20, 2000. https://www.csbe.org/material-on-water-conservation-1-1

El-Hibri, Hatim. "Mapping Beirut: Toward a History of the Translation of Space from the French Mandate through the Civil War (1920 - 91)." Arab World Geographer (2009)

Major traffic lanes and zoning for Beirut and its suburbs by Michel Ecochard, 1943. Source: Hanna (2020, p. 44).
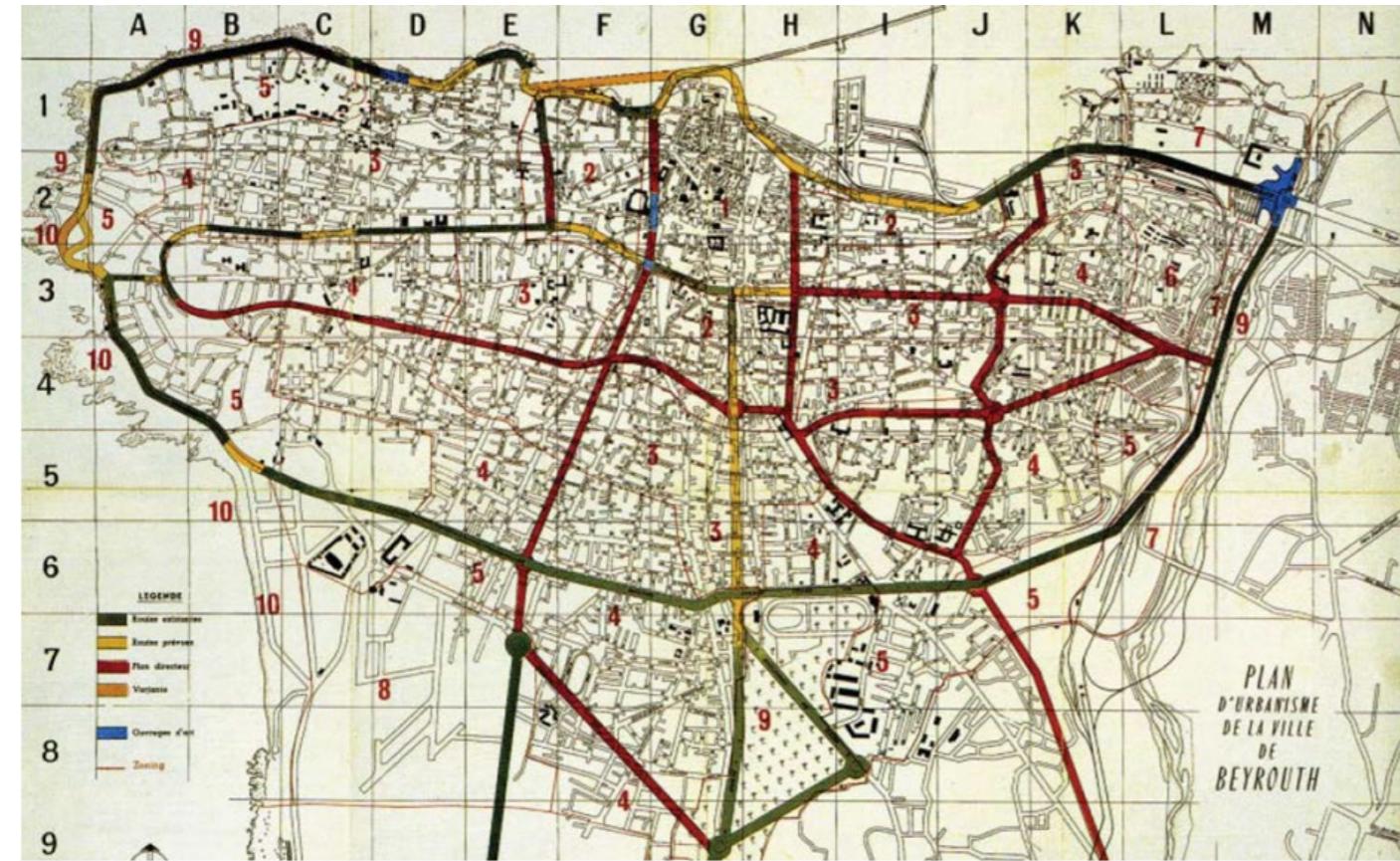
Source: Tabit, Jad, Marlène Ghorayeb, Eric Huybrechts, and Eric Verdeil. Beyrouth. Paris: Institut Français d'Architecture, 2001.

1960 Chehabist Planning

The Chehabist period saw the first attempts at creating an administrative structure dedicated towards urban planning. President Fouad Chehab's leadership embarked on significant urban reforms and social planning initiatives aimed at fostering balanced development and addressing regional disparities (Verdeil, 2008). Central to these efforts was the collaboration with the French research institute IRFED (Institut de Recherche et de Formation en vue du Développement), which conducted comprehensive studies to identify the nation's needs and inform policy decisions (Krijnen, 2021). Additionally, administrative bodies like the General Directorate of Urban Planning and the Central Inspection Bureau were created to oversee urban development and curb corruption (El Chamaa, 2022). Despite these ambitious initiatives, the Chehabist planning efforts faced notable criticism. Many of the proposed projects, such as public housing and new town developments, were only partially implemented or abandoned due to shifts in political power and financial constraints following regional crises like the one in 1967 (Nasr, Verdeil, 2008). Private capital continued to favor Beirut, leading to uneven development and exacerbating urban-rural divides.

Verdeil, Eric. "State Development Policy and Specialised Engineers: The Case of Urban Planners in Post-War Lebanon.", 2008

Marieke, Krijnen.The urban transformation of Beirut: an investigation into the movement of capital, (Page 85-117), 2021

El Chamaa, Mohamad. "Fouad Chehab's Forgotten Plans for Beirut and Its City Center." L'Orient Today, 2022

Nasr, Joe & Verdeil, Eric. (2008). The Reconstructions of Beirut.

Map of business districts embedded in proposed highway scheme. Soource: OLJ Archives 1965

1977 CDR Plan

Amid the Lebanese Civil War, the Lebanese government established the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) through Decree No. 5 on January 31. The CDR was tasked with formulating and scheduling reconstruction and development plans, securing funding for proposed projects, and supervising their execution. The CDR commissioned the French organization Atelier Parisien d'Urbanisme (APUR) to develop a reconstruction plan for Beirut's central district. This plan aimed to rebuild the downtown area by preserving its traditional Mediterranean and Oriental urban fabric while enhancing infrastructure. However, the resurgence of conflict prevented the implementation of this plan. The CDR's efforts in 1977 marked an early attempt at organized reconstruction during the ongoing civil war, highlighting the challenges of implementing development plans amid persistent instability. (Nardella,Abbas).

Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR). "About CDR." CDR Official Website
Monthly Magazine. "CDR After 40 Years: USD 11 Billion of Projects." Monthly Magazine, 2021
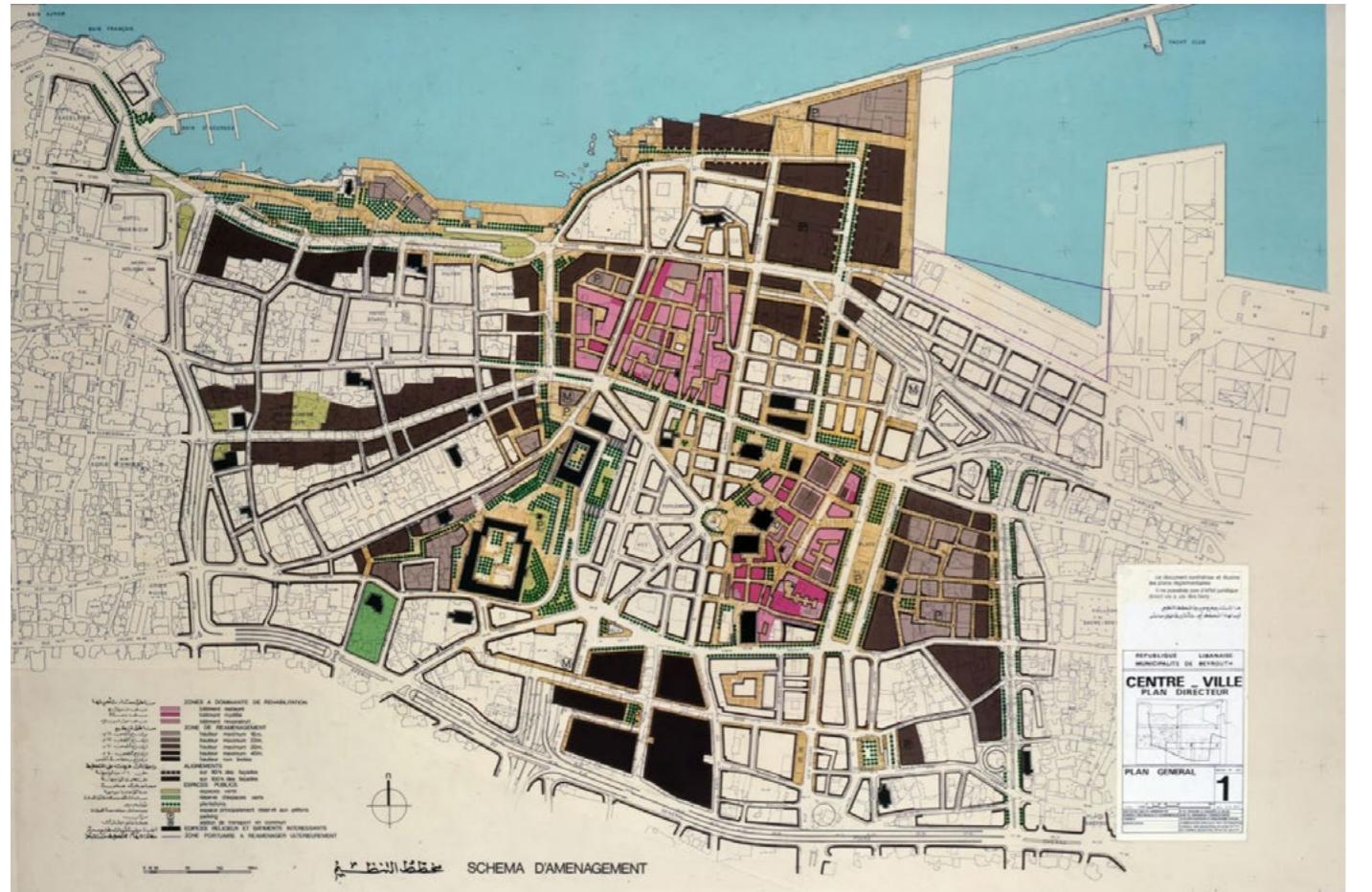
APUR Plan for Beirut 1977
Suorce: https://50ans.apur.org/fr/home/1967-1977/beyrouth-phnom-penh-rio-de-janeiro-1312.html

Nardella,Bianca and Abbas,Yasmine. Conservation and reconstruction in the Beirut Central District. https://web.mit.edu/akpia/www/AKPsite/4.239/beruit/beirut.html

1983 Oger Plan

In 1983 a private engineering firm, Oger Liban, owned by Rafiq Hariri, commissioned a master plan for the reconstruction to the consultancy group Dar al-Handasah. At the same time demolitions, without any control, started in central areas that were called for rehabilitation in the 1977 plan. As a result, some of the most significative parts of the urban fabric, such as the traditional souks, were erased. (Nardella,Abbas) The Oger Plan faced several criticisms. Firstly, the demolitions carried out under the guise of reconstruction led to the destruction of culturally and historically significant structures, such as the traditional souks, which were integral to Beirut's heritage. Secondly, the plan was developed with limited public transparency and minimal involvement from local communities, raising concerns about the inclusivity and representativeness of the proposed developments. Critics argued that such an approach prioritized commercial interests over the needs and desires of Beirut's residents. Additionally, the reliance on a private firm for urban planning responsibilities traditionally managed by public institutions sparked debates about the privatization of urban development and the potential marginalization of public interest in favor of private profit. (Kabbani,1992)

Nardella, Bianca and Abbas, Yasmine. Conservation and reconstruction in the Beirut Central District. https://web.mit.edu/akpia/www/AKPsite/4.239/beruit/beirut.html

Kabbani, Oussama. "The Reconstruction of Beirut." Centre for Lebanese Studies, https://lebanesestudies.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/903771b6.-The-Reconstruction-of-Beirut-Oussama-Kabbani.pdf.

Beiruts central district before the civil war. Source: Plan "La ville oubliee," URBAMA, BEYROUTH, REGARDS CROISES, 1997
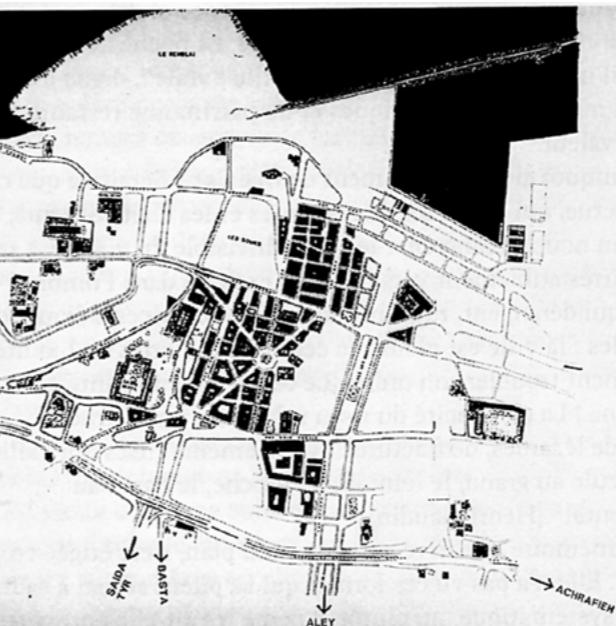
Beiruts central district after the demolitions. Source: Plan "La ville purifiee," URBAMA, BEYROUTH, REGARDS CROISES, 1997

1991 Solidere Plan

In 1991, following the end of the Lebanese Civil War, the Lebanese government established the Société Libanaise pour le Développement et la Reconstruction du Centre-Ville de Beyrouth (Solidere) to oversee the reconstruction of Beirut's Central District. Solidere was granted expropriation rights over approximately 150 hectares in the city center, a decision that was unprecedented in Lebanese development history and sparked significant controversy (Mango,2004). The establishment of Solidere was formalized through legislative measures, notably Law 117 enacted on December 7, 1991, which enabled the creation of a private company to manage and execute the reconstruction plan. This law facilitated the transfer of landownership to Solidere, granting it substantial control over the redevelopment process (Larkin, 2009). The government's decision to delegate such extensive powers to a private entity was driven by the urgency to rebuild and attract investment but was also met with criticism regarding its implications for public accountability and transparency (Boano, 2010). Solidere's reconstruction efforts led to the transformation of Beirut's Central District into a modern commercial hub, attracting international businesses and investors. The development introduced contemporary architectural designs and infrastructure improvements, reshaping the city's skyline and economic landscape. Proponents argue that Solidere played a pivotal role in revitalizing the war-torn city center, contributing to Lebanon's post-war recovery (Nardella,Abbas). Critics contend that Solidere's approach prioritized commercial interests over the preservation of Beirut's historical and cultural heritage. The extensive redevelopment led to the demolition of significant portions of the old downtown, including traditional souks and historic buildings, replacing them with modern structures that some viewed as lacking local character. This transformation sparked debates about the loss of collective memory and identity associated with the city's original urban fabric (Van Pinxteren, 2012). Additionally, the privatization of the reconstruction process raised concerns about social equity, as the developments primarily catered to affluent residents and tourists, potentially marginalizing lower-income communities.

Mango, Tamam. "Solidere: The Battle for Beirut's Central District." Massachusetts Institute of Technology, http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/30107. 2004

Larkin, C (2009) Reconstructing and Deconstructing Beirut: Space, Memory and Lebanese Youth, University of Exeter, working paper.

Boano, Camillo (2010). The Recovery of Beirut in the Aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War: the Value of Urban Design.

Nardella,Bianca and Abbas,Yasmine. Conservation and reconstruction in the Beirut Central District. https://web.mit.edu/akpia/www/AKPsite/4.239/beruit/beirut.html

Van Pinxteren,Elsien. (2012). "Beirut's Makeover – The Meaning of 'Solidere' 15 Years Later." Asfar, https://asfar.org.uk/beiruts-make-over-the-meaning-of-solidere-15-years-later/.

2002 National Physical Master Plan

The National Physical Master Plan of the Lebanese Territory (NPMPLT), finalized in 2005 aimed to guide Lebanon's spatial development by addressing physical constraints and future economic and social challenges. The plan emphasized balanced development, rational resource use, and environmental protection. It proposed strategic land-use zones, including urban regions, mixed rural areas, and natural sites of national interest, and identified critical environmental pressures. The NPMPLT's implementation involved collaboration among central government bodies, local municipalities, academic institutions, and non-profit organizations. A Geographic Information System (GIS) and an Atlas encompassing around 50 thematic map layers were developed to support planning and decision-making. The plan's recommendations covered sectors such as transportation, tourism, industry, agriculture, education, environment, and urban planning (CDR, 2005). Despite its comprehensive framework, the NPMPLT faced several challenges such as the ongoing political crises since 2005 hindered effective coordination and implementation of the plan, leading to fragmented territorial governance (Verdeil, 2019).

Lebanese Council for Development and Reconstruction. "National Physical Master Plan of the Lebanese Territory Final Report." Lebanese Council for Development and Reconstruction, December 2005.

Verdeil, Eric, et al., editors. Atlas of Lebanon. Presses de l'Ifpo, Conseil National de la Recherche scientifique, Part 7 page 104-105, 2019. https://doi.org/10.4000/books.ifpo.13178.

Chapter 5 cover photo sources (from top to bottom): Ratib Al Safadi Anadolu Agency Getty Images, https://www.cdr.gov.lb/, https://www.nna-leb.gov.lb/.

Solidere Masterplan Source: Solidere Annual report 2005

5- Current State of Urban Planning in Beirut

5.1- Urban planning and Implementation in Beirut

1- National legal and planning framework

Urban planning in Lebanon is legally based on Legislative Decree No. 69 of 1983, which defines how urban plans and regulations are prepared and approved. Under this law, general and detailed master plans are drafted by the General Directorate of Urban Planning (GDUP, often called DGU) within the Ministry of Public Works and Transport. The draft plans are then submitted to the Higher Council for Urban Planning (HCUP), and after HCUP's decision they must be ratified by the Council of Ministers for them to become legally binding. (Public Works Studio 2018) The National Physical Master Plan of the Lebanese Territory, known as SDATL or NPMPLT, was adopted by Decree 2366 of 2009 and serves as the general national framework for territorial and urban planning. This national master plan is binding on ministries, public institutions and municipalities in all work related to land use and construction, at least in principle. (Public Works Studio 2022)

2- Main national urban planning bodies that affect Beirut

A UN-Habitat and GLTN (Global Land Tool Network) legal review notes that planning matters in Lebanon are handled by several overlapping central agencies, particularly the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR), the Directorate General of Urbanism (DGU or GDUP), the Higher Council for Urban Planning (HCUP), and in some cases municipalities.(Diab GLTN) The Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) is a national governmental body created in 1977 that became the main agency in charge of post-war reconstruction and major infrastructure across Lebanon, including Beirut. According to CDR's official website, CDR is responsible for preparing reconstruction and development plans, securing financing, and supervising implementation and operation of most public projects on behalf of the Government of Lebanon. (CDR) A World Bank-cited study and UN-Habitat material state that CDR also prepared the National Physical Master Plan of the Lebanese Territory (SDATL/NPMPLT), which guides spatial development including for Beirut. (UN-Habitat NUP report) The GDUP (DGU) prepares most general and detailed

master plans and planning regulations, often on its own initiative, before these are reviewed by HCUP and the Council of Ministers. (Public Works Studio 2018) HCUP issues decisions that can temporarily set building conditions and planning rules, and these decisions are binding for building permits for up to three years while awaiting a formal decree. (Public Works Studio 2018) In practice, this centralised system means that major urban projects in Beirut, especially large infrastructure and national-scale developments, are planned and contracted at the national level by CDR and relevant ministries rather than by the municipality alone. (Diab GLTN)

3- Municipal level, Municipality of Beirut

Lebanese municipalities are governed by Decree-Law 118 of 1977 (Municipal Act), which defines municipalities as local administrations with legal personality and financial and administrative independence within the powers granted by law. (Abi Haidar 2019) Decree-Law 118 grants municipal councils formal decision-making authority at local level, with elected councils responsible for local policies and budgets. (Municipal Act 1977) A recent policy paper on municipalities explains that municipal jurisdiction includes land zoning, local roads, waste management, electricity at local scale, local development projects, health infrastructure, water and sanitation, local transport, and public spaces such as gardens. The same study notes that many of these policy areas that are supposed to be municipal are in practice also managed by ministries, with ministries taking the main decision-making role while municipalities often only implement projects. For Beirut specifically, the Municipality of Beirut is a single municipality that covers only a small part of the larger Greater Beirut urban area, which obliges it to coordinate with surrounding municipalities for networks such as water. (Ray Alex 2023) Because of this limited territorial coverage and heavy central oversight, the Municipality of Beirut often implements relatively small-scale works such as street cleaning, minor road surfacing, local lighting and drainage, while large or strategic urban projects typically need approval and financing from higher levels of government. (UN-Habitat Lebanon and ESCWA 2021)

4- Beirut Central District and Solidere

Beirut's central business district (Beirut Central District) was treated as an exceptional case after the civil war, with reconstruction delegated to a private joint-stock company called Solidere. (Nardella) Solidere s.a.l. is described as "the Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut Central District" and is in charge of planning and redeveloping the Beirut Central District area after the war. Law 117 of 1991 established the legal framework for such real-estate companies and allowed the creation of Solidere to reconstruct the city centre, granting it special powers of compulsory purchase and regulatory authority within its area. (The Monthly Magazine) Solidere's articles of incorporation specify that its purpose includes preparing and reconstructing the area where its real-estate properties are located in accordance with an approved plan and layout, and executing infrastructure, roads, and public spaces within that zone. (Solidere) In this central district, Solidere has therefore functioned as the main implementing body for urban projects, under special agreements with CDR and the central government. (Randall 2014)

5- Who actually implements urban projects in Beirut?

A World Bank-cited article and several academic studies agree that CDR is engaged in all stages of public project implementation across Lebanon, including planning, feasibility, detailed design, tendering, expropriation, execution and sometimes operation of facilities on behalf of the Government. (CDR official) A review of planning practice notes that urban and regional infrastructure networks are typically undertaken by CDR together with the Ministry of Public Works, with minimal cooperation from local authorities that lack financial and technical resources. (Makhzoumi et al. 2018) The Badil policy paper states that, until recently, most development projects in Lebanon were carried out by the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities and CDR using funds from the Independent Municipal Fund and external loans or grants. (Ray Alex 2023) For projects that are clearly municipal in scale, the Municipality of Beirut acts as the implementing authority, but these projects are constrained by central oversight, limited fiscal autonomy and the fact that parliamentary approval is still required for large municipal development

projects. (Ray Alex 2023) In the specific area of Beirut Central District, Solidere is the primary implementer of urban redevelopment under its special mandate, while CDR and the government retain overarching supervisory and regulatory roles. (Solidere) In summary, urban projects in Beirut are implemented by a mix of actors: CDR and relevant ministries for most large infrastructure and reconstruction projects, the Municipality of Beirut for local and small-scale works inside its boundaries, and Solidere for redevelopment inside Beirut Central District, all operating within a planning framework designed by GDUP and HCUP and constrained by national laws such as Decree-Law 118/1977 and Decree 2366/2009.

Public Works Studio. The General Directorate of Urban Planning: Senseless Practice Between the National Master Plan, General Master Plans, Exceptions, and Decisions. Monica Basbous, Abir Saksouk, and Nadine Bekdache, 2022, https://mypr.es/wp-content/uploads/sites/102/2022/07/The-General-Directorate-of-Urban-Planning.pdf

Public Works Studio. "The Legislative Framework for Urban Planning: No Voice for the People." Jadaliyya, 8 Oct. 2018, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/38062

Diab, Razi. Legislative and Administrative Land and Property Rights Framework: Lebanon. United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), 2024, https://gltn.net/sites/default/files/2025-07/Legislative-land-and-property-rights-framework_Lebanon.pdf

https://www.cdr.gov.lb

UN-Habitat. National Urban Policies Programme in Lebanon: Diagnosis Report. July 2019. UN-Habitat, https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/documents/2019-07/nup-report_design.pdf

Abi Haidar, Christina. Public Private Partnerships in Lebanon Municipalities: Types, History, Uses, Opportunities, Challenges. 2019, https://c2e2.unepccc.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/01/public-private-partnerships-in-lebanon-municipalities.pdf

Municipal Act (Decree-law no. 118, 30 June 1977). "Municipal Law in Lebanon (English)." 2001 (or date listed in the PDF), mail.bishmizzine.hicmedia.com, https://mail.bishmizzine.hicmedia.com/system/files/inline-files/municipal-law-in-lebanon-eng_1.pdf

Ray, Alex. Crushed Ballot: Ending the Suppression of Lebanon's Municipalities. May 2023, The Badil, https://thebadil.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Crushed-Ballot-Ending-the-Suppression-of-Lebanons-Municipalities.pdf

UN-Habitat Lebanon and ESCWA. State of the Lebanese Cities 2021: Governing Sustainable Cities Beyond Municipal Boundaries. UN-Habitat Lebanon, 2021, https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/event/materials/un-habitat_escwa_state_of_the_lebanese_cities_2021_web.pdf

Nardella, Bianca and Abbas, Yasmine. Conservation and reconstruction in the Beirut Central District. https://web.mit.edu/akpia/www/AKPsite/4.239/beruit/beirut.html

https://monthlymagazine.com/en/article/647/solidere-marks-its-21st-anniversary

https://www.solidere.com/sites/default/files/attached/solidere_articles_of_incorporation.pdf

Randall, Edward. Reconstruction and Fragmentation in Beirut. Divided Cities/Contested States Working Paper No. 29, 2014, Conflict in Cities and the Contested State Programme, https://www.urbanconflicts.arct.cam.ac.uk/system/files/documents/working-paper-29-edward-randall.pdf

https://www.cdr.gov.lb/en-US/About-CDR.aspx

Makhzoumi, Jala, and Salwa Al-Sabbagh. "Landscape and Urban Governance: Participatory Planning of the Public Realm in Saida, Lebanon." Land, vol. 7, no. 2, 2018, article 48, https://doi.org/10.3390/land7020048

5.2- Post Blast Beirut: Urban Impact, Grassroots Mobilization, and Institutional Response

On August 4, 2020, the explosion at the Port of Beirut had profound effects on the city's Central District, causing extensive physical damage and displacing numerous residents. The blast resulted in over 200 deaths, approximately 6,000 injuries, and left around 300,000 people homeless. It caused significant structural damage to buildings within a 20-kilometer radius of the port, with neighborhoods such as Ashrafieh, Gemmayzeh, Marfa, and Mar Mikhael among the most affected. Critical infrastructure, including hospitals and schools, was also severely impacted. In the immediate aftermath, both local and international organizations mobilized to provide emergency relief and assess the structural integrity of buildings. Groups such as the Lebanese Red Cross conducted rapid damage assessments and offered medical assistance, while community-based initiatives like Nation Station supported displaced residents with food, shelter, and aid. These grassroots efforts played a vital role in addressing urgent needs and facilitating recovery. Between March and September 2021, Beirut Urban Lab researchers identified around 80 national and international NGOs involved in shelter repair efforts within the severely affected neighborhoods. These organizations, ranging from long-established entities to newly formed coalitions, are visualized as distinct layers in a recent mapping output published on the Beirut Urban Observatory. An initial reading of the data reveals that NGOs largely led the post-blast response at the neighborhood scale, reflecting a highly decentralized and grassroots-driven recovery process (Beirut Urban Lab, 2020; 2021). In the years following the explosion, Beirut's Central District has experienced a complex interplay of reconstruction and stagnation. While some areas have seen rebuilding efforts, persistent challenges such as political instability, economic crisis, and lack of institutional accountability have hindered comprehensive recovery. The official investigation into the explosion has faced repeated obstacles, leading to widespread public frustration and protests demanding justice (Arab News, 2025). The Lebanese government's response to the Beirut Central District crisis following the August 4 explosion involved several key actions. On August 5, 2020, the government declared a two-week state of emergency in Beirut, granting the military en-

hanced authority to maintain security and coordinate response efforts. In collaboration with international organizations, including UN-Habitat, the Municipality of Beirut conducted a rapid building-level damage assessment to identify structures at risk and prioritize interventions within a 2-kilometer radius of the blast site (UN-Habitat, OCHA, 2020). Recognizing the scale of the disaster, the government engaged with international entities for support. On December 4, 2020, the European Union, United Nations, and World Bank Group launched the 18-month Reform, Recovery, and Reconstruction Framework (3RF) to address urgent needs and tackle governance challenges. The framework emphasized a people-centered recovery process grounded in transparency, inclusion, and accountability (United Nations, 2020). Alongside governmental actions, institutions such as the Beirut Urban Lab, affiliated with the American University of Beirut, mobilized to support recovery. Their initiatives included critical mapping of blast damage and advocacy for a holistic, inclusive, gender-sensitive, and environmentally sustainable reconstruction approach (Beirut Urban Lab, 2020). Despite these efforts, the government's response was widely criticized for delays and inadequacies. Reports highlighted the absence of a comprehensive, government-led recovery plan, resulting in reliance on local organizations and international agencies to fill the void and exposing ongoing challenges in coordination and governance.

Arab News, 2025. Beirut blast investigator resumes work after two years

Beirut Urban Lab, Urban Snapshot: Mar Mikhael, Beirut: ACTED and Beirut Urban Lab. (2021) https://beiruturbanlab.com/en/Details/789.

Beirut Urban Lab. "Initiatives in Response to the Beirut Blast." https://www.beiruturbanlab.com/en/Details/680

Beirut Urban Lab. 2020 Initiatives in Response to the Beirut Blast. https://beiruturbanlab.com/en/Details/680

UN-Habitat. "Beirut Municipality Rapid Building-Level Damage Assessment." October 2020. https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/10/municipality_of_beirut_-_beirut_explosion_rapid_assessment_report.pdf

United Nations, and World Bank Group. "EU, UN and WBG launch an 18-month Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework in response to Beirut port explosion." December 4, 2020.

Damage Map by NASA, Source: Google Earth

Mapping the different NGOS in charge of repairs after the explosion. Source: Beirut Urban Lab

5.3- Long-Term Implications for Urban Planning

The August 4, 2020, explosion at the Port of Beirut has had profound long-term implications for urban planning in the city. The three main implications that have emerged and should be adressed are:

- Reassessment of Urban Resilience and Safety Standards:
The magnitude of the explosion highlighted critical vulnerabilities in Beirut's urban infrastructure, prompting a reevaluation of safety standards and disaster preparedness. Studies analyzing the blast's impact have underscored the necessity for integrating resilience measures into urban planning to mitigate future risks. (Valsamos,2021)

- Community-Centered Reconstruction Initiatives:
In the aftermath, there has been a shift towards inclusive, community-driven reconstruction efforts. Organizations like the Beirut Urban Lab advocate for recovery strategies that prioritize the needs and aspirations of local residents, emphasizing the importance of participatory planning processes. (Al-Harithy, Yassine, 2024)

- Addressing Socioeconomic Disparities:
The explosion exacerbated existing socioeconomic inequalities, highlighting the need for urban planning approaches that address the needs of vulnerable populations. Efforts are underway to ensure that reconstruction fosters social cohesion and equitable development.

G. Valsamos, M. Larcher, F. Casadei, Beirut explosion 2020: A case study for a large-scale urban blast simulation, Safety Science, Volume 137, 2021 https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0925753521000357

Al-Harithy, Howayda, and Batoul Yassine. "A People-Centered Urban Recovery Strategy for Karantina (Beirut, Lebanon) in the Aftermath of the Beirut Port Blast." Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Natural Hazard Science. February 27, 2024. Oxford University Press.

Town hall meetings in the public garden in Karantina 2021. Source: Batoul Yassin, Yehya Al Said

Volunteers clean up the damage in Beirut a few days after the port explosion. Source: Thomas Devenyi/Hans Lucas/Reuters

5.4- Key issues facing Urban Planning in Lebanon

Lebanon's urban planning landscape is severely hindered by a combination of institutional, legal, and socio-political challenges, leading to significant fragmentation and inefficiency. The very concept of "urban policy" is not formally recognized, and "urban" terminology is largely absent from Lebanese laws, making it difficult to establish comprehensive guiding frameworks for economic development and urban planning.

Key issues facing Urban Planning in Lebanon:

1- Institutional Fragmentation and Lack of Coordination:
The absence of a dedicated urban planning ministry has dispersed responsibilities across numerous institutions, each operating under different laws and regulations. This, coupled with the lack of a single public institution solely responsible for planning, hinders coordinated and effective development (UN-Habitat, 2021).

2- Weak, Outdated, and Exclusionary Legal Frameworks:
Regulatory tools are limited to land-use planning, and the legal frameworks are weak and outdated (dating back to 1977 for local authorities). Critically, Lebanese urban planning law lacks any mention of public participation in master-planning, reinforcing a purely administrative and technocratic approach. This top-down methodology often excludes community input, leading to developments that don't reflect local needs or desires. (UN-Habitat, 2018)

3- Pervasive Corruption and Commercial Influence:
The absence of clear planning regulations and political will, combined with a lack of accountability and transparency, has fueled corruption, favoritism, and clientelism. Urban planning is heavily influenced by commercial interests, prioritizing private sector-led developments over comprehensive public strategies, sometimes exacerbating social divisions, as seen in Beirut's reconstruction projects (Public Works Studio, 2017).

4- Limited Local Authority Autonomy and Sustainability Issues:
Local authorities, despite their role in urban development, are constrained by outdated laws, central administration control, and reliance on international aid, which compromises the sustainability of their plans and actions. (UN-Habitat, 2018)

5- Inefficient Resource Allocation:
Current zoning and master plans fail to protect communal spaces or ensure affordable housing. The absence of rent control and social housing policies contributes to displacement, rendering the city center inaccessible to lower-income residents (UN-Habitat, 2018). The fragmented planning results in overlapping responsibilities and inefficient resource allocation, hindering sustainable urban development (UN-Habitat, 2021)

6- Diminished State Role and Reliance on it:
While the Lebanese state still plays a central role in the economy, employing a quarter of the workforce and heavily influencing the private sector through investments and subsidies, public debt significantly challenges its ability to sustain this role. (UN-Habitat, 2018)

7- Fragmented and Short-Term Initiatives:
Diverse actors, including local authorities, civil society, and humanitarian agencies, undertake initiatives for urban development and resilience. However, due to the weak planning system, outdated urban policies, and their project-based funding, these efforts remain fragmented, provide only short-term solutions, and have minimal holistic impact. (UN-Habitat, 2018)

Public Works Studio. Urbanism and Law: Master-planning in Lebanon and its Impact on People and Places. 2017. https://publicworksstudio.com/en/urbanism-and-law

UN-Habitat. "Lebanon's National Urban Policy Synthesis Report: Intersection of Housing and Transportation." 2021 https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2022/03/nup-synthesis-report-web.pdf

UN-Habitat. "National Urban Policies Programme in Lebanon." 2018 https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/documents/2019-07/nup-report_design.pdf

Chapter 6 cover photo:

Kids participating in a cultural event in Karantina.

Youth in Lebanon protesting economic and financial collapse in 2021.

ACTED and Beirut Urban Lab volunteers with Al Khodor residents after the August blast.

Sources:

https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/youth-in-lebanon-policy-narratives-attitudes-and-forms-of-mobilization/

https://www.acted.org/en/beirut-encouraging-a-people-centered-reconstruction/

6- Community Participation in Beirut

6.1- Role of Grassroots in Beirut's Urban Development

In the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion, grassroots organizations and community members mobilized to address immediate needs and advocate for a recovery process that was inclusive and sensitive to the socio-spatial inequalities exacerbated by the disaster. Their efforts focused on ensuring that reconstruction plans addressed the needs of all residents, emphasizing the importance of public space and community engagement in the rebuilding process (Al-Harithy, Yassine, 2024). Grassroots initiatives in Beirut have also led to collaborations with international organizations to enhance urban development. For instance, UN-Habitat partnered with Rebirth Beirut to identify and implement opportunities aimed at improving the city's urban environment for the benefit of the community, while promoting an urban cultural agenda. This partnership exemplifies how grassroots organizations can work alongside international bodies to advocate for and implement community-centered urban development strategies (United Nations, 2023). Grassroots organizations in Beirut have tried to influenced the city's urban development by advocating for community participation, challenging exclusionary planning practices, and actively engaging in disaster response and recovery efforts. Their work underscores the importance of integrating local knowledge and priorities into urban planning processes to foster inclusive, resilient, and sustainable urban environments.

During the most recent UN-Habitat 3RF (reform recovery reconstruction framework) meeting, urban challenges and policy reform needs in Lebanon were discussed. This meeting included an array of non-governmental associations as well as governmental entities which shows that there is a clear push to involve grassroots organizations in Beirut's urban planning. Some of these group included: Ministry of Interior and Municipalities (MoIM), Ministry of Finance, Directorate General of Land Registry andCadastre (DGLRC), Council for Development and Reconstruction, UNOPS, AFD, World Bank, EU, Habitat for Humanity, Live Love Lebanon (LLL), Lebanese Red Cross, Real Estate Syndicate of Lebanon, UN ESCWA, Banque de l'Habitat, National Tenants' Committee, Union of Arab Surveyors, American University of Beirut (AUB) – Beirut Urban Lab (BUL), Lebanese Univer

sity-Faculty of Fine Arts and Architecture, Team International, Legalis Law Firm, Public Works Studio (PWS), Cités Unies Liban/Bureau Technique des Villes Libanaises, UN-Habitat–UNDP MERP project, UN-Habitat, UNRCO, Directorate General of Urban Planning, Nahnoo, UNICEF, Ministry of Public Works and Transport, Nusaned, Real Estate Appraisers' Syndicate, UPLoAD, Beirut Heritage Initiative, Beirut Municipality, Beit El Baraka, EBRD, Lebanon Reforestation Initiative, UNESCO, Municipality of Bourj Hammoud, Order of Engineers and Architects (Beirut and Tripoli), Public Corporation for Housing, Arab Reform Initiative, The Policy Initiative, Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, Legal Agenda, ALBA. The meetings tackled important topics related to inclusive urban planning in Beirut. Some of the topics include; making cities walkable, how the work of 3RF be more participatory, how mobility should also take a multisectoral landscape approach, the creation of a Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, the importance of adopting a repair, reoccupy and recover approach, upgrading neighborhoods, rather than extend, build, replace, and consultation at the local level through committees to discuss projects as a collaborative approach. (UN-Habitat, 2023)

The 3RF , despite its innovative institutional architecture that includes civil society organizations, was not successful in advancing an inclusive and efficient urban recovery, because of inefficient coordination between donors, insufficient organizational inertia, sustained political instability, and weak institutionalization of reform processes. The 3RF did yield several projects, one of which concerns the restoration of the severely damaged heritage buildings in the neighborhoods affected by the blast (BERYTE , initiated in late 2022), but the platform did not contribute to enabling an institutionalized process for an integrated urban recovery. (The Policy Initiative and BUL)

Al-Harithy, Howayda, and Yassine,Batoul . "A People-Centered Urban Recovery Strategy for Karantina in the Aftermath of the Beirut Port Blast." Beirut Urban Lab, 2024, https://www.beiruturbanlab.com/en/Details/1974.

The Policy Initiative and Beirut Urban Lab. Beirut's Post-Blast Urban Recovery: A Story of Nonprofits, Aid, and a Dysfunctional State. StoryMap, 5 Sept. 2024, storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/c169714bea5940c6a170a830b70a938f.

UN-Habitat Urban Policy Working Group Minutes of Meeting. 2023 https://www.lebanon3rf.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/Urban-Policy-WG-MoM-17.05.2023.pdf

United Nations Lebanon Press Release. "UN-Habitat and Rebirth Beirut join forces to improve the city's urban infrastructure and environment." 2023 https://lebanon.un.org/en/239486-un-habitat-and-rebirth-beirut-join-forces-improve-city%E2%80%99s-urban-infrastructure-and

6.1- Recent Interventions in Beirut's Central District

The Green Line Project
Launched in 2020, the Green Line is a network of protected bike lanes throughout Beirut's Central District in collaboration with Solidere. This initiative transforms city streets with low-cost, rapid interventions, connecting the BCD to surrounding neighborhoods. By prioritizing cycling and walking, the project aims to improve urban mobility and foster a more sustainable and vibrant city life.

"Livelicity _ The Green Line." Livelicity, https://www.livelicity.com/projects/thegreenline.

Beirut Digital District (BDD)
The Beirut Digital District is an innovation hub located in the heart of Beirut, designed to support the city's digital and creative industries. It serves as a focal point for incubators and accelerators, nurturing startups, and providing spaces for medium and large enterprises. The district aspires to attract investments, create employment opportunities, and empower Lebanon's digital sector.

"Beirut Digital District." Arab Urban Development Institute, https://araburban.org/en/infohub/projects/?id=7596.

Beirut Digital District project and outdoor area.
Source: https://paralx.com/BDD1227

Cultural Revitalization Efforts
Despite facing numerous challenges, Beirut's cultural scene has shown resilience. Art galleries and cultural institutions are actively contributing to the city's revival by hosting exhibitions, supporting local artists, and engaging the community. These efforts provide cultural enrichment and play a role in the economic and social revitalization of the BCD.

Gerlis,Melanie. "Beirut has suffered endless catastrophes; its art galleries offer a glimmer of hope". The Financial Times, 2025.

Sfeir-Semler art gallery in Downtown, Beirut.
Source: www.sfeir-semler.com

6.3- Successful / Impactful Community Led Interventions

Beirut RiverLESS Initiative

The Beirut RiverLESS Initiative is a reforestation project aimed at revitalizing the degraded areas surrounding the Beirut River in Lebanon. Spearheaded by theOtherDada (tOD), a regenerative consultancy and architecture studio, the initiative employs the Miyawaki method to establish dense, native forests on urban landfill sites. This approach restores biodiversity and also reclaims public spaces for community use. Historically, the Beirut River was a vital waterway, serving as a site of worship in ancient times and housing a Roman aqueduct that supplied potable water to the city. Over the years, urbanization and pollution transformed the river into a concrete canal, leading to significant environmental degradation. The surrounding areas became dumping grounds for industrial and slaughter waste, resulting in the loss of essential ecosystem services such as freshwater supply, flood regulation, and natural spaces for cultural activities. In response to these challenges, theOtherDada launched the Beirut RiverLESS Forest project in 2019. The initiative focuses on planting native pocket forests on degraded urban sites adjacent to the river. The Miyawaki method, pioneered by Japanese botanist Akira Miyawaki, involves planting a diverse mix of native species in a small area, resulting in rapid growth and the development of a self-sustaining ecosystem within a few years. The project has seen the establishment of multiple forest sites; Beirut's RiverLESS I, II, III, IV, V, VI. planted between May 2019 and December 2024. The forests cover a total of 1,270 sqm with a totla of 4,970 trees planted.

A cornerstone of the initiative is active community participation. Local residents are involved in all phases of the forest-making process, from planning to planting, fostering a sense of ownership and stewardship over the reclaimed spaces. This collaborative approach enhances the success of the reforestation efforts as well as strengthens community bonds and promotes environmental awareness.

The Beirut RiverLESS Initiative has made significant strides in ecological and social regeneration. By reintroducing native flora, the project supports biodiversity, improves air quality, and mitigates urban heat effects. By transforming neglected areas into green spaces, the initiative provides residents with accessible environments for recreation and community activities, contributing to the overall well-being of the urban population. The initiative has garnered international recognition, earning the D&AD Future Impact award in 2019 and the iF Social Impact Prize in 2020. It was also featured in the 5th Istanbul Design Biennial, highlighting its innovative approach to urban reforestation and community engagement.

The Beirut RiverLESS Initiative exemplifies how collaborative, nature-based solutions can address urban environmental challenges, restore degraded ecosystems, and foster resilient communities.

Atlas of the Future, "Beirut RiverLESS Forest" https://atlasofthefuture.org/project/beirut-riverless-forest/.

SUGi Project "Beirut RiverLESS Forest." https://www.sugiproject.com/forests/beirut-riverless-forest.

Source: www.sugiproject.com/forests/beirut-riverless-forest

Sioufi Garden

Under the German-funded Sustainable Integrated Municipal Actions (SiMA) project implemented by UNOPS, the rehabilitation of Sioufi Garden was designed with insights from the local community to cater to people of all ages and abilities. (UNOPS Press Release) UNOPS invited locally registered NGOs, CSOs, foundations, and academic institutions to form a consortium that would take on the garden's operational management and maintenance, directly embedding civil society in stewardship of the space. (UNOPS Call for Proposals) A companion UNOPS notice further emphasized selecting one consortium of community organizations for 12 months of on-the-ground operations, reinforcing participatory management. (UNOPS) Parallel efforts focused on capacity-building for municipal staff and a Community Council linked to the Sioufi Garden project, aiming to strengthen collaborative decision-making and social cohesion around the park. (Dawaer Foundation) Community-oriented programming helped reactivate the space, exemplified by AUB/ESDU's public event in Sioufi Garden under the SiMA grant component, which used the park as a platform for inclusive activities. (American University of Beirut) At handover, the UN in Lebanon highlighted that the rehabilitated Sioufi Garden would provide accessible, inclusive, and safe public space promoting social interaction and well-being, reflecting the participatory ethos behind its revival. (United Nations in Lebanon) A longer arc of community engagement in the garden is seen in Ashkal Alwan's 1997 collaboration to permanently install works by local artists, setting a precedent for cultural participation in Sioufi's public life. (Ashkal Alwan/Together We Tap) The public reopening with local authorities and international partners signaled the garden's return as a shared civic asset and hub for community use. (Enmaeya News)

https://enmaeya.com/en/news/68da7759f9ce754f-0164cc65-beirut-launches-green-spaces-for-community

https://content.unops.org/documents/libraries/press-releases/2025/en/Press-release-Lebanon-Handing-over-for-the-rehabilitation-of-Sioufi-Garden-and-Jisr-el-Wati-Courts-in-Beirut.pdf

https://content.unops.org/documents/libraries/press-releases/2025/en/Press-release-Lebanon-UNOPS-call-for-proposals-for-the-operational-management-and-maintenance-of-Sioufi-Garden.pdf

https://lebanon.un.org/en/294594-unops-relaunches-its-fifth-round-call-proposals-lebanon

Dawaer Foundation. "Trainers for Capacity Building of Municipal Staff and Community Council." Daleel Madani, civil-society-directory/dawaer-foundation, accessed November 2025 https://daleel-madani.org/civil-society-directory/dawaer-foundation/calls/trainers-capacity-building-municipal-staff-and-community-council

https://www.aub.edu.lb/articles/Pages/esdu-next-step-green-jobs

https://lebanon.un.org/en/302384-handing-over-rehabilitation-sioufi-garden-and-jisr-el-wati-courts-beirut

https://togetherwetap.art/framework/sioufi-garden

https://enmaeya.com/en/news/68da7759f9ce754f-0164cc65-beirut-launches-green-spaces-for-community

photos source: https://www.beirut.com/en/762477/finally-beiruts-sioufi-garden-is-open-once-again/

Saving Bisri Valley

Grassroots groups, residents, farmers, and environmental NGOs coalesced into the "Save the Bisri Valley" campaign, staging regular protests, teach-ins, and nationwide outreach to oppose the dam. (Global Voices) Community organizers built broad support through petitions and public communications, gathering tens of thousands of signatures calling on the World Bank to cancel funding for the project. (Change.org) Activists repeatedly highlighted environmental and safety risks including biodiversity loss, heritage destruction, karst geology seepage, and seismic hazards to shift public opinion and pressure decision-makers. (Al Jazeera) Civil society representatives also pursued formal accountability by filing a request to the World Bank Inspection Panel, alleging violations related to environmental and social impacts. (World Bank Inspection Panel) On-the-ground mobilization escalated to sustained sit-ins and physical presence at the valley, which disrupted access for contractors and contributed to halting preparatory works. (UPR NGO Report) The movement internationalized its advocacy through diaspora actions, media engagement, and NGO networks keeping the issue in global view and amplifying pressure on financiers. (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre) In response to mounting concerns and unmet preconditions, the World Bank first suspended then canceled the undisbursed US$244 million portion of its loan for the Bisri Dam in September 2020. (World Bank Statement) Independent reporting confirmed the cancellation decision and noted the years of organized resistance that preceded it. (Reuters) Analyses of the episode characterize Bisri as a rare success for Lebanese environmental activism, where coordinated community participation directly influenced a major infrastructure outcome. (Bretton Woods Project)

https://globalvoices.org/2019/04/13/inside-the-lebanese-campaign-to-stop-a-world-bank-funded-dam-project

https://www.change.org/p/world-bank-save-the-bisri-valley

https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/8/7/lebanese-dam-project-stirs-eartquake-fears-environment-concerns

https://www.inspectionpanel.org/sites/default/files/cases/documents/134-Request%20for%20Inspection-24%20June%202019.pdf

https://upr-info.org/sites/default/files/documents/2021-08/js9_upr37_lbn_e_main.pdf

https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/bisri-lebanons-dam-of-contention

https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/statement/2020/09/04/cancellation-of-water-supply-augmentation-project-bisri-dam-project

https://www.reuters.com/article/world/middle-east/world-bank-cancels-loan-for-lebanons-bisri-dam-effective-immediately

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Protest against Bisri Dam, March 2019
Source: https://www.transrivers.org/2020/3151/

https://www.hetgrotemiddenoostenplatform.nl/the-little-lebanese-valley-that-could-environmentalists-taunting-a-corrupt-system/

Saving The Dalieh of Raouche

In December 2014 it emerged that Rem Koolhaas/Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) had been commissioned for a major real-estate scheme at Dalieh, sparking immediate public backlash. Activists described the scheme as a large-scale luxury and tourist development that would privatize one of Beirut's last open coastal headlands, instead of preserving it as a publicly accessible shore. The campaign to resist the development took shape via the Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche (CCPDR), which mobilised grassroots efforts, weekly protests, cultural interventions, legal action, to defend the coastline and public access. Legal action was pursued, challenging a wartime decree (Decree 169/1989) that effectively waived development restrictions on that coastal land, thereby opening the space to private real-estate exploitation. The legal challenge, alongside public protest, helped delay the project. In parallel, the activists produced alternative visions: the CCPDR launched design-competitions and international ideas calls (for example "Revisiting Dalieh") to re-imagine the headland as an open communal space, rather than a gated resort. By raising public awareness, obtaining significant media coverage, framing the conflict as one of environmental justice (coastline access, social equity, heritage, ecology) and combining protest, litigation, and alternative-planning, the local community managed to stall the Koolhaas-linked project and keep the site from being turned into what was envisioned.

https://ejatlas.org/print/the-dalieh-of-raouche-lebanon

photos source: https://ejatlas.org/print/the-dalieh-of-raouche-lebanon

Redesigning Jeanne D'Arc Street

The rehabilitation of Jeanne d'Arc Street, a key corridor linking Bliss Street to Hamra Street, was conceived as a model for accessible, pedestrian-friendly urban design in Beirut, built fundamentally on community participation. As a joint initiative of the Beirut Municipality, the AUB Neighborhood Initiative, and the Center for Civic Engagement and Community Service, the project united residents, business owners, urban designers, and accessibility advocates in a collaborative and inclusive planning process.

During the research phase, anthropologist Samar Kanafani led extensive interviews with neighbors to understand the daily challenges they faced and their aspirations for a more livable street. She also documented the experience of an AUB student in a wheelchair navigating from campus to a nearby shop, while a visually impaired pedestrian contributed firsthand mapping of sidewalk hazards, reinforcing the urgency of an accessible redesign rooted in lived experience.

This participatory foundation continued throughout the design process. Community testimonies, expert consultations, and interactive workshops with wheelchair users, municipal engineers, and urban designers shaped the project's priorities; from wider, smoother sidewalks to shaded seating, better lighting, and proper drainage. The Beirut Municipal Council encouraged the team to incorporate innovative solutions uncommon in the city, such as elevated junctions, tactile paving, and a 1.5-meter protected "safe passage," while also designing in ways that physically prevent cars, motorcycles, and shops from encroaching onto sidewalks. A Town Hall meeting in April 2016 presented these proposals for public discussion, reinforcing transparency and collective ownership.

While all approvals and funding were secured in 2016, bureaucratic delays pushed construction from mid 2016 to July 2017, with completion in February 2018. Despite governance hurdles, exemplified by disputes over removing 32 legal parking spaces, the final result reflects the community's needs and priorities: wider and safer sidewalks, raised intersections, sidewalk-protection systems, tactile tiles for the visually impaired, bicycle and motorcycle racks, benches, trees, proper lighting, and improved signage.

Today, Jeanne d'Arc Street is far easier to navigate for wheelchair users, people with strollers, visually impaired pedestrians, and the general public.

https://www.aub.edu.lb/Neighborhood/Pages/jeannedarc.aspx

https://www.aub.edu.lb/Neighborhood/Documents/ImprovingWalkabilityBeirutLessonsfromJeannedArcStreet.pdf

photos source: https://www.aub.edu.lb/

CatalyticAction Public Space Making

CatalyticAction, a design NGO working between architecture, urban design, and social engagement, has become a leading actor in advancing community-driven public space practices in Beirut. Their work positions design as a tool for social inclusion, with an emphasis on child-centered planning, participatory co-production, and small-scale interventions that generate large-scale spatial and social impact. Two of their most significant post-blast interventions, the Karantina Streetscape and Beirut's Public Stairs, illustrate how public space can be reclaimed and reimagined through participation.

Karantina Streetscape (2021)

The project sought to upgrade the streets in the neighbourhood of Karantina, both around the Beirut Governmental Hospital, the National HIV and TB Centre and the Karantina Public Park. An area that bustles with cars, this project focussed on making Karantina's streets more pedestrian and child friendly by improving neighbourhood infrastructure. The design interventions were underpinned by a participatory approach, ensuring input from the local community around their needs, visions and aspirations for the space. Building on this participatory phase, the design centred on slowing traffic, improving pedestrian accessibility, creating play opportunities for children and supporting existing social activities. To make the area safer and more inclusive, the design added a new roundabout, speed bumps, clearer road markings, improved sidewalks, pedestrian crossings and access ramps, as well as a new shaded sidewalk under existing trees. This sidewalk includes a long bench for gathering, and additional planting throughout the area aims to create more shade and give the streets a more park-like character. Play was facilitated through the colourful bench and floor games along the pavement. By improving the infrastructure around the hospital and park, the intervention has made the area more accessible, comfortable and safe, and the combination of community-driven design and traffic-calming measures has encouraged social activity while providing children with playful, engaging spaces.

photos source: https://catalyticaction.org/

Beirut's Public Stairs (2022)

This project aimed to rehabilitate and enhance the social activities on the stairs of St Nicholas, Vendome and Laziza in the neighbourhoods of Mar Mikhael and Gemmayzeh, Beirut. This was achieved by fixing damages, adding furniture, increasing play opportunities and improving accessibility. Through a series of participatory workshops with the stairs users, the design for this project involved direct engagement with residents of these neighbourhoods, with a focus on using Minecraft to co-design with youth. The designs incorporated creative seating options in strategic locations to enable users to enjoy the social character of the stairs, and a landmark shade structure and stage were created to facilitate social and cultural activities. To increase accessibility for elderly residents, handrails were added, and to make the stairs more playful, interactive sensory play items such as speaking pipes, rolling spheres and a slide were integrated, along with coloured tiles to create playful floor spaces and bring variety to the staircases. Once construction was completed, these spaces were activated through community activities, which enhanced the community's sense of belonging and created opportunities for community building.

photos source: https://catalyticaction.org/

Joana Dabaj, Sara Maassarani, Andrea Rigon, Riccardo Luca Conti 2023, Rebuilding communities through public space interventions: Co-learning from Beirut's reconstruction after the 2020 port blast. Beirut: CatalyticAction & University College London. ISBN: 9781068449123

6.4- Stalled or Contested Attempts at Public Space Intervention

Laziza Park

After the historic Laziza Brewery in Mar Mikhael was demolished in 2017 for a luxury real-estate project that never materialized, the vacant lot deteriorated into a garbage dump and informal parking area. At the start of the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, neighbourhood residents began informally cleaning the site, removing debris and planting trees and herbs without funding or permission. Their repeated presence gradually transformed the abandoned lot into a community garden, with passersby joining to water plants, tidy the space, and build makeshift seating. Over time, Laziza became an everyday commons used by families, neighbours, and children and a refuge after the August 4, 2020 port explosion, when volunteers mobilized to maintain the space and support one another. (Salame)

Local NGO Rashet Kheir later activated the park through free public programming such as yoga, arts workshops, and small markets, while UN-Habitat supported its rehabilitation with benches, planter boxes, murals, solar lighting, and photovoltaic panels. These efforts strengthened participatory governance and helped the community temporarily reclaim an otherwise neglected urban void. However, because the land remained privately owned, all improvements were designed to be removable, reflecting the project's structural precarity.

This fragility ultimately shaped the park's demise. Municipal police had already intervened to stop the construction of a small roof over the community micro-library, underscoring the limits of tolerated interventions on private land. In 2022–2023, pressures intensified when the Internal Security Forces ordered the removal of park amenities, and the property owners initiated legal action to evict the volunteers and reassert control over the lot. Academic assessments of post-blast Beirut identify Laziza as a brief but powerful experiment in urban commoning that was eventually re-enclosed, demonstrating how grassroots initiatives collide with entrenched property regimes and speculative development pressures. (Harb)

Laziza Park's trajectory from abandoned lot to vibrant community garden and back to contested private property captures the promises and limitations of community-led urbanism in Beirut. It highlights how residents can mobilize to create inclusive public spaces, yet remain constrained by legal insecurity, privatization, and the absence of supportive urban policy.

"UN Improves Quality of Life through Urban Interventions in Reviving Neighbourhoods of Greater Beirut." United Nations Lebanon.

Harb, M., Dayekh, L., Atallah, S., & Zoughaib, S. (2025). Rebuilding post-blast Beirut: nonprofit urban governance, sectarian moralities, and emerging commons. City, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2025.2572889

Salame, Richard. "Community Efforts Help Memorialize Historic Laziza Brewery through Public Park." L'Orient Today, 30 June 2022, https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1304328/community-efforts-help-memorialize-laziza-brewery-through-public-park.html

Salame, Richard. "Laziza Park's Future in Question as Maintainers Ordered to Remove Plants, Benches." L'Orient Today, 5 May 2023, https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1336627/laziza-parks-future-in-question-as-maintainers-ordered-to-remove-plants-benches.html

Laziza Park, project funded by UN-Habitat.
Source: www.alfusaic.net

The Mar Mikhael Square Proposal

The proposed Mar Mikhael Square emerged in the aftermath of the Beirut Port explosion as part of broader attempts to introduce people-centered public space in a neighborhood severely affected by material damage and social fragmentation. Beirut Urban Lab at the American University of Beirut developed the project with an explicit intention to prioritize pedestrian experience, reorganize circulation, and respond to local needs through a participatory, research-driven design process (Beirut Urban Lab). Despite these intentions, the project quickly became entangled in questions of representation, legitimacy, and community authority within a neighborhood lacking recognized local governance structures (Public Works, 2023).

Opposition emerged early on from influential actors, some tied to political parties, who used intimidation, misinformation, and pressure tactics to obstruct public meetings and discourage open dialogue around the proposal. These actors portrayed the project as a threat to circulation, property values, and neighborhood identity, despite the absence of formal neighborhood bodies to validate these claims. Parallel to this, a group of residents submitted a petition to the governor objecting to aspects of the design, reflecting genuine concerns but also revealing how fragmented and unequal the processes of neighborhood representation remain in Beirut (Public Works, 2023). The Beirut Urban Lab publicly countered misinformation campaigns by publishing evidence, technical drawings, and clarifications on circulation, heritage protection, and pedestrian priorities, insisting that the project had been shaped through extensive consultation, surveys, and public engagement (Beirut Urban Lab).

However, the lack of formally recognized neighborhood committees, combined with Lebanon's structural problem of electoral registration based on place of family origin rather than residence, created a vacuum where no actor could legitimately claim to speak "for the neighborhood". This vacuum enabled powerful groups to impose their agendas more forcefully, ultimately distorting public perception of the project and undermining participatory planning efforts (Public Works, 2023). According to analyses of post-blast recovery initiatives in Beirut, the Mar Mikhael case highlights how even well-designed, community-oriented proposals struggle to survive in governance environments characterized by political fragmentation, mistrust, and competing claims over urban authority (Verešová).

By June 2023, escalating opposition, political pressure, and obstruction tactics forced the Beirut Urban Lab to halt the project entirely, despite its technical feasibility and support from urban planning professionals. The suspension underscored the fragility of participatory urban recovery processes in contexts where formal representation is absent and informal power brokers dominate the decision-making landscape (L'Orient Today). Ultimately, despite the Beirut Urban Lab's extensive efforts, public endorsements, and attempts to correct misinformation, the square was never constructed, demonstrating how structural governance failures can derail initiatives rooted in progressive urban design and community-centered planning (Beirut Urban Lab).

Beirut Urban Lab. "Urban Professionals Endorse the Public Square Project in Mar-Mikhael/Gemmayzeh, Countering Misinformation." Beirut Urban Lab, 2023, beiruturbanlab.com/en/Details/1943.

Verešová, Dominika. "From top-down to people-centred urban recovery: a Beirut case study" Miscellanea Geographica, University of Warsaw, 2025, https://doi.org/10.2478/mgrsd-2025-0015

Public Works Studio , "The Mar Mikhael Square Project: Who Speaks for the Neighbourhood?" 17 July 2023, publicworksstudio.com/en/the-mar-mikhael-square-project-who-speaks-for-the-neighborhood/.

L'Orient Today, "Beirut Urban Lab 'Forced to Halt' Mar Mikhael Project." 12 July 2023, today.lorientlejour.com/article/1343216/beirut-urban-lab-forced-to-halt-mar-mikhael-project.html.

Source : https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/c169714bea-5940c6a170a830b70a938f

The Bachoura Archaeological Site and Public Outcry

The Bachoura district, located beneath the Ring Road on the eastern edge of Beirut's historical core, contains one of the city's most significant yet endangered archaeological zones. Excavations over the past decade uncovered extensive Roman remains, including sections of the ancient Roman wall that once enclosed Beirut, as well as multiple burial grounds and funerary structures. Despite the site's importance and its classification as a protected heritage zone, it became the target of an aggressive redevelopment plan. Approvals issued by the Ministry of Culture and the Directorate General of Antiquities allowed the "relocation" of the ruins for incorporation into a private project, a decision that dismantled their contextual integrity and transformed them from rooted architectural structures into displaced decorative elements. Observers reported heavy machinery flattening layered Roman remains and funerary components. The project, led by Alia Company, moved forward despite strong criticism from heritage groups and activists, who argued that the developer's political and economic influence enabled the prioritization of commercial interests over archaeological preservation.

Public reaction was immediate. Lebanese media and social platforms expressed widespread anger at the demolition of a site widely considered irreplaceable, warning that erasing the ruins for modern convenience would permanently strip Beirut of vital historical layers. Viral footage showing excavators dismantling archaeological strata intensified public outrage, with one widely shared post condemning the act as "a new crime in the heart of Beirut... a betrayal of our heritage." Citizens were encouraged to submit formal objections to the Ministry of Culture, and advocacy groups such as Beirut Heritage documented community efforts to halt the project, emphasizing both the site's cultural value and the absence of transparent public communication.

In an unusual moment of public accountability, activists Samira Ezzo and Soha Mneimne confronted the Minister of Culture on the televised program "حوارات السراي" (Saray Dialogues) about the fate of Bachoura 740. They presented evidence, field testimonies, and research on the site's Roman remains, raising critical questions regarding the lack of transparency, the absence of published archaeological reports since 2014, the dismantling of ruins despite institutional objections, and the uncertain prospects of future public access once the new structure is built. Their intervention underscored community fears that rapid development was overriding heritage protection.

The minister responded defensively, stating: "وقت" ("الّلي بقلّك ما في آثار، يعني تأكّدت شخصياً إنّو ما في آثار" "When I tell you there are no ruins, it means I personally confirmed that there are no ruins"). His reply failed to address core concerns regarding documentation, the removal of finds, the withholding of scientific reports, or the absence of long-term guarantees should political leadership change. The exchange demonstrated both the importance of public forums and their limitations, reflecting a broader imbalance between community advocacy and state-backed development agendas.

The Bachoura case reveals a systemic issue in Beirut's urban governance: the persistent marginalization of community participation in decisions related to heritage preservation. Although public outcry was strong and sustained across media and civil society platforms, it did not alter the project's outcome. The site was cleared, its remains displaced, and the land repurposed as a parking facility within a private development. This outcome underscores the limits of public influence in contexts dominated by political power and private capital. It also highlights the urgent need for participatory planning frameworks that grant citizens and heritage experts meaningful authority in shaping interventions within historically significant areas. Bachoura's transformation from an archaeological zone into a parking lot stands as a stark example of what occurs when public consultation is symbolic rather than substantive: history is erased, trust is weakened, and the city's cultural identity is fundamentally compromised.

https://www.beirut.com/en/762314/historic-ruins-in-beirut-flattened-for-a-parking-lot/

https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1479407/controversy-grows-over-parking-project-on-archaeological-site-in-bashoura

https://www.beirut.com/en/762314/historic-ruins-in-beirut-flattened-for-a-parking-lot/

Archeological site during excavations 2019
source: "Save Bachoura Site" facebook page

The site transformed into a parking lot 2025
source: Samira Ezzo

The site transformed into a parking lot 2025
source: Elie Mansour

Soha Mneimne and Samira Ezzo confronting the Minister of Culture on the televised program "حوارات السراي" (Saray Dialogues) source: TeleLiban

6.5- Challenges and Opportunities for Grassroots/Authority Collaboration

Challenges:

Lebanon's sectarian political framework produces a deeply fragmented and polarized governance system that obstructs the development of urban commons and collective city-making. Public authorities are weak, inconsistent, and often resistant to shared urban space, while corruption, inefficiency, and historical mismanagement have eroded public trust. Grassroots groups and NGOs frequently view government institutions as unresponsive or adversarial, making collaboration difficult. (Lebanon Support)

Urban interventions are further constrained by restrictive legal and bureaucratic environments, complex registration processes, and regulations that can be selectively enforced. These structural barriers prevent nonprofits and community actors from institutionalizing community-led initiatives or experimenting with new policy and legal models. Both state entities and civil society groups also face financial and human resource limitations, hindering long-term coordination.

On the ground, political-sectarian and neoliberal hegemonic structures mobilize to dismantle organized collective efforts, resulting in a fragmented form of micro-urbanism—disconnected, incomplete projects with unequal impacts on livelihoods and local economies. Vulnerable populations are often excluded, displaced, or further marginalized in the absence of adequate social protection, while securitization and discrimination intensify.

The dominance of nonprofits in this landscape reflects the state's deliberate inaction. Yet these organizations face their own legitimacy challenges: many are politically affiliated, unaccountable, fragmented, donor-dependent, or driven by the humanitarian logic of the aid industry. Together, these dynamics reveal how collective experiments in post-blast Beirut collide with entrenched sectarian power networks and market interests, constraining the transformative potential of urban commons and reinforcing persistent tensions between grassroots aspirations and hegemonic structures.

Opportunities:

Opportunities for collaboration between grassroots initiatives and public authorities emerge clearly from recent community-led urban interventions in Beirut. Public spaces require ongoing maintenance and everyday usability, suggesting that co-management models where municipalities retain ownership while local groups program and care for the space could help sustain long-term public life. This aligns with broader shifts in Lebanon, where municipalities have increasingly become pivotal actors in service delivery, particularly in the absence of strong central governance (Berghof Foundation). Lessons from projects like the Sioufi Garden rehabilitation show how structured partnerships where authorities, UN agencies, and local organizations share stewardship roles, can activate public spaces and embed community participation. UNOPS invited locally registered NGOs, CSOs, foundations, and academic institutions to form a consortium that would take on the garden's operational management and maintenance, directly embedding civil society in stewardship of the space. Meanwhile, the Beirut RiverLESS initiative and CatalyticAction's Karantina and public-staircase interventions show how small-scale, design-led collaborations can catalyze broader social impact when authorities allow space for experimentation and community guidance.

Temporary cultural events and community markets could be introduced before large-scale redevelopment, while allowing small vendors to return would help restore the everyday street culture once present in central Beirut. Such approaches reflect shared goals between NGOs and local authorities in improving public services and addressing socio-economic challenges (Groupe URD). The Jeanne d'Arc Street redesign further demonstrates that when municipalities engage directly in participatory planning, working with residents, universities, and accessibility advocates, the resulting public realm can meet diverse needs while setting citywide precedents for inclusive design. Collaborative stewardship of archaeological sites may also reconnect the district with its public memory, while neighborhood-based advisory committees could counter the dominance of elite technocratic planning. These possibilities are reinforced by international donor programs that encourage partnerships between NGOs and governmental bodies by providing financial resources

and technical support (Groupe URD). Moreover, the rise of new civic movements and grassroots mobilizations since the 2019 protests indicates growing public demand for participatory governance (Lebanon Support). Building mutual trust, streamlining regulatory frameworks, and recognizing the shared objective of serving public needs can therefore open meaningful pathways for reclaiming Martyr's Square and advancing more inclusive urban development.

Berghof Foundation. "Lebanon: Inclusive Local Governance and Social Cohesion." Berghof Foundation, 2025, https://berghof-foundation.org/work/projects/lebanon-inclusive-local-governance-and-social-cohesion.

Groupe URD. "Civil Society and Local Authorities in Lebanon: Issues at Stake and Stakeholder Dynamics, 2021." Groupe URD Publications, 2021, https://www.urd.org/en/publication/civil-society-and-local-authorities-in-lebanon-issues-at-stake-and-stakeholder-dynamics-2021/.

Lebanon Support. "The Basic Guidebook for Emerging Collectives, Cooperatives and NGOs in Lebanon." Lebanon Support, 2016, https://daleel-madani.org/sites/default/files/Resources/lebanonsupport-basicguidebook-ngos-en_0.pdf.

6.6- Martyr's Square Role in Recent Social Movements (2019 October Revolution)

Martyr's Square in Beirut has historically been a focal point for political and social activism in Lebanon. During the October 2019 uprising, known as the "17 October Revolution," the square became the epicenter of nationwide protests against government corruption, economic mismanagement, and sectarian politics. Citizens from diverse backgrounds gathered in the square, transforming it into a hub for dissent and collective action. Protesters occupied the space, setting up tents, organizing public debates, and holding cultural events to foster a sense of unity and political engagement (Al Jazeera, 2019). The square's historical significance and central location amplified its role during the revolution. It served as a strategic gathering point for mass demonstrations, with the Martyr's Monument often draped in protest symbols and banners. Despite government attempts to dismantle protest encampments and outbreaks of violence, Martyr's Square remained a symbol of resistance. Activists continued to return to the site to commemorate the revolution's anniversary, reinstalling symbols like the "fist of the thawra" to reaffirm their commitment to political reform (L'Orient Today, 2022). Ultimately, the square played a pivotal role in Lebanon's modern protest movement, embodying the people's desire for transparency, accountability, and social justice.

In "How People Reclaimed Public Spaces in Beirut during the 2019 Lebanese Uprising," Wael Sinno examines how protesters revitalized underutilized areas in Beirut to serve as platforms for civic engagement and unity. Protesters transformed the expansive streets of Beirut's Central District into dynamic venues for demonstrations, cultural events, and public discourse. Locations like Samir Kassir Garden, previously tranquil and meditative, became vibrant centers for social interaction and collective activities. Abandoned structures such as "The Egg," an unfinished cinema from the 1960s, were repurposed into community centers, symbolizing resilience and the reclamation of public assets. The study underscores that these acts of placemaking redefined the physical landscape of Beirut and fostered a sense of unity among citizens of diverse backgrounds. By collectively occupying and revitalizing these spaces, the movement challenged sectarian divisions and asserted the public's right to the city. Sinno's analysis highlights the pivotal role of public spaces in social movements, demonstrating how their reclamation can serve as a powerful tool for expressing dissent, building community, and envisioning alternative futures.

Al Jazeera. "In Pictures: In Beirut, a Revolution in Unity over Corruption." Al Jazeera, 23 Oct. 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2019/10/23/in-pictures-in-beirut-a-revolution-in-unity-over-corruption.

L'Orient Today. "Three Years On, Protesters Install the Fist of the Revolution on Martyrs' Square in Beirut." L'Orient Today, 17 Oct. 2022, https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1314876/three-years-on-protesters-install-the-fist-of-the-revolution-on-martyrs-square-in-beirut.html.

Sinno, Wael. (2020). How People Reclaimed Public Spaces in Beirut during the 2019 Lebanese Uprising. The Journal of Public Space.

A man stands next to graffiti during the 2019 Lebanese Uprising Source: Nabil Mounzer.
"Reclaim your Public Spaces" seen on one of the walls in BCD. Source: Wael Sinno/UN-Habitat

Al-Balad, a plan of Beirut's Central District during the 2019 Lebanese Uprising Source: Architect Antoine Atallah

Lebanese protesters rally in central Beirut on Sunday during demonstrations against tax increases and official corruption.
Source: AFP/Getty Images

Following the October 17 protests, many streets in the BCD were blocked by protesters and/or securitized by the Army, and key institutions such as the Parliament saw heightened, sustained security presence and barriers.

A mural painted by Roula Abdo on one one of the new walls erected in downtown Beirut to block access to the Parliament building 2020. Souurce: Abby Sewell

Lebanese army soldiers are deployed during a protest in the aftermath of last week's deadly blast in Beirut 13 Aug 2020.
Source: Thaier al-Sudani Reuters

Graffiti-covered wall blocks the road to Parliament near Beirut Souks, Beirut 2021. Source: Fin DePencier

7- Reimagining Martyr's Square: Architectural and Urban Design Proposals

Chapter 7 cover photo source: Rola Younes

7.1- Site Analysis
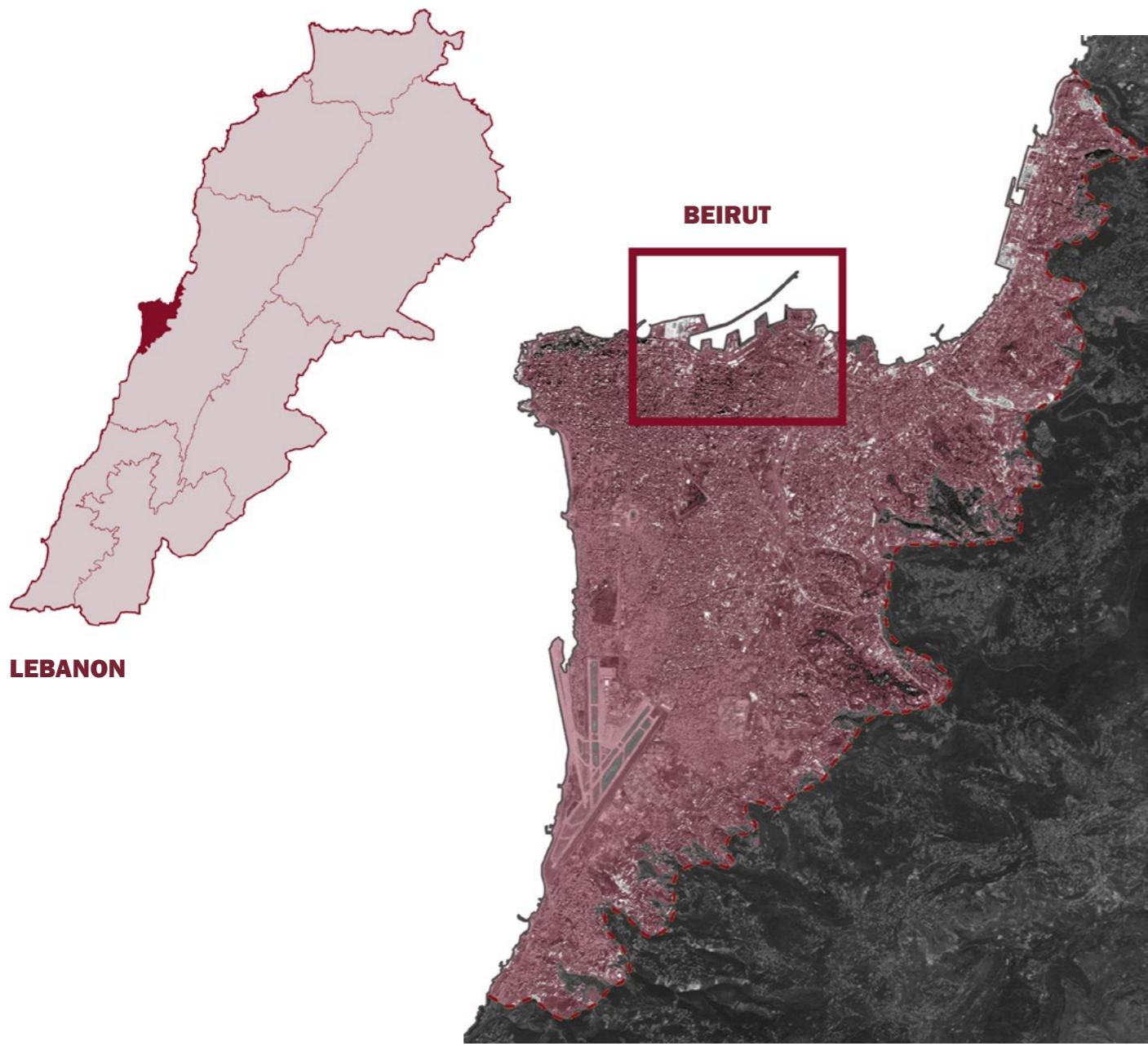
LEBANON

BEIRUT

Project site in Beirut's Central District including the Beirut Souks area, Nejmeh Square, Bachoura, Ring Bridge, Martyr's Square, Saifi Village, Gemmayze Street, Charles Helo and George Haddad boulevards.

Project site length = 1200m

Width= 800m

Total site area = 0.96 km2

PROJECT SITE

Site Analysis

Built Area

Archeological Sites

Vacant Plots

1- Martyr's Square Monument

2- Al Amin Mosque

3- The Egg

4- Roman Forum of Beirut

5- Sahet Al Nejmeh

6- Mansour Assaf Mosque

7- Archeological Tell

8- Beirut Souks

10- Zaha Hadid Building

11- Bashoura Archeological Site

12- Beirut Digital District

13- Saint Elie Church

14- Charles Debbas Park

15- Saifi Village

16- Gemmayzeh Street

17- Quasar Tower

Built Area

- ⬛ Built Area
- 🟩 Archeological Sites
- 🟥 Vacant Plots
- 🟧 Highway / Freeway Dividing the city

Built Area: 224,182 sqm
Vacant Plots Area: 107,309 sqm

The vacant plots represent roughly 32% of the total available land in BCD. This shows a large opportunity for public intervention, especially for affordable and public housing, green or civic spaces and community infrastructure.

The Ring highway divides the Beirut Central District physically and symbolically. It is a physical border that disrupts pedestrian movement and symbolically blocks off the poorer Bashoura neighborhood from the Downtown area. It also creates a disconnect within the neighborhoods of the Beirut Central District; making it difficult to walk from Saifi Village to the adjacent Monot and Gemmayze areas.

7.2- Legibility, Identity, and Memory: A Lynchian Reading of Beirut's Central District

The Concept of "Imageability" and "Legibility"

Lynch emphasized that a city must be imageable; visually and experientially rich enough to form a coherent mental image and legible, or easy to navigate and understand. Post-war reconstruction efforts by Solidere erased historical legibility, replacing organic urban memory with uniform, privatized landscapes. The fragmentation caused by war and reconstruction efforts disrupted continuity in districts, created harsh edges, and diminished the square's role as a node. The new vision for Martyr's Square aims to restore legibility by reactivating memory and enhancing spatial orientation through participatory, human-centered design.

Lynch and Community Participation

Lynch advocated for cities that reflect how people actually experience them, not just how planners envision them. Emphasizing the importance of focusing on grassroots involvement and inclusive development. By grounding the redesign of Martyr's Square in residents' mental maps, daily routines, and symbolic attachments, the proposal aligns with Lynch's call for participatory planning that reflects the lived city, rather than the imposed one.

Lynch, Kevin. The Image of the City. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960.

Kevin Lynch's Five Elements of Urban Form as an Analytical Lens

Lynch identified five key elements that shape a city's legibility (how easily people can form a mental map of a place):

Lynch Element	Represented by	Application to BCD
Paths streets, walkways, routes of movement	■ ▬	The war, Solidere's redevelopment, and the August 4 explosion affected pedestrian and vehicular connectivity. Finding better pedestrian integration of Martyr's Square into the city's daily rhythms.
Edges boundaries or barriers (physical or symbolic)	▪▪▪▪ ▪▪▪▪▪▪	Socioeconomic and political barriers (e.g. between Solidere and adjacent neighborhoods) have created urban edges that fragment the city. Finding ways to soften these edges through design and policy.
Districts recognizable city sections with a distinct character	■ ▦	Solidere has been criticized for being a sanitized district with little continuity with the surrounding urban fabric. Finding strategies to reclaim its identity through local cultural activation.
Nodes focal points or intersections	● ○	Repositioning Martyr's Square as a key node of civic life, historically a rallying point, becoming a hub of community and democratic engagement.
Landmarks visible points of reference	★ ★	The symbolic importance of landmarks like the Martyrs' Monument, the Mohammad Al-Amin Mosque, and the gutted Egg building. Proposing conserving or reactivating these as memory anchors.
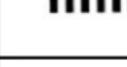
"Ring" Bridge and Fouad Chehab Boulevard
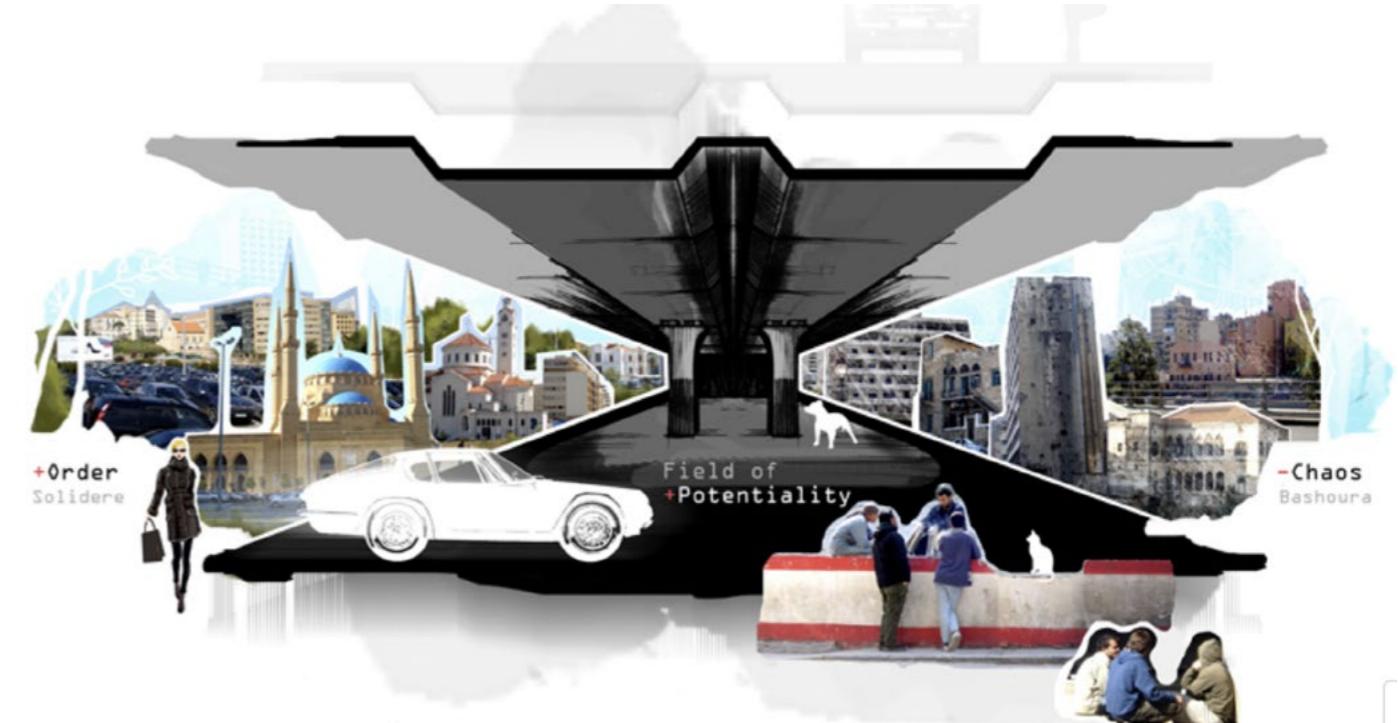
Source: Curioso.Photography

Illustration & Design by Zarifi Haidar Marín

Source: https://www.photo-alsace.com/photo-ref-190202-038.html

Soource: https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1479407/controversy-grows-over-parking-project-on-archaeological-site-in-bashoura.html
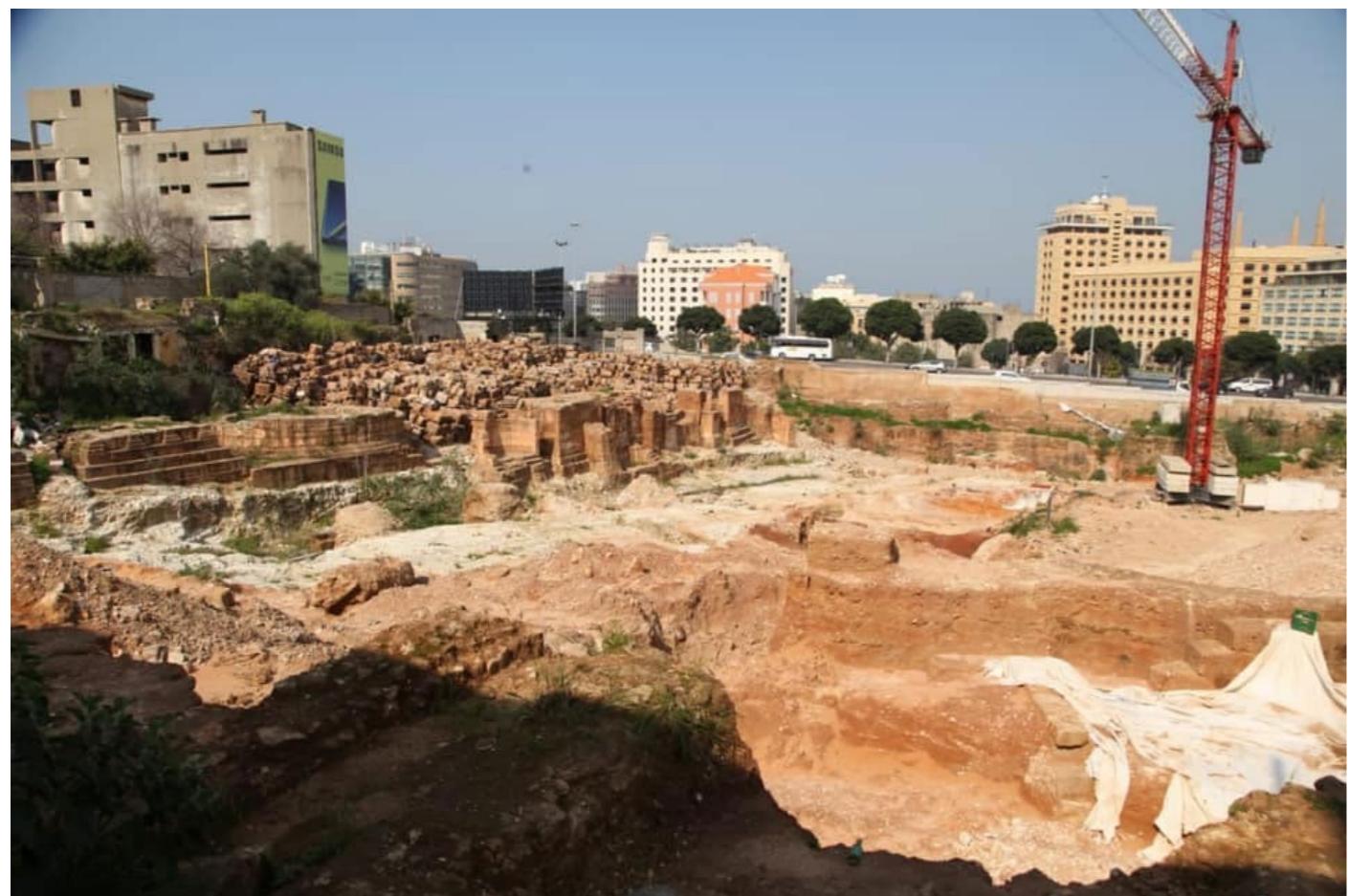
7.3- Connecting Martyr's Square to Adjacent Neighborhoods

Freeway Removal

Freeway removal is an urban planning strategy that involves demolishing highways to repurpose land for mixed-use development, parks, housing, and commercial spaces. It often supports smart growth, transit-oriented development, and pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly environments. In some cases, freeways are converted into boulevards, tunneled, capped, or relocated to less dense areas. These transformations have helped cities worldwide reconnect neighborhoods, improve public spaces, and enhance livability.

San Francisco, USA

After the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake damaged the elevated Embarcadero Freeway, San Francisco opted to demolish it. The area was transformed into a scenic boulevard with streetcars, parks, and public spaces, revitalizing the waterfront and improving pedestrian access.

Embarcadero freeway removal before and after

Seoul, South Korea

Seoul removed a major elevated highway to restore the Cheonggyecheon stream, creating a 3.5-mile linear park. This project improved air quality, reduced urban heat, and provided a vibrant public space for pedestrians and cyclists.

Cheonggyecheon restoration before and after

Düsseldorf, Germany

Düsseldorf replaced a riverside elevated highway with the underground Rheinufertunnel to reconnect the Altstadt with the Rhine. Above it, the city built the Rheinpromenade; a pedestrian friendly public space with parks and walkways. This transformation revitalized the riverfront and is now a model of successful urban freeway removal.
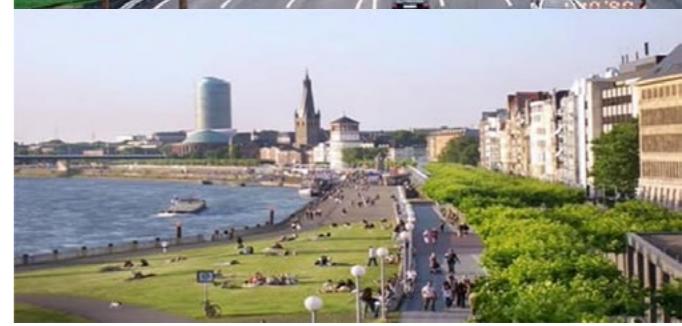
Highway to Rheinpromenade before and after

Archeological Spine

Connnecting the four main archeological sites the each other
1- Harbor Square Ruins
2- Marty'rs Square Ruins
3- Roman Forum of Beirut
4- Bachoura Archeological Site

Source: https://ajar.casa/a-jar-of-information/visit-beirut-19-places-to-see/

Source: https://runway27l.co.uk/2018/10/10/beirut-the-old-and-the-new/

Source: https://www.romeartlover.it/Beirut2.html

Source: https://beirutreport.com/ancient-ruins-uncovered-in-the-digital-district/

7.4- Preliminary Proposal for Reclaiming the Martyr's Square

Martyr's Square, located in Beirut's Central District (BCD), has historically served as a focal point for national identity and political action in Lebanon. Its significance was most recently highlighted during the 2019 October Revolution, where the square became a site of mass mobilization for social and political change. Over the years, the space has suffered from neglect, commercial exploitation, and political manipulation, leading to its disconnection from the city's cultural and social fabric. This proposal seeks to reimagine Martyr's Square as a hub for inclusive urban renewal, prioritizing community engagement, cultural heritage, and sustainable development. By embracing principles of participatory planning, cultural revitalization, and sustainability, this preliminary proposal offers a vision for an urban space that transcends its historical significance, transforming Martyr's Square into a vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable part of Beirut's urban landscape. It aims to establish the square as a model for reclaiming urban spaces as centers of community, heritage, and public life.

Objectives:

- Reconnecting the city's communities:
By prioritizing public access, social spaces, and cultural expressions, Martyr's Square will once again become a communal gathering place.

- Fostering inclusivity and diversity:
Ensuring that the square accommodates the varied needs of all citizens, irrespective of class, ethnicity, or political affiliation.

- Preserving historical heritage:
Balancing urban development with the preservation of the square's historical and cultural significance.

- Supporting sustainable development:
Integrating green infrastructure and environmentally friendly practices into the design of the square.

Architectural and Urban Design Proposals:

Spatial Design and Layout:

- Public Open Spaces:
The square will be redesigned as an open space with large pedestrian zones, green areas, and seating. The introduction of green landscapes will enhance aesthetics, improve air quality and provide a comfortable environment for relaxation.

- Central Monument Integration:
The Martyr's Memorial, which currently stands at the heart of the square, will be preserved and integrated into the new design. A more accessible, reflective space around the monument will encourage visitors to engage with Lebanon's historical struggles for freedom.

- Walkability and Connectivity:
The square will be better connected to the surrounding areas through well-maintained pedestrian pathways and public transport nodes. This will improve its accessibility from key parts of the city, making it more integrated into daily life. Accessible design features, such as ramps and well-marked pedestrian crossings, will be prioritized.

Mixed-Use Development and Cultural Spaces:

- Cultural Centers:
Establishing spaces for exhibitions, performances, and workshops. These centers will host activities promoting Lebanon's rich heritage and contemporary cultural expressions, making the square a hub for arts and cultural exchange.

- Cafes and Retail:
Strategically placed kiosks, cafes, and small shops will foster local entrepreneurship while ensuring the square remains active throughout the day. These spaces will also provide informal gathering spots for citizens to socialize.

- Interactive Digital Installations:
The integration of digital screens or projections can be used for public art, announcements, and community-driven content, ensuring the square remains dynamic and responsive to its users.

Policies and Strategies for Implementation:

- Public-Private Collaboration:
A critical aspect of the project will be collaborative governance, involving a public-private partnership model. This will ensure that both public interests and private sector investments are aligned for the square's sustainable and equitable development.

- Community Involvement:
A participatory approach will be adopted in the design and development phases, ensuring that local communities, artists, activists, and civil society groups have a say in the square's evolution.

- Local Economic Support:
The development of small businesses and artisan markets will be encouraged to promote local economies, particularly in the form of craft markets, food stalls, and cultural tourism.

- Governance and Maintenance:
The successful renewal of Martyr's Square will depend on effective governance and long-term management. The establishment of a dedicated management body, in collaboration with local authorities, will oversee the square's maintenance, programming, and security. Regular activities, events, and cultural initiatives will be organized to ensure continuous engagement with the public.

Challenges:

- Political Sensitivities:
Given the square's symbolic role in Lebanon's political struggles, it is essential to ensure that the redevelopment process remains apolitical and serves as a unifying space for all citizens.

- Gentrification Concerns:
The inclusion of commercial elements and private investments must be carefully managed to avoid the displacement of low-income residents or the loss of the square's character as an open and inclusive space.

Archeological Spine Connection

Archeological Site

Archeology Museum

Affordable Housing Units

Cultural and Touristic Center

Farmers Market

Green Space

New Old Souks

Pedestrian/Car Limited Area

Pedestrian Street to Mar Mkhayel

Transportation Hub

Underground Freeways

0 25 50 100 200

Chapter 8 cover photo:

This is the document presented to all interviewees prior to each interview. It provides a synthesis of the author's masterplan proposal, developed through spatial and historical analyses.
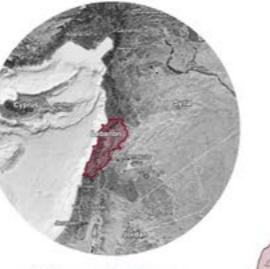
Lebanon

Beirut

Project Site

Lebanon Location
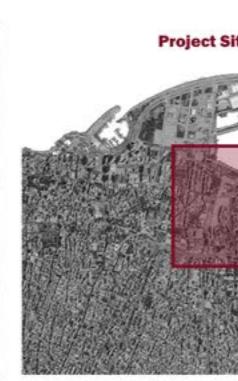
Masterplan Proposal

Farmers Market

A farmers' market in Beirut's Central District would revitalize the area by supporting local farmers, offering residents affordable and sustainable food. Creating an inclusive public space that fosters social connection, in contrast to the district's history of privatization, it would symbolize resilience and renewal, reestablishing the city center as a place where all members of lebanese society can congregate.

Underground Freeways

Building underground freeways in Beirut's Central District would reduce congestion and pollution while freeing surface space for green areas and walkable streets. This would reconnect fragmented neighborhoods, improve livability, and transform the city center into a more people-centered environment.

Pedestrian Street to Mar Mkhayel

Establishing a pedestrian street linking the Central District to Mar Mikhael is vital to physically and socially reconnect two of Beirut's most vibrant urban areas, which remain fragmented by infrastructure and traffic. This link would enhance walkability and create a continuous public realm that encourages interaction, accessibility, and a stronger sense of urban cohesion.

Green Space

Public Open Spaces:
The square will be redesigned as an open space with large pedestrian zones, green areas, and seating. The introduction of green landscapes will not only enhance aesthetics but also improve air quality and provide a comfortable environment for relaxation.

Central Monument Integration:
The Martyrs' Memorial, which currently stands at the heart of the square, will be preserved and integrated into the new design. A more accessible, reflective space around the monument will encourage visitors to engage with Lebanon's historical struggles for freedom.

Transportation Hub

Establishing a transportation hub in Beirut's Central District is essential to reconnect the fragmented city, improve accessibility, and reduce reliance on private cars that contribute to congestion and pollution. As the historic heart of Beirut, the district is a natural focal point for mobility, and a central hub would link diverse neighborhoods, support economic activity, and make the city center more inclusive and functional for all residents.

Cultural and Touristic Center

Cultural Centers:
Establishing spaces for exhibitions, performances, and workshops. These centers will host activities promoting Lebanon's rich heritage and contemporary cultural expressions, making the square a hub for arts and cultural exchange.

Pedestrian/Car Limited Area

Creating a pedestrian, car-limited area in Beirut's Central District is crucial to reclaim public space, reduce traffic congestion and pollution, and make the area more livable and accessible. By prioritizing walkability, it would encourage social interaction, support local businesses, and highlight the district's cultural and historical significance, transforming it into a vibrant and people-centered urban hub.

New Old Souks

Reimagined heritage marketplace that blends traditional Lebanese architecture with contemporary public space, including artisan shops, food stalls, and cultural pavilions woven through narrow alleys and ...

Affordable Housing Units

The People's Quarter at Martyrs' Square:
Reclaim Martyrs' Square as a living, inclusive urban hub by introducing a mixed income housing model centered on public and affordable units, community oriented design, and institutional innovation. Since the August 4 explosion and prior economic stagnation, large parts of the area remain underutilized or fenced off by Solidere. The BCD is largely unaffordable and disconnected from Beirut's real demographic reality.

■ Archeological Spine Connection
■ Archeological Site
■ Archeology Museum

The Beirut Archaeological Spine:
Physically and symbolically connecting the major archaeological sites of the Beirut Central District: Bashoura ruins, Roman Forum of Beirut, Martyrs' Square, and the Archaeological Tell this will transform these sites into a coherent, accessible, and publicly celebrated urban network.

0 25 50   100   200

8- Interviews on Martyr's Square and Beirut Central District

8.1- Data Collection Methods

The qualitative data for this research was gathered through a series of ten semi-structured interviews conducted with key steakholders. This method was chosen to facilitate an in-depth exploration of complex, nuanced perspectives regarding urban development, public space, and the political economy of the Beirut Central District. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to follow a predefined set of thematic questions while retaining the flexibility to pursue emergent themes and allow the interviewees to articulate their views freely.

Participant Selection

Participants were selected representing the three critical spheres of influence in Beirut's urban governance landscape: the Public Sector, the Private Sector, and Civil Society/Expert Groups. This deliberate diversification ensured a holistic perspective on the challenges and opportunities for inclusive development in the BCD.

3 Public sector intervewees to understand official planning mandates, bureaucratic challenges, and policy priorities related to the BCD.

3 Private sector interviewees to analyze the role of developers, investors, and commercial actors in shaping the BCD's built environment and economy.

4 Civil society/experts interviewees to gather critical perspectives, grassroots experiences, and alternative visions from those actively working on urban justice, cultural heritage, and community organization.

Some interviewees had experience spanning multiple sectors, such as public, private, and civil society. When this was the case, they were asked additional questions related to their other areas of expertise, not only the sector they had initially selected for.

Participant Profile and Execution Details

The selection of interviewees was intentionally broad to capture diverse voices with specialized knowledge and direct experience in urban advocacy, such as journalists, curators, architects, urban planners, photographers, politicians, civil

servants and activists. Execution of the interviews employed a mixed-mode approach: seven interviews were conducted in person, while three were conducted online. All interviews were audio recorded with the express consent of the participants and subsequently transcribed. The duration of the interviews ranged from 60 to 120 minutes.

Interview Questions

The interviewees were first shown the preliminary proposal for the regeneration of the Martyr's Square area and were briefly informed about its main interventions. They were then asked, first, questions concerning the general thesis topic, second, questions about the masterplan proposal, and third, questions related to their respective fields, whether in the public sector, private sector, or civil society.

I- Questions Concerning General Thesis Topic (All Participants)

These questions sought to establish a baseline understanding of the BCD's identity, meaning, and accessibility across all stakeholder groups.

1- How would you describe the identity of Martyr's Square today?

2- What role did the Square play before the civil war, and how has that role changed?

3- Do you feel Beirut's Central District is accessible to ordinary citizens, or does it feel alienating?

4- What symbolic or emotional meanings do you think Martyr's Square holds today?

5- How do you personally experience the physical, social, or economic borders that exist within Beirut?

II- Questions About Thesis Masterplan Proposal (All Participants)

These questions were posed to all participants to gather feedback and stress-test the feasibility and political risks of the final masterplan proposal.

1- Do you believe a mixed income housing model is feasible in Beirut and Beirut's Central District?

2- What's your impression of the proposal to introduce cultural centers and new old souks around the Martyr's Square?

3- Do you have a positive or negative impression of the highways and bridges that surround the downtown area?

4- Do you think a network of pedestrian pathways could help reconnect surrounding neighborhoods of Beirut's Central District?

5- In your view, what would meaningful community participation look like throughout the design, implementation, and maintenance of a project like this?

6- What potential risks or unintended consequences do you see in implementing this type of urban intervention?

7- If you could change one thing about Martyr's Square today, what would it be?

8- How do you emagine to participate or contribute to a "new old souk" in Beirut's Central District?

9- What do you hope Martyr's Square becomes for the next generation?

III- Public Sector Specific Questions

These questions focused on governance, regulatory frameworks, and the feasibility of state-led urban renewal.

1- What are the main challenges to public led urban renewal in Beirut?

2- How do urban planning regulations currently enable or block inclusive developments in Martyr's Square?

3- Do you think it's feasible to renegotiate Solidere's land control for public interest use?

4- How might the lack of heritage conservation laws impact reactivating archaeological sites around the Martyr's square?

5- What mechanisms exist or are missing for public participation in Beirut's urban planning processes?

IV- Private Sector Specific Questions

These questions probed the relationship between commercial viability, social responsibility, and private sector participation in the BCD.

1- In your experience what makes a downtown area economically sustainable and socially vibrant?

2- How do you respond to critiques that commercial development in BCD has excluded the public?

3- What incentives can push private developers to consider building affordable or mixed income housing?

4- Would your firm or business be interested in participating in a PPP (public-private partnership) model to revitalize Beirut's Central District?

5- How can commerce coexist with memory, activism, and public life in the Martyr's Square?

V- Civil Society Specific Questions

These questions explored the historical role of grassroots movements, preservation strategies, and mechanisms for transferring decision-making power to non-state actors.

1- How have communities historically interacted with Martyr's Square as a site of protest or gathering?

2- In your view how can memory and resistance be preserved in built form?

3- What kind of urban interventions do you think best support inclusion and daily life?

4- How can NGOs or grassroots groups be given decision making power in public space projects?

5- What risks do you see in revitalizing areas that are already contested or emotionally charged?

8.2- Stakeholder Interviews
Roula Ajouz Sidani

Roula Ajouz Sidani is a seasoned public sector leader and strategic advisor with over 35 years of experience in sustainable tourism, urban development, and national planning. Having served as Director of the Cultural Religious Tourism Unit at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers and as an elected member of the Beirut City Council for two consecutive terms, she has played a pivotal role in shaping Lebanon's public development strategies and promoting transparency, cultural preservation, and economic revitalization. Her extensive work with governmental bodies, international organizations such as the World Bank and UN-Habitat, and civic institutions reflects her deep expertise in policy implementation, stakeholder coordination, and sustainable urban governance.

Questions Concerning General Thesis Topic

1- How would you describe the identity of Martyr's Square today?

Nothing. It has no identity today.

2- What role did the Square play before the civil war, and how has that role changed?

Everything. It played the role of peace and prosperity; it represented the height of Lebanon and worse civil war ever. It embodies everything; it divided and it brought people together. It did both its where people met and where people fought.
هيّ المحل وين بلّشت التجارة ببيروت، وهيّ المحل وين انتهيت التجارة إلى حدّ ما ببيروت. قصة كبيرة. هي أمّ الشرائع وملجأ كل مثقّف كان بالتاريخ ليتعلّم القانون والتشريع. هي أمّ الشرائع تبحث عن قانون
It's very contradictory.

3- Do you feel Beirut's Central District is accessible to ordinary citizens, or does it feel alienating?

It is accessible but it also feels alienating. It's not a place for the poor or middle class, there's no places to sit, coffee shops are closed, only expensive restaurants and caffes. It's alienating to everybody more or less.

4- What symbolic or emotional meanings do you think Martyr's Square holds today?

Nothing at this stage.
همّ الناس كتير أكبر. مركز لقاء متل ما كان مرّة ما بقى، مطاعم مسكّرة، داونتاون مسكّر.
Inaccesable restaurants
بس ما بتشبّهك بشي، ضايعة.
People are too preoccupied with survival that they forget the emotional meanings.

5- How do you personally experience the physical, social, or economic borders that exist within Beirut?

Of course. Theres a huge social discrepancy that's not acceptable. The middle class has disappeared, and this is reflected in the outings that are available for the general public. Everything is expensive and not stimulating or inviting.

Questions About Thesis Masterplan Proposal

1- Do you believe a mixed income housing model is feasible in Beirut and Beirut's Central District?

In Beirut yes, in downtown, I doubt.
مثل كل الداونتاونز الحديثة بالمنطقة ما بتربط
هيدا ما يعني إنو ما لازم يكون فيه projects
أو ما لازم يكون فيه Museums و مطاعم لكل الناس
At the same time, the government does not own the land in this area. The land is more or less private. So, I don't know who would have the incentive to build such housing. The land is very expensive. I'm not justifying, I'm just stating the facts. Barrier تكون مفروض مفتوحة لكل الناسما تكون
بين الغني والفقير، بس مش بالضرورة للسكن
So, since these are private lands, I don't see how it is realistically possible in this area. However, the Karantina area which is an extension to this area from the sea is neglected. This area could be a prime area that can complement the downtown district and include affordable and middle-class housing as well as a hub for companies that can work with the neighboring countries. Reviving the spirit of the Lebanese again. Especially when these neighboring countries for example Syria are reconstructing and revivng. So, the roots of your project proposal can be extended to these neighboring areas, providing continuity. And spreading to these areas that also have potential and are mostly owned by the government and not private entities. So bottom line is to have any type of public housing, the land should be owned by the government. I suggest introducing a flea market instead where people and converge and meet, always connect you project with bringing back Lebanon to what it was, bring back people together.

2- What's your impression of the proposal to introduce cultural centers and new old souks around the Martyr's Square?

It's very important but it has to have a meaning. It has to be related to? أي بيروت نريد؟
ما بقى فينا نعمل أشياء بتاخد العقل بس ما خصها بتاريخنا
Especially in a place like Beirut that has such a rich history.
ما في ينعمل مشروع ببيروت، ما يلحظ شوكانت عليه
You cannot just go into complete nostalgia, this is why you need to revive the past. Search for places that had historical importance even if it's gone today.

3- Do you have a positive or negative impression of the highways and bridges that surround the downtown area?

Not not negative, once we answer what beirut do we want, on all levels including infrastructure. And we have a
مخطط توجيهي عام وملزم ومفصّل للبلديات
Which is a dream of mine, then we can always change as long as we remember our past.
عشنا أربعين سنة حرب، ما في تخطيط مدن، وماشي حالنا
We need to look at the cup half full. We need peace first in the country to be able to have
مخطط توجيهي عام
Which is doable because it happens all over the world. These bridges might not look the best
ما حلوين.
But imagine life without them; the cars have nowhere to go. They were good for their time but its about time to change. A plan should be put in place detailing the peripherals of the city, how to make underground networks ect, by order of importance and whatever we can implement.

4- Do you think a network of pedestrian pathways could help reconnect surrounding neighborhoods of Beirut's Central District?

Absolutely, because you can only say "hello" while walking. Driving has disconnected people from each other. We need sidewalks, we need plants, we need benches, we need small shops; things that allow people to walk around and interact with each other.

5- In your view, what would meaningful community participation look like throughout the design, implementation, and maintenance of a project like this?

Oh! Ideally? This answer is too long!
بسبب الحرب روح الإنسانية بهالبلد ضاعت، وروح الوطنية ضاعت
We have a very serious, complicated problem in our system. Educational; we neglected and did not update our public school system. We lack
الخدمة المدنية
This is what we need to rebuild since there is a big gap between the social classes. There is so much work that needs to be done, equity and not equality.

لما تعملي عدل، بيزيط البلد
Because slowly you give an alternative to George Orwell 1984 which is what's happening now. Fixing the electricity crisis can alleviate costs for most people of this country, giving them the potential to do more than just survive. This country has so much potential because it proved that once there is stability, in 24 hours it stands back on its feet, but it needs a plan. A first step could be some sort of unified mandatory system in schools. Which teaches children from a young age what's right and wrong.

فكرة تخدمي بلدِك منّا موجودة
There is a solution, but it is very long term that starts from the root, education.

6- What potential risks or unintended consequences do you see in implementing this type of urban intervention?

It's very simple, it's when you don't talk to the people and explain to them from the very beginning.
أنتِ جاية من عند الناس لَعند الناس، وهيدا الغلط اللي عم بصير بكل شي. بدنا نعمل مشروع، بدنا نبَسّطه، نعمله بصري، نحكي مع الناس ونخد دعمهم.
You make meetings, films, short videos, social media, you can start with ngos , talk to public figures that the general public like, and let them interview the public. You need to market the project right. The times this was tried in Beirut; it wasn't done right.
نعمل بطريقة غلط، ننزل عليهم بالباراشوت. الناس حالتن حالة، ما عندن كهربا، وبدّن سيّاراتن يصفّوا بعيد ما سألوا الناس الصح شو بدها. بدّك تحكي لغة الناس

7- If you could change one thing about Martyr's Square today, what would it be?

Open the shops. Really open up the area.
ما إلو حق ولا رئيس يسكّر المنطقة والشوارع عالناس.
مجرد ما تفتحي وتعطي ثقة، بترجع بتعيش المحلّات.
Politics is what's stopping that from happening. The army has physically closed off the area so the places and shops are afraid to open. Mental and physical barricades are what exist. I once opened up the area myself, without funding from anyone. Lebanese people are innovative, and they want to live, give them peace and they will do it.

8- How do you imagine to participating or contributing to a "new old souk" in Beirut's Central District?

If it is done well, caters to everyone, the first thing I would do is go there.
بنزل وبنزل مع أصحابي

9- What do you hope Martyr's Square becomes for the next generation?

Liberated. To stand for what it is. To respect its martyrs and to build for tomorrow. Those martyrs that died for their country. They died because they believed in their country. I wish for it to be liberated again

Public Sector Specific Questions

1- What are the main challenges to public led urban renewal in Beirut?

Corruption. Bureaucracy. Everything has to be computerized and simplified, and things will work out. It's easy and free.

2- How do urban planning regulations currently enable or block inclusive developments in Martyr's Square?

Everything today blocks this, weather in martyrs square or the whole country. Because the laws that are implemented whether in urban planning or whatever it is are obsolete. Even the environmental laws are obsolete. They cause more harm than good. The law its self is outdated, we need modern laws.

3- Do you think it's feasible to renegotiate Solidere's land control for public interest use?

If there is a government everything is feasible. Because there is something worse than Solidere, the capital of corruption. Private companies are developing public land without even paying taxes like in Biel where they landfilled the sea, built on it and don't pay anything to the government.
حاسبوا الناس على العلم مش على ميولكن الشخصيّة.

4- How might the lack of heritage conservation laws impact reactivating archaeological sites around Martyr's square?

I don't really see a lack there honestly, I respect the Directorate General of Antiquities (DGA) they are working with limited resources and doing a great job with what they have. You cannot stop development just because there are ruins in the area. Like every other historical city in the world, they maintain the ruins but develop around them while conserving them. The implementation of the laws is lacking due to scarce resources.

5- What mechanisms exist or are missing from public participation in Beirut's urban planning processes?

None exist. But there should be and it's very easy. In Beirut you should have partnerships with the main credible universities in archeology, infrastructure, and urban planning. To compensate for the lack of government employees and lack of jobs for these young students. It's easy but there are no incentives. The universities and students would be more than happy to participate in this. But it is up to the mayors and government officials to implement such a thing.

Main Insights

Martyr's Square today reflects a profound disconnect between its historical significance and its contemporary reality. Once a central symbol of unity, commerce, and civic life, it has become associated with emptiness and loss, its emotional resonance weakened as citizens prioritize daily survival over collective meaning. Yet beneath this detachment remains a latent symbolic power and a persistent nostalgia for the square's moral and historical weight. Although physically open and accessible, the downtown area functions as a socially exclusionary landscape shaped by privatized public space and an economy catering to elite users, erasing its role as an inclusive gathering place. This exclusion is intensified by the erosion of the middle class, which has deepened social and economic segmentation across the city. Systemic governance failures including corruption, outdated legislation, and the absence of effective public planning, have allowed private actors to dominate land use, limiting the potential for equitable or sustainable development. Genuine civic participation is nearly nonexistent, underscoring the need for early-stage engagement rooted in clear communication, visual tools, collaboration with universities and NGOs, and the use of accessible public language that speaks directly to citizens. Spatially, walkability is identified as a crucial condition for social cohesion, while aging infrastructure, elevated highways, and closed commercial fronts reinforce both physical and psychological barriers. Mixed-income housing within Solidere's boundaries is financially unrealistic, but adjacent publicly owned areas such as Karantina offer more viable ground for affordable, socially integrated development linked to the historic core. Ultimately, the renewal of Martyr's Square must be understood not only as an urban project but as a social one, grounded in civic education and a long-term effort to rebuild a shared sense of citizenship and belonging.

Proposed Urban Strategies Derived from Interview Findings

1- Move from Symbolic Restoration to Practical Reconnection.

Instead of treating Martyr's Square mainly as a symbolic node, make it a daily-use, inclusive civic space. Focus on reopening commercial life cafés, kiosks, local markets to restore spontaneous encounters. Use the square as a testing ground for reactivating public life, not just memorializing the past.

2. Expand Beyond the BCD: Connect to Karantina.

Introduce a continuity corridor linking Martyr's Square to Karantina through walkable axes, small public nodes, and mixed-use clusters. Position Karantina as the "social balance zone",a place for affordable housing, creative industries, and public facilities. This responds to the realism of land ownership constraints while preserving your vision of inclusivity.

3. Create a Pedestrian Social Network.

Develop a network of walkable streets and micro public spaces extending from Martyr's Square to adjacent neighborhoods. Prioritize "slow mobility" (walking, cycling) and integrate urban furniture, greenery, and small-scale commerce. This supports social healing through physical connectivity.

4- Introduce a "People's Market".

Replace or complement the "new old souks" concept with a flea market / weekly market open to all social classes. It embodies the idea of bringing people together through trade, echoing the square's historical function. This gives your plan a tangible economic and social anchor, not just cultural nostalgia.

5- Prioritize Communication and Participation.

Integrate a participation strategy as part of the design process. Start with visual and accessible storytelling (videos, exhibitions, pop-up events). Partner with universities, NGOs, and influencers to collect public feedback. Build trust through transparency and visual communication. Make participation itself an urban activation tool, not just consultation.

6- Advocate for Policy and Legal Reform.

Frame your project as a pilot for policy modernization. Push for updated planning laws and digitized permit processes. Propose partnerships between municipalities and universities to fill the governance gap. Use your design as a catalyst for administrative reform, not just physical change.

7- Respect the Past, Avoid Pure Nostalgia.

Ensure that your "revival of the old souks" is rooted in the authentic cultural memory of Beirut, not a stylized replica. Highlight continuity rather than reconstruction, reconnecting historical layers with current realities. Use archaeological and heritage elements as living components, not static relics.

8- "Liberate" the Square Physically and Mentally

Strategically propose to remove army barricades, open visual axes, and encourage public re-entry. The political gesture of openness becomes an urban design act.

Soha Mneimneh

Soha Mneimneh is an urban planner, researcher, and lecturer with more than fourteen years of experience examining the intersections of urban policy, housing, land governance, and postwar reconstruction in Lebanon. Her work spans academia, international organizations, and local advocacy, with a focus on housing precarity, land financialization, urban politics, and the structural forces shaping Beirut's urban landscape. She currently serves as a researcher at Columbia University and a lecturer at ALBA, while consulting for rights-based and advocacy organizations on issues such as equitable energy transitions, national food strategies, and urban recovery. Previously, she led major research tracks at the American University of Beirut, co-authored landmark reports on housing and post-blast reconstruction, and contributed to the development of key urban databases and methodological frameworks. Beyond research, she has engaged directly in local governance and civic initiatives, including running for Beirut's municipal elections in 2025. With dual master's degrees in Urban Planning and Architecture, Mneimneh brings a uniquely comprehensive perspective on Beirut's evolving urban fabric, informed by rigorous scholarship, policy engagement, and field-based experience.

Questions Concerning General Thesis Topic

1- How would you describe the identity of Martyr's Square today?

Martyr's Square has a very strong social value for me, both as an urbanist and as an activist. إلها كتير رمزية لأنه بعد ثورة 17 تشرين والإحداث السياسية كنا هونيك نجتمع أكتر شي، it was a space for protest. من هيدا المنطلق كتير استخدمنا الساحة This is what it represents to me symbolically from an activist perspective. On a collective level, بعتقد إن في شي مشترك عند فئة كتير كبيرة من المجتمع اللي بشوفو الساحة بهيدا الطريقة. At the same time, it is also a space of conflict. ماكل إحداث 17 تشرين كانت لطيفة. We were tear gassed, and some people were beaten and persecuted. So it is also a site of confrontation and trauma. From an urbanist perspective, I think you know that an intervention is planned for Martyr's Square soon. In two months, they said an architect has been appointed to transform the area into a public square. As urbanists, كتير استغربنا لأن العمل عم ينعمل على أساس خطة قديمة and in a way that is very disconnected from its surroundings. They only added some ramps and a bit of greenery without actually studying what the square means or how it relates to its context. ما في أي تصور على هيدا الموضوع. You know that there are archaeological sites there, but most people do not even know this. They are simply surrounded by a railing. ما في حدا ما إلو قيمة متل أي موقع آثار ببيروت ولبنان. بيعرف إنو هالمواقع موجودين، وما في حتى بانوهات للناس تعرف. There is no real protection. This alone is very problematic. If you speak with the older generation, ديماً بذكرونا بقيمة الساحة. كانت ساحة الدباس، كانت ساحة فيها كان فيها حياة، كان في مبنى الريفولي يلي تهدم، transportation. I understand the romanticization, but these things no longer exist and we will not rebuild the same buildings again. They were demolished. I also do not think turning it back into a transportation hub is the right approach. It should definitely be a public space that brings life back to the area. Today the area is clearly abandoned. When there are no protests, it is completely empty. There are almost no shops open. It is just an island in the middle of nowhere, functioning as a parking lot. Even with the proposed transformation, I am not sure people will truly use it as a public space. It would not work well as a transportation hub anymore because the urban fabric around it has changed. We already have transportation hubs in Cola and Adliyeh. We should strengthen these existing hubs instead. Turning Martyr's Square into a transportation node again is not the best idea.

2- Do you feel Beirut's Central District is accessible to ordinary citizens, or does it feel alienating?

It is definitely not accessible. When we talk about the entire downtown area, we are looking at a vacancy rate of around seventy percent. It is the highest vacancy rate in all of Lebanon. Apartments are empty, shops are closed, and many spaces are abandoned. This alone makes the area inaccessible, because vacant spaces create a sense of abandonment rather than livability. The prices are also extremely high. The Solidere model, which received exemptions to redevelop and upgrade the area, also received exemptions in many other aspects. It controls most of what happens there. This further limits accessibility. It is very clear that the area is not designed for ordinary citizens. Even the public areas, even if the cement blocks are removed, still do not feel accessible. ما في حدا عنده مهنة أو صناعة معينة تيشتغل بهيدي المساحة. There is no place for craftspeople, small businesses, or everyday workers. This creates an environment that feels exclusive and disconnected from the people who actually live in the city.

3- What symbolic or emotional meanings do you think Martyr's Square holds today?

To me, it is a space of protest. It is a place where temporary life appears. Whenever we had protests, كانت ترجع الحياة بشكل مؤقت لهيده الساحة. What would happen was a kind of pedestrianization of the square because the roads were blocked, which allowed street vendors to set up. There was life again, with people singing and dancing. Some people found this chaotic or problematic, but at the same time, because Lebanon lacks public spaces where people can express themselves, many felt that this was their place. They were nonconforming individuals who needed a space to be heard, so the square became a site for expression, even if only temporarily. After Covid, which played a major role in reopening the square to cars, it returned to being what it was before: a parking lot.

4- How do you personally experience the physical, social, or economic borders that exist within Beirut?

I think Beirut is very fragmented. It is fragmented not only in a sectarian sense, but also in terms of class. The strongest borders come from the combination of sect and class. أكيد في كتير عالم بشوفو بيروت إنها كتير كوزموبوليتان، خصوصاً الأشخاص اللي مش ساكنين ببيروت، بفكرو بيروت هي كلها مار مخايل وحمرا. Which is not the case at all. في بيروت في عنا طريق الجديدة، في الخندق، في الجعيتاوي البسطة. So the city is fragmented in this way, and I see it as layers of different forces that manifest in the urban fabric. This is not exclusive to Beirut. It exists in many cities worldwide. But what is understudied is that cities are collages of all these overlapping dynamics. In Beirut, each neighborhood or even each street has its own social dynamics and its own social fabric. As you move across class levels, some neighborhoods begin to resemble villages. You discover that these areas function like small towns. الناس بتعرف بعضا، الناس بتقعد بالشارع. واذا إجا حدا شكلو شوي مختلف، دغري بيلقطو إنو هيدا الشخص مش من هون. I come from these neighborhoods, and I noticed that if I change even a small detail in my appearance, people start to think I am a stranger. Once I talk to them, they recognize me again. So the borders exist socially and economically. Physically, the highways also play a major role. They cut Mar Mikhael from Karantina. This creates real divisions between people. It might not have been intentional. It likely came from car dominance and the push to build more highways, without considering the social implications. Before elections, political groups place their flags across their territories. They mark these areas clearly, showing who controls them. This symbolically represents a form of federalism in the city. It is not only about who provides services, but also about how space is claimed, improved, or branded with these symbols. It creates territorialization within the city, reinforcing borders that people experience every day.

Questions About Thesis Masterplan Proposal

1-Do you believe a mixed income housing model is feasible in Beirut and Beirut's Central District?

I think it has its limits. I am a housing expert, and I know there are many inclusionary housing models. بس بحس أحياناً إن هول الأفكار كتير جايين من برا. They often come from people who are privileged enough to say that we should all live together to create a mixed city. This is just my personal perspective. There are many groups in our society who have never been exposed to what an upper class lifestyle looks like. When they do get exposed, they feel the class difference very strongly. Meanwhile, upper class people often react in the opposite way; they feel sympathy for lower income individuals. So while I personally want mixed income housing, the question remains: which income groups? Placing high income people in the same building with someone who earns minimum wage, without providing the lower income resident with any support to help them move up socioeconomically, does not make sense. The gap would be too wide. In other countries that apply mixed income housing, the definition of low income is very different from Lebanon. For example, low income residents in Singapore live in state owned buildings where inclusionary housing is provided by the government. Even the lowest income group there is much better off than what we consider low income in Lebanon. Here, low income often refers to Syrian refugees or migrant workers who are mostly unregistered and extremely exploited, to the point that it can resemble modern day slavery. You cannot realistically put a refugee or migrant worker in a mixed income building with a banker. There is a fundamental disconnect. So we need to think carefully about which social classes to include when designing mixed income housing. Middle income groups are more compatible with each other. A model that includes middle upper and middle lower classes could work because they share more similarities. For lower income groups, we need to provide support and ensure their basic needs are met before placing them in mixed income housing. Alongside that, restrictions on profits gained during the economic collapse would help reduce the massive gap between those who benefited and those who suffered. Only then can these groups be considered within a mixed income housing model. There are deep structural inequalities that need to be addressed in parallel. Mixed income housing alone cannot solve the core problem unless these broader issues are also confronted.

2- What's your impression of the proposal to introduce cultural centers and new old souks around the Martyr's Square?

I definitely think the cultural center is placed in the right location. The Egg has a strong and clear cultural value, so I agree with positioning it where you proposed. As for the old souks, why not? I like that they are located in a very central area with strong edges around it, which can allow the souks to act as a bridging point that connects these surrounding neighborhoods. I think it is a good opportunity.

3- Do you have a positive or negative impression of the highways and bridges that surround the downtown area?

They create segregation. Just like the separation between Mar Mikhael and Karantina, the same thing happens here. لما حددوا خطوط سوليدير، المضحك كيف حدد إن هيدي المنطقة هتترمم وهيدي لأ. It is definitely a boundary. It is a boundary of displacement. You had people who once lived in the center and were pushed outward to the edges. They had nowhere else to go. So these highways form a very harsh border, both physically and socially.

4- Do you think a network of pedestrian pathways could help reconnect surrounding neighborhoods of Beirut's Central District?

I think it could definitely help, but I also feel that other factors need to play a role. For example, the laws that govern Solidere need to change. We also need to rethink who will actually be in charge of the downtown area after Solidere, in order for the space to truly become accessible. If you build pedestrian pathways between the Khandaq area and downtown, but people still cannot afford to live there or rent a shop there, then what is the point? The pathways can play a role, but they are not the only solution. We need changes at the policy and governance level, as well as changes in how the shops and housing units are designed and managed. Only then can real reconnection happen.

5- In your view, what would meaningful community participation look like throughout the design, implementation, and maintenance of a project like this?

It is very challenging to achieve meaningful participation for a project of this scale. It needs to happen in two phases. The first phase involves governance. Right now, it is very clear that there is no real coordination between the different levels of the state. Municipalities do not collaborate with ministries, and ministries do not collaborate with each other. This is true across all sectors, from electricity to water to housing. Everything in this country is fragmented. Municipalities are in one place, the parliament is in another, and the ministries are somewhere else. For anything meaningful to happen, all these stakeholders need to sit at the same table and create real dialogue. In parallel, residents also need to be part of the process. The question is: which residents? This is another challenge, because currently there are almost no residents in the downtown area. So should we bring representatives from the surrounding neighborhoods? Should we involve people who once lived or owned shops in downtown before Solidere displaced them? That could be a valuable option, especially including the old shop owners. There also needs to be a discussion about what kinds of activities people want to see in the area. Some people want artisans to return. I know many who rejected the idea of street vendors in downtown, and there was a loud outcry from defenders of Solidere. But why would the presence of a street vendor destroy the character of the space? If the municipality organizes and supports them properly, many people could benefit. The hypocrisy is that the same people who object to street vendors here love them in other countries. The former shop owners from Nejmeh Square, for example, felt like they were expelled from the area by Solidere. Yet many of them now have shares in the company. They could play an important role in any participatory process. Meaningful participation requires bringing all these voices together.

6- What potential risks or unintended consequences do you see in implementing this type of urban intervention?

I feel that you have a strong understanding of the elements in your proposal. The transportation hub in the empty plot is actually a smart idea, instead of turning Martyr's Square itself into a hub and bringing more cars there. As for the farmers market, there will definitely be pushback from people who want to preserve the character of the Solidere area, as we discussed earlier. But I do think you should include something like an agro ecological farmers market where organic produce can be sold. There are many farmers in Lebanon who are already working with organizations to shift toward agro ecology, and they are seeing improvements in crop yields. This could be an opportunity. It would benefit consumers, and at the same time encourage more farmers to adopt ecological farming methods.

7- If you could change one thing about Martyr's Square today, what would it be?

Pedestrianize it.

8- How do you imagine participating or contributing to a "new old souk" in Beirut's Central District?

I would buy things definitely.

9- What do you hope Martyr's Square becomes for the next generation?

A true public space. I imagine it becoming something that genuinely represents the practices and spirit of October 17, not necessarily the protests themselves, but the values behind them. I hope it becomes fully pedestrian and genuinely welcoming to people from all social classes. I love the map that was created organically by people during the revolution.

Public Sector Specific Questions

1- What are the main challenges to public led urban renewal in Beirut?

Political will. مشروع أي. بالنسبه إله هيدا ديماً العائق الأساسي. إذا في إرادة سياسية حقيقية، الواحد عنجد بيقدر يتخطى كل باقي العقبات. بدك ناس عنجد قلبها بهل محل، تشتغل عنجد لمصلحة الناس and that's it. I consider the heads of municipalities, the mayors, to play a big role. People do not see the value of local work or local authorities. You have many members of parliament who do not know what is happening on the ground. The municipality members are the people most in contact with what is happening. They know, they implement, and they have their own budgets. They theoretically have independence. إذا كن عندنا رئيس بلدية عنجد عندو إرادة سياسية بيقدر ينسق مع باقي الأطراف لمصلحة الناس.

2- How do urban planning regulations currently enable or block inclusive developments in Martyr's Square?

السياسات كتير بتأثر لأن سوليدير أخذت امتيازات. ومن هذه الامتيازات هي أن سوليدير هي اللي بتحط القوانين. So you have regulations specific to the Solidere area. You have building regulations that are different from the building regulations of the Beirut municipality. Solidere's regulations and codes are very advanced, and the quality of the building and finishing has to be very high end. You have to follow these very high standards, but at the same time the area becomes inaccessible. I feel that these standards should exist across the whole country, not only in the Solidere area, so everyone can have buildings of this high quality. If everyone in the country followed these regulations, prices would drop naturally. The developer would not make such a large profit since this standard would be widespread.

3- Do you think it's feasible to renegotiate Solidere's land control for public interest use?

Yes. How successful that would be is another question. هيدا شي ضروري وأساسي وبلش يبين إن في كتير عالم مهتمة بهل موضوع. Many people are writing their thesis on this subject. There are people who have been talking about this since the birth of Solidere. I feel like there is a group that understands the importance of this issue. At the same time, there is activist fatigue. After the October 17 thawra, people are not as politically active as they used to be.

It is sad, and there is not a lot of political participation, which was clear in the last election. I think a big event is needed to create the momentum for this to happen. Without a collective push, without some event that moves people, it becomes useless. This is not the first time this pattern has happened. In the past, many events mobilized people, collectives were formed, and momentum grew, but then other events occurred that dissolved it. For us, the most recent war highlighted our political and social divisions. So it is difficult, and I do not know if it can happen. You need specific conditions, something that unites everyone. Right now, the conditions divide us.

4- How might the lack of heritage conservation laws impact reactivating archaeological sites around the Martyr's square?

There is not a lack of laws. They have laws. In 2016, a law was passed on how to preserve ruins and archaeological sites. بس هيدا القانون بيعطي بطريقة غير مباشرة كتير صلاحية لمديرية الآثار هي تحدد شو بدو يصير بالموقع. For example, we were doing research on the Bashoura site. We found that the law even allows مديرية الآثار تستملك عقار لتحافظ عليه. This land is actually an entire old city. It was a necropolis. It is not a normal site. It is like a mini Baalbek. عم يلي الردم بيصير هون is absurd. They are not treating this land as a city. While the law does allow the authorities to intervene, even though it is private property, it is also allowed to decide that it wants to transfer these ruins. But right now they are being dismantled, and this is being hidden. No one is really talking about it. The law also allows the state to compel the private owner to conserve the ruins. It can reclaim the land and conserve it. The Ministry of Culture should do this, reclaim the land and preserve it. Using this land for tourism could bring in revenue from ticketing. This could be socially valuable, even for the surrounding areas, which could benefit from economic opportunities as their shops revive. The issue is not the regulation itself. The laws exist, but they are not being implemented in the way people need. This problem is made worse by the economic crisis, which pushes politicians to say they cannot reclaim the land because they lack funds. There are many missed opportunities within the municipalities and ministries because they lack any vision or plan for the future.

5- What mechanisms exist or are missing for public participation in Beirut's urban planning processes?

This إنو يكون في عندك مأسسة للجان الأحياء بقلب بلدية بيروت. is what I proposed in my program. We built our program based on the vision of many people, and it took a lot of time to develop. We tried to create these neighborhood associations to understand how people see their neighborhoods and what improvements they need. Each neighborhood should have a council that residents elect as representatives. These representatives would be responsible for carrying the concerns of the people and following up on the implementation of projects. The municipal council does not have the time to follow up on every single project happening under its jurisdiction. This system would make their work easier and would better reflect the will of the people. This is one way participation can work. We also need town hall meetings, awareness campaigns, and open door policies that genuinely listen and act. In Beirut, we already have multiple neighborhood committees. After the August 4 explosion, two committees were created to handle reconstruction. We also formed a group in Sioufi, but I tried my best not to dictate, because when experts become too involved, people become dependent on the experts. They lose their agency and might not remain as engaged as a community in the way we would want them to.

Main Insights

Urban renewal in Beirut is primarily hindered by a lack of political will, despite municipalities possessing the authority and resources to lead people-centered transformation. Solidere's exceptional regulatory framework reinforces exclusion by imposing high-end standards that isolate the district from the wider population. Although renegotiating Solidere's land control is seen as essential, the momentum required is weakened by activist fatigue, recurring crises, and deep social divisions. Heritage preservation laws technically exist, yet weak implementation allows the erosion of significant archaeological sites that could support cultural and economic regeneration. Governance is fragmented across ministries and municipalities, preventing coordinated planning or long-term vision. Public participation remains limited, highlighting the need for institutionalized neighborhood councils, town hall processes, and the inclusion of displaced former residents and surrounding communities. Martyr's Square holds strong protest symbolism but remains abandoned outside moments of mobilization, currently functioning as a disconnected parking lot. Planned interventions are viewed as superficial and detached from the square's meaning, context, and archaeological layers. Downtown more broadly suffers from extreme vacancy, unaffordable prices, and a lack of everyday economic activity, making it inaccessible to ordinary citizens. Beirut's borders operate through sect, class, symbolism, and infrastructure, with highways intensifying fragmentation. Mixed-income housing faces limitations due to severe socioeconomic gaps, making only adjacent middle-income group mixing feasible. Pedestrian pathways and transport hubs may aid reconnection, but without governance and regulatory reform, their impact will be limited. Agro-ecological markets and inclusive souks offer promising ways to activate public space and support local economies, though resistance from defenders of Solidere's exclusivity is expected. Ultimately, the square is envisioned as a fully pedestrian, inclusive, and expressive public space that reflects the values and collective practices of October 17 and welcomes all social classes.

Proposed Urban Strategies Derived from Interview Findings

1- Strengthen Municipal Leadership and Political Will

Empower municipalities to coordinate across state institutions, lead urban renewal, and implement people-centered policies.

2- Reform Solidere's Regulatory and Land-Control Framework

Standardize Solidere's exclusive building regulations citywide and negotiate partial public reclaiming or co-management of lands.

3- Enforce Heritage Laws and Protect Archaeological Sites

Activate the existing 2016 preservation law, halt destruction of ruins, and integrate archaeological areas into public space.

4- Institutionalize Public Participation Through Neighborhood Councils

Establish elected neighborhood committees, supported by town halls and awareness campaigns, to represent residents in planning.

5- Reintegrate Displaced Residents, Shop Owners, and Surrounding Communities

Include former downtown communities and nearby neighborhoods in shaping land use, economic activity, and cultural programming.

6- Rebuild Martyr's Square as a Civic Public Space, Not a Transport Hub

Fully pedestrianize the square and design it as an inclusive space for daily life, cultural expression, and civic gatherings.

7- Revitalize Downtown by Activating Vacant Properties and Supporting Everyday Economies

Incentivize small businesses, craftspeople, and workers to return to downtown, reducing emptiness and exclusivity.

8- Mitigate Highway Barriers and Reconnect Fragmented Neighborhoods

Soften or remove highway divisions and create pedestrian links between Martyr's Square, Gemmayze, Saifi, Khandaq, and beyond.

9- Contextualize Mixed-Income Housing Models

Apply inclusionary housing suited to Beirut's socioeconomic realities by focusing on compatible middle-income groups and structural support for lower-income residents.

10- Introduce Inclusive Markets and Agro-Ecological Economic Activities

Create accessible souks and farmers markets to activate space, support local producers, and diversify downtown's functions.

Elie Mansour

Elie Mansour is an urban planner, project manager, and civil engineer whose multidisciplinary expertise spans strategic urban development, infrastructure planning, and environmental governance in Lebanon. He holds a Master's degree in Urban Planning from the Lebanese University Faculty of Fine Arts and a Master's in Civil Engineering specializing in structures and public works, combining spatial vision with technical engineering experience. Mansour currently works with the Ministry of Environment, contributing to national efforts on environmental management and sustainable development. His career includes more than a decade at UN-Habitat and a subsequent role as Project Manager at UNDP, where he led initiatives in urban planning, WASH, solid waste management, public space design, and municipal capacity-building. Alongside his institutional roles, he directed his own engineering and planning office for eight years, gaining extensive hands-on experience in construction permitting, building rehabilitation, infrastructure design, and multidisciplinary project coordination. Known for integrating participatory planning and community-based approaches into his work, Mansour brings a comprehensive, practice-driven understanding of Lebanon's urban and environmental challenges.

Questions Concerning General Thesis Topic

1- How would you describe the identity of Martyr's Square today?

It tried to find a new identity after the October revolution. You would go down and find tents spread around. People used to go there because it was a good space to voice your thoughts and concerns and to talk to others. I see that it should have this role as Martyr's Square, the main place of the city, a place where everyone meets, pedestrianized, with no cars. This is how I see it. But now it is just a carrefour, a roundabout where cars pass by to go to Gemmayze or Hamra. So it is currently a junction instead of a meeting place. I see that cars really need to be restricted from entering this area, traffic needs to be diverted, and it should become the main hub for cultural activities, kiosks, and a place for people to meet, mingle, and talk. It could have strong potential to unite the community.

2- What role did the Square play before the civil war, and how has that role changed?

Before the civil war, I heard that when people came from other cities, they would go to Martyr's Square to take the bus to Jisr el Basha. The concept of public transport existed back then. Each street around the square had a bus that went to a specific area in Lebanon. Within the square there was Souk el Barghout. People sold everything. It was a popular area منطقة شعبية. People used to meet there for economic and social reasons, especially for trade. هيدا كان يخلق نوع من الإلتحام الإجتماعي. During the war, because it was a central point, it became the crossing. صار هون الفاصل بين الإسلام والمسيحية، الشرقية والغربية. I hope to see it become a uniting space again instead of a parking area.

3- Do you feel Beirut's Central District is accessible to ordinary citizens, or does it feel alienating?

It is alienating, but it is accessible in the sense that anyone can physically go there. However, it is inaccessible when it comes to safe movement. If you want to cross from the Amin Mosque to the Martyrs statue, a speeding car can run you over because it feels like a highway. In terms of physical accessibility, it is almost impossible. You need to be very fast when crossing. Once you reach the safer spaces, like around the statue, you can walk peacefully. If you noticed, most protests actually

start organically from there. It is a community space, but it is sad that it is bounded by infrastructure ما بتخليها تحكي مع بعضها and it does not allow the square to be connected to its surrounding areas. So it is accessible, but it is not inviting.

4- What symbolic or emotional meanings do you think Martyr's Square holds today?

For the new generation, it represents the Thawra. For the older generation, like my father's, it represents the war. It was the point of division, starting from there and extending to Beshara el Khoury. Before the current Italian statue that was made through an international competition, there was a marble sculpture by Yousef El Howayek, one of the best Lebanese sculptors. His work showed two women, one Muslim and one Christian, sitting and praying on the tomb of a martyr. This statue created social tension. There was an outcry from both Christians and Muslims, and they did not want it there. During the Fouad Chehab era, they held a competition and replaced it with the Italian statue. It has always been a space of debate. They put a statue, the public reacted, and they removed it. The square has always invited people to think about culture from different perspectives. It is a hub, a forum where people talk and confront ideas.

5- How do you personally experience the physical, social, or economic borders that exist within Beirut?

I do not go there. Once, with my family, I stopped the car قرب عن التمثال ونزلتن بس تا فرجيهن, but that was it. Usually, if I want to go somewhere, I park in the Beirut Souks parking, which is a mall, and we walk inside the Beirut Souks. But I do not walk outside it. So my movement is limited to a few meters within the closed souks. I am not a tourist to explore the streets. And in some areas, like Nejmeh Square, you even need permission from the army just to walk there. Asking an army member for permission to enter your own city center is not inviting at all. It is tempting to go in and see Nejmeh Square, but you feel a physical barrier, which is the soldier standing there, preventing you from entering. This militarization of public space in downtown makes you feel uninterested in entering.

Questions About Thesis Masterplan Proposal

1- Do you believe a mixed income housing model is feasible in Beirut and Beirut's Central District?

Yes, why not. It is much better than leaving the buildings vacant. In the Beirut Project in Gemmayze, we have houses that are 200 years old. We were able to combine in the same building the old tenants who cannot afford to pay their rents to their wealthy landlords and new renters who can rent below market rate. If we had the right policies, this would be very possible. You can encourage different classes of people to live together seamlessly. This is a policy we proposed to the municipality. To force landlords to abide by these rules, fines or warnings are placed on buildings to prevent owners from evicting their tenants for five or six years or from selling or demolishing the units. So everything can definitely be done through policy. This also reinvigorates the stagnant housing market in the Beirut Central District. It cannot stay like this, intended only for businesses. This model was tried before and it did not work. What is the purpose of trying to compete with Dubai? It is impossible.

2- What's your impression of the proposal to introduce cultural centers and new old souks around the Martyr's Square?

This should come from an urban planning perspective. You cannot have a cultural center on every street. You need to study the area. You would identify the cultural domains that are most active in Beirut, such as crafts, audiovisual arts, dance, and other creative fields. You can name each souk based on these categories, like a crafts souk, an artisans souk, or a dance souk, depending on current trends and what the youth are producing culturally. Each souk would have its own small hub within the surrounding streets. It needs to come from a planning approach. You must understand the baseline of cultural activities before proposing cultural centers. I do agree with the site you chose because without proposing something like this, the city will move toward gentrification. And this is the path Solidere is already pushing toward. Gentrification removes the old and removes areas like Bashoura. These areas are very beautiful and historical, with vernacular Lebanese architecture and buildings that date back to the French Mandate.

By making use of these buildings and repairing them instead of letting them deteriorate, you preserve the city. When you inject cultural activities into the area, people begin to earn their income from these activities instead of renting out historical buildings for very low prices. The surrounding infrastructure also starts creating jobs. This requires zoning policies, protection, and government incentives. The last heritage preservation law was drafted in 1933 during the French Mandate, and that was the last time anything meaningful was done.

3- Do you have a positive or negative impression of the highways and bridges that surround the downtown area?

It is a long answer. I am no longer in favor of the vehicular mode of transport. It is sad that we do not have any public transport in Beirut. If we had it, all these bridges would cease to make sense. With a robust transportation network that is safe, secure, on time, efficient, and has its own dedicated lanes without interruptions, the bridges and cars would eventually disappear. I would be the first to give up my car if we had decent public transport. We were one of the first countries to implement a tramway system, and now we have nothing, no trams and no trains. The infrastructure would take a long time to rebuild, and the geography of Beirut is hilly, which can also be a barrier. However, I think there should be a project to make Beirut car free. We can have parking in the suburbs, and once inside Beirut, people should be able to walk, bike, or take shuttles or buses. These ideas should be considered, and once implemented, the bridges will naturally disappear. When that happens, the division between poor and rich areas can start to dissolve. When a physical barrier disappears, economic activity can be revitalized. There would be more stalls, more mingling and interaction, more public space, and more discourse. This requires deep study, but it is very necessary.

4- Do you think a network of pedestrian pathways could help reconnect surrounding neighborhoods of Beirut's Central District?

Of course.

5- In your view, what would meaningful community participation look like throughout the design, implementation, and maintenance of a project like this?

Policy wise, I believe a lot in smart city concepts where people can contribute and voice their concerns through a municipality website, for example. They can submit grievances and complaints directly. In Holland, in The Hague, the municipality surveys its residents. In the street they placed a big GIS map, and surveyors were on the ground filling in Google Forms based on what residents said. Whenever a form was submitted, it lit up on the map and showed the areas that had been surveyed and the residents' responses. So you can understand the spectrum of opinions within the city through this platform. I believe the infrastructure should be well established to create this kind of community engagement. There should be policies in place related to how you engage with people through smart city concepts, and there should be a lot of trial and error to find the best way to conduct such processes. There is a model that worked to bring two communities together in Beirut, the City Centre in Hazmiyeh. It is on the border between a Muslim area and a Christian area, and you see people from both meeting there and interacting. Through a mall, they connected the two communities. A hub within the center can do the same and unite people from the different backgrounds we have in Lebanon. So there are three levels: governance through smart city tools, well established physical infrastructure such as benches, canopies, greenery, and trees, and finally community spaces that are supported through awareness.

6- What potential risks or unintended consequences do you see in implementing this type of urban intervention?

Just money and policies. Create the adequate policies and you are fine. Policies like قرارات مجلس بلدي or قرار حكومي, which define how these places should function and give incentives to people who have cultural spaces. There should be policies supported by proper studies. As for money, in any historical area the government needs to intervene in planning. But here our government is broke. They can think of many ways to bring in funding. The diaspora is one example. In Batroun, the diaspora village was built with diaspora funds. The diaspora

is a very good option, as well as public private partnerships through a build operate and transfer system. We can also work on loans for people who want to invest in projects like this. We should have financing options to fund these interventions and allow for growth and improvement. So the two main obstacles are financial and policy related.

7- If you could change one thing about Martyr's Square today, what would it be?

The vehicular accessibility. I would completely remove it and divert all traffic away from the area. This could be a good start. Then, when you eventually green it, there will be no car emissions, and this alone will invite more people to go there and encourage more interesting projects to appear. This is like planning by doing, starting step by step. If the target is to make it a community space, the first step should be to reduce vehicular activity in the area.

8- How do you imagine participating or contributing to a "new old souk" in Beirut's Central District?

It is a dream. At least if the Beirut Souks are renovated, they should bring back the old authentic feeling. Even in downtown and Martyr's Square, they should think of it the same way our ancestors thought of it. حلم نشالله يصير حقيقة.

9- What do you hope Martyr's Square becomes for the next generation?

A public space for all. The Martyrs Square statue itself, although I personally like the old statue better, has been left with the damages and bullet holes of the civil war, and that is very impressive. In my opinion, I like that they kept the marks of war on it. All generations are able to see the marks that the war left. I think we should have kept many more remnants and symbols of the civil war on our buildings and streets so that these ideas stay in our memory. تنذكر ت ما تنعاد. نشوف شو عملت تا ما تنعاد. أكثر من تنذكر تا ما تنعاد. The Martyrs statue is a living witness of the Lebanese civil war, but there should be something written on it about this so that when people go there, they can read about its layered past and origin. In Lebanon and Beirut, we have a problem that goes beyond needing walking or community spaces. People need to be cultured about their public spaces, to read, for the city to become an open air museum. In each

street, there should be something that explains why the street is named the way it is, who caused this history, and what happened. So when people pass by, they can learn. We can use technology and AI for this. Nowadays, doing this is very easy.

Public Sector Specific Questions

1- What are the main challenges to public led urban renewal in Beirut?

Financial challenges and policy challenges. Sometimes municipalities come in with aspirations for what they want to do, but once they enter the municipal bureaucracy, they become discouraged from doing anything. For any public led effort in Lebanon to succeed, it often needs to be supported by private sector ideas or partnerships. Lebanese people abroad are excelling in all fields. We should enlist them to work on such projects. You can create competitions for Lebanese expats who work in architecture. We have many leftover spaces that can be transformed into public spaces. Why not let them work on them?

2- How do urban planning regulations currently enable or block inclusive developments in Martyr's Square?

They do not exist. In 2010, in collaboration with Île de France, they proposed the Green Plan of Beirut. The plan was very extensive, but it was not legally binding or implemented. Urban planning in Lebanon is just a concept on paper. Although we have the General Directorate of Urban Planning, it mainly issues building permits and that is it. It is very primitive and needs a lot of time to mature. Planning is a must in Lebanon. Ninety nine percent of the country is urbanized, so we need proper urban planning. The NPMLT plan was a step in the right direction in 2005 and was passed in 2009. It should be a guiding document for all planning initiatives in the country. But now we need an update. It needs to consider climate change, water scarcity, and it should integrate AI and smart city concepts within our physical master plans. It took into account many economic, social, and ecological factors of its time, but it now needs to be revised.

3- Do you think it's feasible to renegotiate Solidere's land control for public interest use?

Why not. Lebanon cannot remain controlled by it. I believe there should be public private partnerships, not fully public and not fully private. Especially in this transitional phase, you cannot give everything to the private sector. It is like shooting yourself in the leg. You have no resources, and if you hand everything to the private sector, you leave nothing for the country. So during the transition, until there are funds, you need to make some kind of arrangement with the private sector.

4- How might the lack of heritage conservation laws impact reactivating archaeological sites around the Martyr's square?

One example is the Bashoura site. They are turning it into a parking area. They allowed the parking but did not allow the construction of a building on the site, which is better, but there should be actual laws to preserve and conserve cultural heritage. The site should have remained intact. There should be clear limits on what is allowed there, including the possibility of investing in the site to create something cultural at the very least.

5- What mechanisms exist or are missing for public participation in Beirut's urban planning processes?

None exist. Sometimes, when they conduct a strategic environmental assessment, they call for public hearings. For example, with the Bashoura parking, the government asked them to get accreditation from the Ministry of Environment first. In this strategic environmental assessment process, there is a public hearing. Other than that, there is no form of communication with the public. They put an ad for the hearing in the newspaper and make announcements when they do environmental licensing, but for heritage preservation there is nothing. No one talks to anyone. So I call for a heritage licensing process. They should submit a plan, explaining what they will preserve, how they will do it, what the mitigation measures are if any risk occurs, and what the alternatives are if the plan fails. They should come with a clear licensing plan.

Main Insights

Public-led urban renewal in Beirut is heavily constrained by financial limitations, weak policy frameworks, and municipal bureaucracies that discourage initiative, making public–private partnerships and the engagement of the Lebanese diaspora essential for progress. Urban planning regulations offer little support, as most planning remains conceptual rather than legally binding, and key documents such as the NPMLT urgently require modernization to address contemporary challenges like climate change and smart-city governance. While renegotiating Solidere's land control is viewed as feasible, it must occur through balanced public–private cooperation to avoid deepening state dependency or privatization. Heritage conservation suffers not from a lack of laws but from non-implementation, allowing the degradation of significant archaeological sites such as Bashoura and revealing the need for clear preservation rules and a formal heritage licensing process. Participation mechanisms are virtually absent, leaving citizens disconnected from planning decisions except for occasional environmental hearings, and underscoring the need for structured tools that enable transparent public engagement. Martyr's Square itself has shifted from an active social hub to little more than a vehicular junction, despite its symbolic weight as a site of protest, war memory, and civic debate; its revival requires full pedestrianization and the reconnection of severed urban links. Downtown Beirut is technically accessible yet socially and spatially uninviting due to militarization, heavy infrastructure, unsafe crossings, and a mall-like environment that discourages exploration. Mixed-income housing is considered viable if backed by strong municipal policy tools that regulate rents, prevent eviction, and reactivate vacant properties. Cultural activation through thematic souks, creative industries, and the revitalization of historic neighborhoods like Bashoura, is essential to counter gentrification and restore everyday economic life. Ultimately, reducing car dominance, reintroducing walkability, and embedding smart-city participation tools are seen as critical to reconnecting communities and transforming Martyr's Square into a pedestrian, inclusive, memory-rich public space that honors its layered history while serving future generations.

Proposed Urban Strategies Derived from Interview Findings

1- Establish Public–Private and Diaspora Partnerships for Urban Renewal

Leverage architectural competitions for Lebanese experts abroad and create hybrid public–private frameworks to overcome financial and bureaucratic stagnation in municipalities.

2- Reform and Update National and Municipal Planning Frameworks

Make planning documents legally binding, update the NPMLT to address climate change and water scarcity, and integrate AI and smart-city governance tools into Beirut's urban planning practices.

3- Renegotiate Solidere's Land Control Through Transitional Public–Private Agreements

Pursue balanced negotiations that gradually reintroduce public interest into land management without fully relinquishing control to the private sector.

4- Create Enforceable Heritage Preservation and Licensing Laws

Introduce a mandatory heritage licensing process requiring clear conservation plans, risk mitigation strategies, and limits on what is permitted on archaeological sites such as Bashoura.

5- Institutionalize Public Participation Mechanisms

Establish structured public engagement processes, including heritage hearings, planning submissions, and transparent communication channels beyond occasional environmental assessments.

6- Pedestrianize Martyr's Square and Redirect Vehicular Traffic

Remove cars from the square, divert traffic flows, and initiate "planning by doing" through stepwise pedestrianization to reactivate the area as a communal hub.

7- Reintroduce Public Transport and Reduce Car Dependency in Downtown Beirut

Develop long-term plans for transit networks, car-free zones, and peripheral parking systems to eliminate the need for elevated highways and dissolve socioeconomic barriers they create.

8- Support Mixed-Income Housing Through Policy Tools

Use municipal regulations, fines, and tenant-protection frameworks to integrate different social groups within restored buildings, preventing evictions and activating the vacant housing stock.

9- Create Culturally Themed Souks Based on Existing Creative Economies

Map active cultural sectors; crafts, audiovisual arts, performing arts, and develop specialized souks across surrounding streets to prevent gentrification while reviving historic neighborhoods.

10- Invest in Smart-City Participation Tools and Community Infrastructure

Implement digital grievance platforms, resident surveys, GIS-based engagement systems, and physical improvements such as benches, canopies, trees, and community hubs that unify diverse groups.

11- Develop New Funding Models Through Diaspora Investment, PPPs, and BOT Systems

Mobilize diaspora capital, public–private partnerships, and lending programs to finance public-space upgrades, heritage restoration, and cultural projects despite government insolvency.

12- Transform Martyr's Square into a Memory Rich Civic Landmark

Maintain war scars on the Martyrs statue, add interpretive plaques, and integrate educational and technological storytelling tools to turn the square into an open-air museum of collective memory.

Adib Dada

Adib Dada is an internationally recognized regenerative advisor, environmental architect, and founder of theOtherDada, an architecture and advisory practice pioneering nature-based design rooted in biomimicry, systems thinking, and ecological regeneration. His work bridges architecture, ecology, and art to advance a paradigm in which cities function as living systems that support biodiversity and well-being. Through his award-winning initiative, theOtherForest, Dada has spearheaded the planting of more than twenty native Miyawaki forests across Lebanon, transforming degraded urban sites into thriving ecosystems and mobilizing thousands of community members in hands-on ecological restoration. His forest-making and advocacy have been widely published, including in Nature-Based Solutions in Cities of the Global South, Mini-Forest Revolution, and Connecting Trees with People. A sought-after speaker and educator, he has lectured at institutions such as Cambridge University, Yokohama University, MoMA New York, SXSW Eco, World Expo Dubai, and the Saudi Green Building Forum. Dada is a Bio-Leadership Fellow and a Fellow of the Aspen Global Leadership Network, and has collaborated in regenerative and ecological projects with ENVI Lodges, Regenerate Lebanon, and KarajBeirut, Beirut's first non-profit media lab for experimental arts and technology. With formal training in architecture from the American University of Beirut, advanced studies in design and living systems at NYU's ITP, and certifications in biomimicry and ecological restoration, Dada brings an interdisciplinary, future-oriented approach to shaping regenerative environments where humans and nature can thrive together.

Questions Concerning General Thesis Topic

1- How would you describe the identity of Martyr's Square today?

It lacks identity. It has become a car park and a vehicular zone. This was by design and intent, perhaps by the municipality. I do not know who made those decisions, but the systems in place, whether Solidere, the municipality, or both together with the government, had the intention to strip it of its role as a public space where people can come together. They broke it up. They did the same thing they did with the Ring bridge. They made it fully vehicular, and there are no pedestrian crossings. There is nowhere you can actually cross to reach it. So it is a vehicular island. It is a parking lot. Yet there is a certain kind of identity or energy to it. Whenever there is an uprising, people automatically congregate there. So it is embedded in people's memory as a public space. It shows how difficult it is to erase a public space even after generations, because that memory and that energy remain. It is still where people naturally gather during demonstrations or uprisings.

2- Do you feel Beirut's Central District is accessible to ordinary citizens, or does it feel alienating?

Definitely alienating. For sure. From the design of it to the security presence, all of these elements contribute to that feeling. You do see moments where these spaces are appropriated by ordinary citizens or by people who were not necessarily considered in the design process. For example, in Zeytouna Bay, despite the exclusively fancy restaurants and cafes, the boardwalk has become a place where people from many different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, including migrant workers, go and appropriate it as a public space. So there is potential. There is a possibility for appropriation.

3- What symbolic or emotional meanings do you think Martyr's Square holds today?

A lot of the older generations carry memories of Martyr's Square as a place of congregation where they would take the buses to different destinations. Its proximity to the market also made it a very popular area. It has since been transformed into something totally alien and completely distant from the original intention and use of that space.

4- How do you personally experience the physical, social, or economic borders that exist within Beirut?

I am not sure what the exact answer would be, but when I walk around, the experience has changed a lot since having kids. Before I had children, I used to walk around and explore different areas. With kids, it became very difficult because you cannot use a stroller in Beirut. Unless you are in the downtown area, it is the only place where you can walk with a stroller. Anywhere else, there are no sidewalks, or cars are parked on the sidewalks, or the sidewalks are broken and filthy. So the city as a whole is not kid friendly or handicap friendly. That is where the BCD stands in contrast. It is much more pedestrian friendly, handicap friendly, and kid friendly. The contrast is striking. Before kids, it was easier for me to explore areas like Basta, Basta el Tahta, and Bashoura. You sometimes feel unwelcome in certain places. That could be in the BCD, where people look at you if they see you taking pictures, or in areas where different political parties and militias are present. There is always a sense of unease. You feel like you are not necessarily welcome. There is also the army presence. Between the army, guards, militias, political parties, and security personnel looking at you as if asking what you are doing there, you develop that feeling. Usually no one will bother you, but it is the feeling these elements create. And as I said, with kids it is much more difficult to move around because none of the streets or sidewalks are well maintained. It is not really safe.

Questions About Thesis Masterplan Proposal

1- Do you believe a mixed income housing model is feasible in Beirut and Beirut's Central District?

Definitely yes. Anything can be feasible if you have affordable housing. People will actually use it. I do not know what the reaction would be from those who own high end apartments, especially since many of them do not even use these apartments. But if affordable options were provided, I do not see why it would not be feasible. The real challenges are political issues, wasta, and corruption. These are what would stop such a project.

2- What's your impression of the proposal to introduce cultural centers and new old souks around the Martyr's Square?

I feel like it is essential to have a cultural center there. But it depends on the purpose. Culture is a very broad term. Is it a museum? A community center? A community hub? Is it about the history of the city? Which history? Who is writing that story? It is a complex issue. In principle it is good to have a cultural center, but you could end up with a center that no one visits, one that tells a sanitized version of the city and its history. There is a lot of work needed in terms of storytelling and accessibility. It should not feel closed off or detached. Maybe bringing some of its functions outdoors into the public realm can help people experience it without feeling intimidated or like they do not belong. Sometimes beautiful and clean images of spaces can look too new or too foreign, and not very welcoming. As for the old souks, they are essential for bringing people of different income levels into the area. People should be able to shop for basic goods there. It should be an affordable, local souk rather than a high end luxury market or a place filled with cheap fast fashion brands. Both extremes target very restricted clientele. A real souk needs local production and local products. Similarly to the cultural center, careful thought is needed. What kind of souk is it? What will be sold there? Who gets to sell there? Are you willing to allow food carts like kaak and corn vendors? These details shape how the space is perceived. How much freedom will people have in using the souk? Can anyone come with a table and set up shop? Or will it be highly organized, which again creates barriers to entry? These are things that should be considered.

3- Do you have a positive or negative impression of the highways and bridges that surround the downtown area?

Definitely negative. They are dividing, unfriendly, and not well maintained, and there is so much potential. You see people congregating under the bridges, mostly day laborers. This can make some people feel unsafe passing through those areas, which then hinders pedestrian circulation. These people are there because it is a major thoroughfare where they can access work, so how do you cater to different audiences and different needs? There are also different time scales: migrant workers who are here for a few years and are not necessarily invested in the city, residents who have lived here most of their lives and are invested in its public spaces, and day laborers who may spend only months here and have even less connection to the city. So how do you cater to all these different groups and allow them to coexist while maintaining safety and cleanliness? It becomes important to think not only about who lives in the area but who uses the space. Do they get to use it? Do they get to have a say? If someone does not feel connected to a public space, they will not care about maintaining it or keeping it in order. So the challenge is how to create a sense of connection for groups who may find it very difficult to feel any belonging to the space, because they do not come from it, do not feel welcome, and do not expect to stay long enough to invest in it.

4- Do you think a network of pedestrian pathways could help reconnect surrounding neighborhoods of Beirut's Central District?

That is one element, but the real question is why people would cross from one side to the other. What is happening on the other side that makes crossing necessary? You have to think about the purpose and the language of movement. For example, in Burj Hammoud many people cross the horrible Yerevan Bridge. A lot of people have died on that bridge because there are no pedestrian crossings and not even sidewalks. It is purely vehicular, but it is the only way for people there to reach their work in the city, to access services, or to buy things they cannot find where they live. They risk their lives because they have valid and essential reasons to cross. So what are the reasons for people to cross from one area to another in Beirut? Why would someone from Bashoura

cross to go to downtown? Is it to see archaeology and walk around? Is it because there are essential services? Or because there is a community hub worth going to? You have to create real reasons that justify movement. And on the other side, why would someone who has a twenty million dollar apartment in the BCD cross into Bashoura? Without meaningful destinations and connections for both sides, a pedestrian pathway alone will not create that relationship.

5- In your view, what would meaningful community participation look like throughout the design, implementation, and maintenance of a project like this?

Finding ways for people to appropriate the space, creating community hubs that attract people and offer services to those who need them. There are many unemployed people and many elderly people who have nothing to do, so how do you create community centers that cater to them? Around those centers you can start forming circles of influence where activities happen and where people take part in maintaining, cleaning, ensuring safety, and looking after the space. The more you organize activities that engage the community, such as planting, community gardens, cleanup sessions, games, and other forms of collective involvement, the more social cohesion you create and the more people care for the place. However, you are working against a system that does not want this to happen and has no incentive to support it. It goes against its principles. When you create social cohesion, many of the systems in place begin to lose power. So you are fighting heavily against that system.

6- What potential risks or unintended consequences do you see in implementing this type of urban intervention?

That you alienate the systems in place, which will be met with a lot of resistance. Even the language we are using now, like "fighting" and "resistance," is aggressive and negative. It also echoes the language of war and confrontation, whereas our work is about regeneration, restoration, and reconciliation. How can we begin to change the language we use? Even I am guilty of this in the words I am using with you right now. So how do we start thinking differently? When we restore a place, we develop a sense of belonging and agency, which

is very important. Having agency means knowing that you can make change instead of waiting for the system to make that change or assuming the system will prevent you from acting. This is exactly what we did in our projects, whether on Martyr's Square or Beirut River or many other places. It came from our own agency. We said: we can do this, we are going to do this whether we have a permit or not, whether we will be judged or attacked. We know this is the right thing to do, we believe in it, and we will go ahead with it. Citizen power and civil society are very important. Showing people that they have the agency to make change at their own level, even at a tiny micro scale, is crucial. Over time, these actions can scale up. This gives people energy and hope. Many of us feel like nothing is in our hands, that we cannot change our city or our country, which is not true. Showing people through tangible actions that they can make these small changes is powerful. It is also important not to focus on things that have little impact. For example, recycling is important, but there are many upstream issues that need to be addressed first. Recycling is often used by the system to shift the blame onto people, rather than taking responsibility for the waste, packaging, and toxicity they produce. The narrative becomes: if only you recycled, the trash crisis wouldn't exist. This is not true. When we are planting a forest in the city, we are reclaiming a degraded space that should be returned to humans and other organisms. We are reclaiming it from the system, engaging and uplifting communities to do the work themselves. We facilitate, but the community is the one doing the work. They are the ones making the impact. We are not here to empower or give permission. We are here to show people what we are doing, invite them to join, learn from us, and continue. It is about inspiration and showing that they have agency. When we reclaim degraded land, clean it up, involve the community, and turn it into a green and healthy space, we reduce temperatures, reduce flooding, increase biodiversity, improve mental health, and much more. We are not doing one thing with one effect. We are doing things that have multiple, overlapping impacts on humans and the more-than-human world.

7- If you could change one thing about Martyr's Square today, what would it be?

Limit car access and make it more pedestrian. You do not necessarily need to remove cars entirely,

but you should make the area more walkable and accessible. Remove all the parking lots around it and turn them into public spaces and green spaces. Introduce urban forests as a tool for community engagement, where people can help maintain these forests and use them. This would clean the air and address flooding, temperature issues, and pollution through nature based solutions. There are so many things that can be done.

8- What do you hope Martyr's Square becomes for the next generation?

I hope it returns to being a public space, a true public space that represents all the people who are there. A place that contributes to social cohesion and public debate. During the thawra it became a space for public debate, which was so refreshing and so needed, and I think that could have very positive long-term impacts. It can also become a green lung for the city. Regarding your proposal, the issue with placing barriers around public spaces is that barriers often make these spaces more vulnerable to destruction and vandalism. When people themselves participate in creating a public space, they feel ownership over it and are more inclined to protect it. If a large landscape firm comes in and installs neatly arranged trees and polished elements, we know what happens: during demonstrations, people often destroy these interventions as an act of reclaiming—rejecting what feels imposed on them. The destruction becomes symbolic: "This is what you imposed on us; this is what we reject." A participatory approach would be extremely valuable, but it should not involve only immediate neighbors, because they are no longer the original residents, nor are they necessarily the people who will use a national public space. Martyr's Square is not a neighborhood park; it has national significance, which makes participation more complex. Still, the more communities involved, the more protected the space becomes. I'm not convinced that a single large green area would survive future demonstrations. When I look at the site, everything is heavily contained by streets. It might be more interesting to break that rigidity. Yes, we can have a main civic space, but it should not be just one big green lawn. It should integrate different functions: public services, community houses, market structures, elements that bring life and therefore protection. Greenery should also be more fragmented across the urban fabric, not boxed in by

surrounding roads. Right now, the design tends to replicate the existing condition: bordered by streets, contained, defined by the same rigid lines. What if parts of the square spilled into adjoining plots? What if the green spaces were more fragmented and organic rather than neat and contained? Think of Martyr's Square as the center, and imagine functions, small green pockets, and public nodes radiating outward. Around Beirut there are many leftover plots, even tiny ones, that could host a tree, a bench, or a micro–public space. By decentralizing instead of concentrating everything in one large field, you make it harder for authorities to block or militarize the space. We know they have closed the square many times. Fragmented, smaller pockets are harder to control. Meanwhile, a few larger spaces; if they include markets or community hubs, gain protection through human presence and daily activity. So you would have one main civic space, but also a network of pocket parks and public nodes radiating from Martyr's Square.

Private Sector Specific Questions

1- In your experience what makes a downtown area economically sustainable and socially vibrant?

It is not like that now, but I think community engagement is essential, along with bringing different communities back into the downtown area. Creating different types of markets so you are not only catering to one type of clientele is very important. Tourism and ecotourism can also be essential. The area has so much history, archaeology, and access to the sea, so it has all the elements needed to become a prime ecotourism zone. You can also think about introducing hotels that are not just high-end, but more eco-friendly and affordable lodging options. That could be a very good way to diversify who uses the space. Markets that cater to different people's needs would also help. There is so much potential when it comes to pedestrianizing the zone. By making it more walkable and attracting a larger diversity of people, you open the door for more uses of the space. That could have a positive social impact and also lead to economic growth.

2- How do you respond to critiques that commercial development in BCD has excluded the public?

It has definitely excluded the public. From the day they put up the boarding around the site and made it inaccessible, the exclusion began. Even when the project stalled for fifteen or twenty years, the boarding stayed in place. It is still exclusionary, even visually. What if those spaces had been used as public spaces until the project actually moved forward? What if, after a certain number of years, the barriers were removed and the land became public again, or at least publicly accessible? There is an interesting concept called POPOS that I saw in the United States. POPOS stands for privately owned publicly operated spaces. These are privately owned lands or plots that are not being used, but the city or municipality gets the right to operate them. They remain privately owned, but as long as the land is unused, it is opened for public use. That is an interesting model to consider.

3- What incentives can push private developers to consider building affordable or mixed income housing?

Subsidies from the government are one option. There are also other ways, such as allowing developers to increase the built up area or the number of floors they can build if they include mixed income housing. Incentives or tax breaks can also play a role. There are many ways to do this.

4- Would your firm or business be interested in participating in a PPP (public-private partnership) model to revitalize Beirut's Central District?

Yes of course.

5- How can commerce coexist with memory, activism, and public life in the Martyr's Square?

Historically, it was also a place of commerce, so these uses are not contradictory. Commerce can coexist with public life and activism, and even support them, especially when it sits within or around public spaces. It all depends on the type of commerce. If it is high end boutiques, it will recreate a sense of exclusivity. The nature of what is happening there matters. A major missing element in this area, and across the city in general, is public restrooms. We do not have any, and this is one of the reasons the streets are so filthy. No one wants to maintain public restrooms, but they are part of the basic civic infrastructure that needs to be put in place.

Main Insights

A socially vibrant and economically sustainable downtown emerges from restoring diversity, walkability, and everyday accessibility rather than catering exclusively to high-end users. Long-term exclusion created by fenced-off plots, privatized land, and heavy security can be countered through governance tools that reopen unused private sites for public use. Private developers can be steered toward mixed-income housing and inclusive programs through incentives such as subsidies, zoning bonuses, and tax relief, while commerce, public life, and activism can coexist when markets remain local, affordable, and supported by essential civic services like public restrooms. Martyr's Square has been intentionally transformed into a vehicular island with little pedestrian access, yet its identity as a civic gathering point persists. The broader district remains alienating despite being one of the few stroller- and disability-friendly areas, revealing stark inequalities in the city's pedestrian infrastructure. Social and political boundaries are experienced through surveillance, insecurity, and limited mobility, underscoring the need for cultural centers, community hubs, and souks that are locally grounded, accessible, and unsanitized. Highways and bridges contribute to fragmentation, and pedestrian pathways will only succeed when they connect to meaningful destinations and essential services. Effective community participation relies on spaces and programs that enable daily appropriation, shared maintenance, and social cohesion, even as such cohesion challenges entrenched systems. Ultimately, reclaiming Martyr's Square requires pedestrianization, nature-based solutions, and a dispersed network of public nodes and green pockets that extend into surrounding plots, ensuring that the space is protected and animated through continuous, collective use.

Proposed Urban Strategies Derived from Interview Findings

1- Reintroduce community-driven markets and diversify commercial activity.

Create multiple types of markets; local, affordable, and varied, to attract different social groups and revive everyday economies. Avoid high-end boutiques and encourage local production, small vendors, and flexible stalls.

2- Develop ecotourism and affordable lodging as economic catalysts.

Leverage Beirut's history, archaeology, and access to the sea by promoting eco-friendly hotels and affordable accommodations, broadening the user base beyond elite visitors.

3- Pedestrianize the downtown core and reduce car dominance.

Limit vehicle access around Martyr's Square, remove parking lots, improve walkability, and introduce safe pedestrian crossings to reverse its transformation into a "vehicular island."

4- Open unused private plots for public access through POPOS-like models.

Use "privately owned, publicly operated space" policies to temporarily open undeveloped private parcels as public parks, plazas, or community use areas.

5- Expand mixed-income housing with incentives for developers.

Provide subsidies, tax incentives, or increased allowable floor area to encourage developers to include affordable and mixed-income housing.

6- Integrate essential civic infrastructure, especially public restrooms.

Install and maintain public restrooms as baseline infrastructure to support commerce, tourism, and public life.

7- Establish cultural centers that spill into public space and avoid sanitized narratives.

Design cultural institutions that are accessible, outward-facing, and rooted in community storytelling, rather than enclosed, overly curated buildings.

8- Build community hubs offering services and programs for diverse groups.

Create centers for unemployed youth, elderly residents, and families, spaces for daily activities, support services, and social engagement, strengthening belonging and stewardship.

9- Introduce nature-based solutions such as urban forests and dispersed green pockets.

Transform parking lots and degraded parcels into community-maintained urban forests; distribute small green nodes across the district to create a resilient, less militarizable public realm.

10- Create meaningful destinations to justify pedestrian movement between neighborhoods.

Link pedestrian pathways to archaeology, services, markets, cultural hubs, and essential amenities so movement between BCD and surrounding neighborhoods is purposeful and reciprocal.

11- Rethink highways and under-bridge areas to integrate marginalized users.

Reimagine divisive road infrastructure to safely accommodate day laborers, migrants, and short-term users, acknowledging their presence and needs rather than excluding them.

12- Promote participatory, community-maintained public spaces.

Use planting days, clean-ups, urban gardening, and shared maintenance programs to build ownership and reduce vandalism, making public spaces self-protected through everyday use.

13- Replace rigid boundaries with a radiating network of public spaces.

Rather than one large, contained square, create a central civic space supported by a web of pocket parks, micro-public spaces, and activity nodes that spill into adjacent plots.

14- Encourage private-public partnerships (PPPs) for large-scale revitalization.

Mobilize private sector actors willing to collaborate with government and civil society on durable, inclusive redevelopment strategies.

Diaa Mrad

Dia Mrad is a Lebanese visual artist, architect and architectural photographer born in Ras Baalbek in 1991 and based in Beirut. Holding a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in Architecture from USEK, he began by documenting Beirut's architectural heritage before his work shifted in response to Lebanon's political and economic crises. His practice now explores how social and political change leaves visible and invisible marks on the built environment, from post explosion destruction to everyday objects shaped by ongoing instability. Moving between photography and architecture, Mrad examines the tension between two dimensional images and three dimensional space, creating work that captures both the memory and materiality of cities in transformation.

Questions Concerning General Thesis Topic

1- How would you describe the identity of Martyr's Square today?

It feels nonexistent. I do not think it has an identity anymore. It was once a place with deep history, but the only time we truly connected with it was during the revolution six years ago. Other than that, it has always felt like a place without character or purpose. It is supposed to be the balad, the center of the country, a place where people intersect and gather. Yet it is nothing like that today. You notice immediately that it is mostly empty and functions as a parking lot, so it does not feel like part of the city or like a space meant for the public. Historically, the purpose of a square is to be a place where people demonstrate, walk, and meet. But if you look at the roads around it, it is no longer well connected to anything. Martyr's Square is disconnected from Gemmayze on one side, and it is also disconnected from downtown because of the large highway that is always busy around it. It feels like it was once central, but whatever urban planning decisions were made ended up stripping it of its relevance. It is divided and detached from its surroundings. Because it is dominated by parking, you can easily miss the fact that the Martyrs statue is even there. It does not feel like part of the city. It is sad. Gemmayze in that area still feels somewhat pedestrian, but once you walk toward Martyr's Square, the space pushes you toward downtown, which feels like a cold and empty district. Martyr's Square becomes an in-between, yet also feels like the final edge where everything is abruptly cut off.

2- What role did the Square play before the civil war, and how has that role changed?

Growing up, I never interacted with Martyr's Square. It never felt like a place for us. I imagine that before the civil war, because it was more connected, it must have played a much bigger role. When you look at historical images, it was an actual square surrounded by buildings, full of movement and some greenery. It feels like something that was taken away from the city. It was meant to be the heart of Beirut, but it is far from that today. Now you do not see anyone walking there. It is only a parking space. In the past, it looked like a garden in the middle of the city, a real public square. Today it is only concrete, asphalt, and

the Martyrs statue. During the revolution, there was a shared feeling among everyone. We felt like the city was coming back to us, like it was finally our city again, because we had never seen that many people there. Maybe this was intentional by the people who planned it after the war. Squares and gathering spaces are naturally places where protests happen, so I think they wanted to take that possibility away from the Lebanese population. ما في محل نتجمع فيه ونبدأ مظاهرة. During the revolution, at first it felt almost like we were trespassing, even though we were simply entering what was supposed to be the most public space in the city. Martyr's Square was our only accessible square for protest. Nejmeh Square and Riad El Solh were not. Maybe if Martyr's Square did not exist, the revolution would not have happened.

3- Do you feel Beirut's Central District is accessible to ordinary citizens, or does it feel alienating?

I have always wondered why it feels so inaccessible. If you look at the architecture, it is not intimidating. It still has a human scale. You get the sense that it is supposed to have shops and activity, but then you notice the actual shops are all major luxury brands, expensive hotels, and high-end restaurants. That alone keeps the general public out. It does feel alienating, although it is hard to pinpoint exactly why. Maybe it is the presence of Parliament and the security measures around it that blocked many roads over the years. That creates the feeling of a police state. Recently, I went to film the Roman Baths for We Design Beirut. There are barbed wire barriers placed along the sidewalks. It looks like the streets were closed off at some point, and the barricades were simply moved aside. The Roman Baths were also closed for a long time. Just having these elements in the landscape makes you feel like you are somewhere you are not supposed to be. There might also be a desire among certain elite groups who live in that area to keep it from becoming a popular public space, even though it is beautiful. I drive a Vespa, and not too long ago there was a law that prohibited motorcycles from entering downtown after six in the evening. Why am I not allowed to cross through downtown with my Vespa? It feels like a police state, like you are entering an area that is not meant for you, an area that belongs to a specific group or social class. Maybe bringing back the kind of markets you are proposing could help

democratize the space and bring it back into popular use. Many people feel alienated simply because there is nothing for them to do there. Even when we go for lunch or dinner in downtown, it still does not feel like a place where you can take a walk. It is not welcoming. Maybe it is the lack of variation. There are no contrasting elements, no small shops, no public functions like schools, and nothing that people can actually use.

4- What symbolic or emotional meanings do you think Martyr's Square holds today?

For me, the strongest meaning it holds is connected to the revolution. It became a symbol of hope. As someone who lives here, I saw Martyr's Square bring together people from all walks of life. The idea of public protest is the most recent and most meaningful function it has had. At the same time, the square still feels cold. Even during the revolution, it felt like we were trespassing, even though it was supposed to be a public space. My memories of it are tied to that feeling of trespassing, but also to the feeling of being part of something revolutionary. The highways around it, the army presence in different spots, and the sense of being monitored all affect the atmosphere. It does not feel free.

5- How do you personally experience the physical, social, or economic borders that exist within Beirut?

Through my work in photography, I spend a lot of time observing the city, its architecture, and its urban layout. I am always surprised when I move from one area to another that is physically very close, yet the differences are so significant. It makes me question whether the borders are more physical or social. For example, if you look at Gemmayze and Mar Mikhael, they share a continuous street with no actual physical border between them. Yet Mar Mikhael feels more accessible, and I think that is because of the mechanics, the small shops, and the industrial character of the area. Gemmayze, on the other hand, still has many residents who have lived there historically, which gives it a more genuine and authentic atmosphere. Mar Mikhael has many newer residents, so it feels less cohesive. The separation there is not physical, it is social, especially due to gentrification. When it comes to physical borders, highways are the strongest ones we have.

Whether it is Fouad Chehab Avenue or the Ring, the roads create very impactful divisions. You can see it clearly when you walk. The buildings, the functions, and the shops change suddenly. You wonder how a shop on one side can have a rent of one hundred dollars, while a shop in downtown only three hundred meters away has a rent of twenty thousand dollars. That is a clear class separation. Historically, downtown Beirut had the same social class of residents as Bashoura. Over time, with heavy planning interventions and highway construction, that separation became intentional. The goal seems to have been to create a more elitist district. It is strange, because in many cities around the world, the downtown is the older and sometimes poorer area, while the high-rise business districts are outside the center. But in Beirut, it is the opposite. Downtown was transformed into a business-focused center, while people live outside of it. It feels like it should have been the other way around. I experience these borders physically through the differences in planning and renovation. Bashoura has many beautiful buildings that, if renovated, would look very similar to those in downtown. If the streets were improved and circulation made better, the historical continuity between the two areas would be clear. But today they feel like completely different worlds. You can see both the physical and social barriers just by looking. One of the main reasons I started photographing the city was to understand this contrast. How can two areas that are so close be so different? I paid attention to things like signage, the wires and cables everywhere, and how in some streets everything is neat and organized, while a parallel street looks chaotic. Documenting these details helped me try to understand the city. It feels like a large, chaotic urban landscape. مش مفهوم ليش هون هيك وليش هون مش هيك Religious borders may also play a role. Cultural or lifestyle differences can affect how an area develops and how it looks.

Questions About Thesis Masterplan Proposal

1- Do you believe a mixed income housing model is feasible in Beirut and Beirut's Central District?

Knowing Beirutis, I would say no. Someone with a high income would want to live in a high income housing model, and even someone with a lower income would not want to live in a building where they face expenses they normally would not have. For example, having a concierge is an added cost. In many lower income areas, buildings do not have a concierge at all. In my parents' building, when I asked them to consider hiring one, they said that no one in the building wanted it because it was an unnecessary expense. These small differences create barriers that prevent mixed income housing from working. Beirut is a smaller scale city, and people care a lot about who lives in the same building as them. A higher income person would probably not buy an apartment in a building shared with lower income residents. They would justify it with arguments about safety or lifestyle differences. Beirut is a clear example of class segregation. You can easily find lower income buildings, but you rarely find high and low income residents living within the same building. Because of this, I do not think mixed income housing is very feasible in Beirut. When it comes to a planned mixed income housing model, I personally do not think it would work.

2- What's your impression of the proposal to introduce cultural centers and new old souks around the Martyr's Square?

I like the idea of new old souks because it restores the original character of Beirut's central downtown, which was always a marketplace. That is one of the functions that could bring back a wide range of people. We currently have the so called Beirut Souks, but they are very elitist. They are not real souks; they function more like a shopping mall. Having a contrasting marketplace that is more inclusive and more affordable is a good idea. As for the cultural center, maybe. The Egg has become a kind of cultural landmark. It feels like something that belongs to everyone, something people naturally connect to. Building on that energy and creating a cultural center could work. But my first thought is that a cultural center might not be the strongest option. A museum, on the other hand, could be more successful and more meaningful.

3- Do you have a positive or negative impression of the highways and bridges that surround the downtown area?

Mostly negative. It is useful to have a highway that connects to Hamra, but it feels like you are leaving one area and entering another, even though you are still in the same city. It should feel more continuous. Instead, downtown sits in the middle like a passage or a doorway you have to cross in order to reach another part of Beirut. It should feel like one connected urban section. This is why I like your proposal to place the highway underground, bring pedestrian life back to the area, and reduce the width of the road that currently separates different neighborhoods. Right now, the division is very strong, especially between Bashoura and Saifi.

4- Do you think a network of pedestrian pathways could help reconnect surrounding neighborhoods of Beirut's Central District?

Yes, maybe. Realistically, we still rely heavily on cars. Creating pedestrian pathways would help, but there is still a lack of natural connections within the city. A public transportation line might be even more effective than a simple pedestrian street. For example, reviving something like the old tramway could make a big difference. Having pockets of more popular shops, like dekkeneh style stores, would also help. Adding small green areas would make the space feel like somewhere you actually want to walk through. A pedestrian pathway on its own is not enough. It needs supporting elements, such as pocket squares or pocket parks. Cities like Barcelona and Paris do this well. In each neighborhood, you find small squares or gardens that create moments of pause within the urban fabric. You could do the same in the dead spaces around buildings in Beirut. Small parks or gardens where people can sit and rest would make walking feel more natural and more inviting.

5- In your view, what would meaningful community participation look like throughout the design, implementation, and maintenance of a project like this?

During the design process, interviewing people and asking them what they feel is missing in their city would help shape the project. I believe residents would provide the most valuable input, because it is their daily lives that are affected. Surveying them would help identify what is truly lacking. In the implementation phase, it is important that people feel connected to the project. After surveys, the project could be presented to the public, followed by an open debate. Even if some people do not fully agree with the final result, they would still feel like they were part of the discussion. They might understand that others had different needs or preferences, and this could help them accept the outcome more easily. This process builds a sense of belonging. When people participate and feel included, they become more engaged, and the project becomes more community driven.

6- What potential risks or unintended consequences do you see in implementing this type of urban intervention?

The biggest risk is that it might not work, and we end up exactly where we are now. What if we create all these interventions and people do not use them? It is beautiful to design an archaeological spine, but what if people do not visit it? Beirut already has many historical sites, yet not many people go to them. I wonder what the reason is. Is it the urban planning around them, or is it a lack of awareness? For the project to succeed, it cannot rely only on design and planning. It needs strong community engagement so people know about it, feel involved in it, and understand how to use it. Without that, the intervention might not achieve its objectives. The biggest risk is that it becomes just another attempt at remodeling downtown without truly transforming how people interact with the area.

7- If you could change one thing about Martyr's Square today, what would it be?

I would add trees. Bringing trees back would immediately restore a human element. Right now, the square feels like a block of concrete. In the old photos of Martyr's Square, there were large palm trees framing the space. It looked like a park. Trees help define a space. At the moment, the square feels confused and uncontained. Adding trees would give it structure while still keeping it open. They could do a lot to transform the atmosphere and make it feel welcoming again.

8- How do you imagine to participating or contributing to a "new old souk" in Beirut's Central District?

Having a specific theme or focus for the souk would help. Souk El Ahad, for example, is known for vintage and reused items. Creating a souk with a clear identity could attract people and give the place a purpose. This is similar to the project I proposed for the Golf Club area. The idea was to look at what already exists around Ouzai and bring those functions into a new building. There are many furniture workshops in that area, so I proposed a furniture focused souk. There are also informal basketball and football courts. People created these spaces on unused land because they needed them. If you formalize what people already do, they will continue to use it. For a new old souk in downtown, it would make sense to study what already exists nearby and amplify it. For example, in Basta and Bashoura there are many antique shops. You could extend that activity into Martyr's Square. Imagine a central pavilion with small booths where the original antique shop owners set up once a week to create a market or fair. This would build on the existing identity of the area. Instead of introducing an entirely new function, you can revive the types of souks that historically existed there. This gives people something familiar to connect with and ties the project to the cultural history of the city. By looking at the surrounding borders of the district and identifying the functions that already thrive, you can draw those elements into the new souk. Concentrating existing market activities in one central area would help create a vibrant and meaningful space.

9- What do you hope Martyr's Square becomes for the next generation?

A true public space. A real place that people feel connected to and can simply go to. It is the only remaining public space in the center of the city, so it has the potential to become the starting point for a new urban system. If something like your project were implemented, it could serve as a model for how the larger city could evolve. Martyr's Square is already deeply political. Because it was historically a site of public executions, it carries strong symbolic meaning. It has also been the stage for political uprisings. I would love for it to continue playing that role and to contribute to shaping the new city that we are all dreaming of.

Civil Society Specific Question

1- What kind of urban interventions do you think best support inclusion and daily life?

When you think about daily life in public space, it is about simple things: walking around, looking at shops, and having easy pedestrian access. Pedestrian access is definitely an important starting point. Benches would help, along with places where you can sit and have a coffee without having to commit to anything. Affordable markets and small food kiosks would also make a big difference. Right now in Beirut, public space is mostly tied to expensive restaurants. It would help to create spaces where you can simply walk, buy a sandwich and lemonade, and spend time without feeling pressured to spend a lot. Street vendors or juice stands in permanent structures could help as well. A row of small, affordable food places would attract people. It would feel similar to a food court in a mall, which is usually inclusive because everyone can find something that fits their budget. Food might even be the strongest function for bringing people in, because it gives you a clear reason to go and it is accessible no matter where you come from. So I would say pedestrian access, food stalls, and small gardens leading toward Martyr's Square would create a strong foundation. Small gathering areas scattered around the district could encourage people to meet and naturally walk through the square. We have space for these interventions. There is unused land and many parking lots. The real challenge is that Beirut is small and land is treated purely as real estate. There is little willingness to give up land for public use. That might be the main obstacle.

Main Insights

Martyr's Square is seen as nonexistent and disconnected, functioning mainly as a parking lot rather than a public space, and its historic civic role is believed to have been intentionally weakened after the war to limit public gatherings. Beirut's Central District feels alienating because of luxury shops, security measures, and restricted access, while strong physical and social borders, especially highways, create sharp class separations between adjacent areas. Mixed-income housing is viewed as culturally unfeasible, whereas reintroducing new old souks is favored for restoring the area's original marketplace character. Highways and bridges around downtown are perceived negatively for disrupting continuity, and pedestrian pathways are considered insufficient without supporting elements like transportation, small shops, and pocket parks. Meaningful community participation requires surveys, public presentations, and open debates, and a major risk is that new interventions may remain unused. Adding trees is seen as the most impactful immediate improvement, and a new old souk should build on existing activities such as antiques from Basta and Bashoura. Ultimately, Martyr's Square is hoped to become a true, inclusive public space that reconnects the city and continues its symbolic political role.

Proposed Urban Strategies Derived from Interview Findings

1- Reconnect Martyr's Square to Surrounding Neighborhoods

Remove or underground the highways that isolate the square. Reestablish pedestrian and spatial continuity between Gemmayze, Saifi, Bashoura, and the BCD. Recreate pathways that restore the square as the city's central intersection point.

2- Transform the Parking-Lot Condition into a True Public Square

Eliminate surface parking. Reallocate the land to public space and civic activities.

3- Reintroduce Trees and Green Infrastructure

Plant large-scale trees to define the square's edges and restore a human, shaded atmosphere. Create green pockets and small gardens around and within the square.

4- Reinstate the Square's Historic Role as a Civic and Democratic Space

Design large, open, flexible gathering zones. Ensure unobstructed access without security barriers, fences, or restricted roads.

5- Democratize the BCD Through Inclusive Market Functions

Introduce affordable, accessible souks rooted in local culture. Design spaces for weekly markets, antiques, crafts, and small local vendors. Anchor the souk in existing economies like Basta and Bashoura antiques.

6- Avoid Mixed-Income Housing Models in the BCD

Prioritize other inclusion tools (markets, public spaces, mobility) instead of forcing mixed-income residential blocks.

7- Remove or Minimize Security Barriers and Access Restrictions

Reopen streets permanently. Remove barricades, fences, and visible security infrastructure. Redesign state buildings' surroundings to feel open, not militarized.

8- Introduce Everyday, Affordable, Street-Level Commercial Activities

Incorporate kiosks, juice stands, affordable food stalls, small retail units. Activate the ground floor throughout the district.

9- Create a Fine-Grain Network of Pedestrian Pathways

Link the BCD's inner streets with clear, walkable pedestrian routes. Integrate pathways with greenery, pocket squares, and resting points.

10- Support Pedestrian Life with Pocket Parks and Gathering Areas

Transform underused land and parking lots into small public gardens. Place seating, benches, and shaded areas throughout.

11- Introduce Public Transportation into the BCD

Develop a tram or transit line passing through or near Martyr's Square. Connect neighborhoods through transit, not only walking.

12- Build a Cultural Space Only if Grounded in Strong Public Resonance

If cultural programming is added, ensure it reflects public memory, belongs to everyone, and complements The Egg's symbolic role.

A museum may have stronger meaning than a generic cultural center.

13- Prioritize Deep, Multistage Community Participation

Conduct citywide surveys during the design phase. Hold public debates and presentations before implementation. Create feedback loops so residents understand and shape final decisions.

14- Ensure Long-Term Activation Through Awareness and Engagement

Promote awareness campaigns. Organize public events, workshops, and markets. Integrate local communities and shop owners from the start.

15- Use Food as a Primary Social Catalyst

Introduce food courts, kiosks, and affordable street vendors. Use food to animate movement corridors leading to the square.

Teymour Khoury

Teymour Khoury is a curator and architect whose work spans architecture, research, and exhibition-making. He is the founder of Archifeed, a platform dedicated to expanding architectural discourse and amplifying critical design conversations across the Middle East and beyond. Khoury earned his Master of Advanced Architectural Design from Columbia University's GSAPP and his Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Miami, building on earlier studies at the Rhode Island School of Design and the American University of Beirut. His professional experience includes roles at Bernard Khoury/DW5, CÚRE & PENABAD, and Patrick Reuter Architektur, alongside academic contributions as a teaching assistant at the University of Miami School of Architecture. Khoury recently co-curated "Design In Conflict", a student exhibition organized by We Design Beirut and managed by Archifeed, held at Burj El Murr. The exhibition showcased work from students across nine Lebanese universities and explored how conflict shapes space and form as an ongoing condition embedded in landscapes and lived experiences, reflecting Khoury's commitment to empowering emerging designers to confront complex realities through architecture and art.

Questions Concerning General Thesis Topic

1- How would you describe the identity of Martyr's Square today?

I don't think it has any identity, to be honest. Martyr's Square, similar to Beirut's Central District, reflects the geopolitical and social state of Beirut and the Central District. It's an interesting topic because, in President Rafic Hariri's vision for Solidere and Beirut's Central District, all of this area was some sort of bet that, at some point, Beirut would be a "plaque tournante," a turning point for the region. A place like Beirut, which benefits from many of the social freedoms that other Arab nations don't have, was in the middle of all of that. Hariri's plan was for Beirut to be an economic and social hub for all the Arab countries in the region. He saw Beirut, as the famous Solidere slogan says, madina arīqa lil-mustaqbal, an old city for the future. This is interesting because it projects it into the future but forgets the present. I find this quite interesting. Martyr's Square was supposed to be engulfed into a much larger plan. But because Hariri was killed in 2005, and due to all the political issues that rose later, like sectarianism and tribalism, this never came true. In one way, you have the Solidere/Hariri plan that was halted, and in another way, the vision that Solidere had was a vision consolidated by the private sector and banks, not industries. Most plots in Beirut are private because there was a whole scheme and plan to make Beirut into a banking hub and an economic and social hub. This area used to have a very vernacular urban layout, and the architecture was organic. Unlike the Solidere plans, which were very gridded and oriented toward the private sector and commercialization. It was a mimic or precursor to somewhere like Dubai, a city where you don't have industries or major factories but is much more of a commercial hub. This was the vision they had in the Hariri era. Interest rates were so high that many local industries did not survive. Why invest in a factory if you can just put your money in the bank and collect interest? To conclude, I think Martyr's Square is two things: it doesn't have an identity; it was part of a much larger plan that was never completed and never became fruitful because of the death of Hariri and the vision of Solidere that ended up not being accomplished. And due to the fact that this wasn't Solidere's plan, it never became the vernacular realm that it was in the pre-1975 era. I cannot totally blame Solidere for this. Of course, they had a responsibility in that, but this was only a consequence of a much larger geopolitical spectrum that pushed Beirut into that trajectory.

2- What role did the Square play before the civil war, and how has that role changed?

The Square before the war, from what I've seen and from my grandmother's album, she was the first woman licensed architect in Beirut, she always told me Martyr's Square was la place du peuple: a public plaza where people would go and spend their afternoons. Martyr's Square, in a way, symbolized the modern era that Beirut lived in. We were a very modern and contemporary city before many other towns and places in the region. We were much more developed than, let's say, a country like Singapore. There's an old story of the government of Singapore asking the Lebanese government for a loan in the sixties, which shows you how modern we were back then. In many ways, Martyr's Square symbolizes that. It shined a big spotlight on how modern Beirut was and showed how a plaza could be accessible to all. Back then, it projected that sense of a nation-state that, of course, wasn't perfect, but I would say was emerging and still in an embryonic state. But it gave an impression that the institutions and the public state were something that were respected and evolving. And in another way, it gave a perfect image of the social, political, and economic state that Beirut was in back then. That role has obviously changed. I take the example of Burj al-Murr, where we are right now. It is a reflection of Beirut's socio-political and urban state. The state of Beirut didn't allow for this building to be either repurposed or destroyed. There were many occasions where the private sector tried to refurbish it and do something with it, but only in a purely aesthetic manner. So it's interesting to see a building as old as this one, that witnessed so many political events, still standing. To go back to Martyr's Square, I would say it is kind of the same thing. One of the reasons why Martyr's Square is how it is today is, again, because of the geopolitical and social context the country went through from 1975 until today. Solidere's vision was halted in 2005, and whatever came after that was a pure consequence of that and of what was happening in the region.

3- Do you feel Beirut's Central District is accessible to ordinary citizens, or does it feel alienating?

No, absolutely not. I don't think anyone could say that it is. But again, I would almost repeat my answer from the previous question. It is also a consequence of the political events that we went through, and this reflected on the urban laws and the urban evolution of Beirut, which then reflected on that. Because everything was privatized, because at some point the vision of the economic hub did not happen, it created a part of Beirut that was very blunt and "soluble" in some ways. It's a vision that contradicted what it was pre-1975, and it was a vision that never accomplished itself. To respond to such a question: if Hariri were still alive, and if Beirut didn't go through the sequence of events that happened after 2005, and if, in an ideal world, it had taken the same path as a city like Dubai, which became an economic hub for the region. If Beirut had accomplished or succeeded in that path, and if Hariri wasn't killed, and if Beirut was able to become what it was envisioned to be by Hariri and Solidere and the private sector, I think we could have responded to this question in a much more colorful manner. It's black or white: either it did or it did not. But because Solidere's vision was halted, and the geopolitical context didn't allow Beirut to become this regional turning point that I was talking about before, it's very hard to conduct some sort of research or investigation or to provide a concrete answer for this. If you want a response purely to the question of why this part of Beirut; whether it's full of life or not, whether it's for everyone or not, the answer is quite clear and simple: it's not. But if you want to dive deeper and pose the social and political mechanisms that brought us into the situation we are in today, then it's much more complex. I think many of the factors and conditions I spoke about shine a spotlight on that. But again, it's very complex.

4- What symbolic or emotional meanings do you think Martyr's Square holds today?

I don't think it reflects any symbolic or emotional meanings. I don't think it reflects, for any person or Lebanese citizen, any particular emotion. I think it's more of a void or an open development or reconstruction project that did not accomplish itself and, in many ways, did not happen. I do not think it reflects any emotive feeling or sense. If I were to go toward that territory, I would say it doesn't

reflect much. It reflects a project halted mid-construction that did not really articulate itself or take place. Again, like I said, if we had followed that path of a city like Dubai, I think we would have a Martyr's Square today that would have been something other than a parking lot. It would have probably been a tower or a mall or a mixed-use private project. I would say it's just a direct consequence of the events that we lived. For me, when I pass by Martyr's Square, I'm just looking at a reconstruction plan that never articulated itself, that never came to fruition or completion. It's very voided.

5- How do you personally experience the physical, social, or economic borders that exist within Beirut?

That's a very complex and good question. I think the Beirut Central District, in a way, segmented social classes in Beirut. Today, you need to be extra privileged to live in the Beirut Central District and many of the areas surrounding it as well. Like many contemporary cities that were built recently, and like many cities in the Gulf countries too— to live in the heart of Dubai or Doha, you have to be very privileged. There are very few examples like Shanghai, and it was very interesting to see that in the center of Shanghai, some of the districts were kept for the workers. Because of course, you have a communist state and a very strong CCTV state where citizens are monitored on a daily basis, but it has some advantages, since the state becomes so strong that no matter what the private sector is willing to offer or give, the extremely strong state prohibits this from happening. So you have, in the middle of Shanghai, some historic streets where construction workers and low- to mid-income people lived. So you had these very historic lower-income streets next to very fancy contemporary towers with expensive apartments. I would say Beirut did not follow that path, although in some pockets of Beirut you still have low- to mid-income people who maintain their historically owned family house from their grandfather or great-grandfather, which they inherited and never sold. So in a way, they were able to stay and keep it. But for all new constructions, urban fragmentation happened, and there were a lot of inequalities that surfaced much more in the recent and post-war years. Beirut was still extremely vernacular. But in the game of blame— is this purely because of Solidere and the privatization of Beirut? For sure, they have a responsibility. But

I wouldn't go and say the blame is entirely on the private sector. Many other cities that had a strong nation-state still experienced this. You see a lot of urban segregation in the United States, for example, what you call one of the greatest democracies in the world. You also see it in many European countries as well. So I don't really buy that blame game that was adopted by many Lebanese social activists that exclusively blames the private sector for everything without zooming out and trying to understand why this developed that way and what the consequences are. And to zoom out even more and understand that this is not only a Beirut problem, but one that many other contemporary cities around the world also face.

Questions About Thesis Masterplan Proposal

1- Do you believe a mixed income housing model is feasible in Beirut and Beirut's Central District?

As long as you don't have a nation-state, no, absolutely not. I think it would be very unrealistic to say that something like this would be possible. The problem is that many institutions make you believe that this is somehow possible. In architecture school, they make you do social and mid-income housing. Your goal is to represent social justice. But the reality is that the architect doesn't really have this kind of power or legitimacy. At the end of the day, most architects are hypocrites, we all work for the private sector and make most of our money from the private sector, except for some specific cases like in France, for example, where many architects dream of working for the public sector, and there are many public projects that emerge. But the reality is that most architects around the world, specifically in countries like Lebanon where we don't have a nation-state at all, would be very hypocritical to claim that we are representative of any kind of social justice. So for the question of mid-income or social housing: absolutely not, I don't think such a model is applicable. Maybe in some areas in Lebanon where the land is cheap and within the means of construction you can accomplish something like that. But to have it at the same kind of scale as you have it in Manhattan, New York, for example, or Vancouver, at that large scale where you can have mid-income or social housing close to the center of Beirut, which would make it very practical for mid- or low-income people to go to work... Like in 1975, we had vernacular houses built by artisans very close to downtown. But to have this now, like we had before, in the middle of downtown or Beirut, it's very unrealistic If you don't have a strong nation-state that can back those projects, it's very unrealistic. Mid-income or social housing would be at the end of a very long list of things that this pre-embryonic nation-state we have would need to do. I'm not saying that it's not important, it's extremely important, and it's unfortunate that we do not have them. But it is explainable, and the game of blame here again doesn't make much sense.

2- Do you have a positive or negative impression of the highways and bridges that surround the downtown area?

Neither positive nor negative. I don't have a strong opinion on them. Like all infrastructure in this country, they are poorly maintained and not adapted to Beirut's evolution, especially as the number of cars increases and we still have no public transportation. The main issue is not the bridges or highways themselves, but the lack of proper maintenance and the absence of a public transport system. Beirut is becoming increasingly dense, and without a nation-state to plan and manage infrastructure, these structures appear inefficient.

3- Do you think a network of pedestrian pathways could help reconnect surrounding neighborhoods of Beirut's Central District?

In an ideal world, yes. But how realistic is it? To achieve this, you would need an entirely new infrastructure network that provides shade, weather protection, and proper continuity. To build pedestrian pathways, similar to something like the High Line in New York, you need a strong, well-defined budget and, most importantly, an established public transportation system. Without proper public infrastructure, creating pedestrian pathways would be inefficient and unfeasible. You first need optimized, adaptable public infrastructure that responds to the city's density.

4- If you could change one thing about Martyr's Square today, what would it be?

Let's get rid of that parking lot, please. Or at least let's make it more efficient. I think about this project in Miami by Herzog and de Meuron which is called The Parking Garage. They were able to transform the parking into a vertical architectural structure. I'm not saying that is optimal, but at least it fits better than ground-floor parking. I'm not saying we should do that, but I'm saying it remains much more efficient because instead of being limited exclusively to parking on the ground floor, at least you can go up and use that vertical structure to do more things. So this would be like a "dumb" response to the situation. In a much more smart or constructive manner, I would say that this is the central plaza of Beirut; something needs to be done and developed there. It needs to be an important part of Beirut. A part that can

attract people there. Not just tourists, but also our own people to this plaza. Back then, Martyr's Square was a public plaza where people would gather and watch movies and walk around and go to artisans' shops and at the same time go and enjoy a shisha in a restaurant. It was very much mixed-use, not in the contemporary sense of the term but in the sense that it was public and also private, relied very much on artisanry, so it was a very cosmopolitan place to be in, which it's not anymore. But again, is it logical to talk about Martyr's Square without addressing what surrounds it? The Beirut Central District as a whole? Even if you would nationalize Martyr's Square, make it public, make it a public plaza, of course it's better than nothing, but what would be the point if you're not thinking about the overall urban vision of Beirut? It wouldn't make any sense. So for me, for the case of Martyr's Square, it is worth zooming out and thinking about the entire area, at least an area of ten to fifteen blocks. Let's think about how we can make that entire area public. I also like the way of saying it's very optimistic to be able to change everything, so let's change something small, I like that approach. But in the case of Martyr's Square, let's look at a wider set of plots, because what's the point of doing that if a few meters away you have the Beirut Souks or a gigantic private project that is already very segmented.

5- What do you hope Martyr's Square becomes for the next generation?

I hope that Martyr's Square and the broader area that surrounds it would one day get reclaimed by the state that I hope will be born soon. By a strong nation-state that would reclaim those areas as public areas and would develop them so that they reflect Beirut and become again a public space like they were pre-1975. And they rethink the urban layout of that entire area. As you said, it should become pedestrian-friendly, accessible by public transport, and become an area where you can hang out in Beirut, where you can bring your family on a Sunday and be able to walk there. But again, this would be very optimistic from my end to think this without taking into account all the necessary steps you need to take before this becomes possible. These steps you need to arrive to this can also be very interesting. I'm not one to always demonize the private sector, but I also think public and private partnerships can happen, but for this to happen you need a public entity,

and without a public entity this is impossible. You cannot hope for a private investor to be a representative for social justice while on the other end you do not have a public institution that exerts pressure on him or gives him at least some guarantees that if he does that, then at least he would have some offsets in some other projects or developments he would do. That's the way the capitalist market works. As much as you can go against it, at some point if you want to be in it, you have to take all those constraints. But in a very optimistic world, I would hope that this becomes the public plaza that many Lebanese dream that it becomes, but this will also take some sacrifices from the Lebanese people. Because in reality we are also responsible for the fate of our urban town and city. It's very easy to always blame Solidere and the private sector, but at the end of the day we are the ones that made such a context possible. We are the ones that created it and set it in place, and we are the ones that went along with it. The "we" is much stronger than the "I," and the problem that we have here in Lebanon is that the "I" is always more important than the "we." You have a very clean apartment yet the street under your building is very dirty. As long as we are within that optic, it would be very hard to set any judgments. And again, this is the reason we don't have a strong nation-state. So again, it's an endless loop, it's very complex, and I don't like getting too much into the details because everything all comes back to that much larger complex theme that we are in.

Private Sector Specific Questions

1- In your experience what makes a downtown area economically sustainable and socially vibrant?

What I can say from an architect's point of view and a curator's point of view is that for a city like Beirut to be an example of a modern or contemporary city, I think one of the key things to have is two main factors. The first one is to keep the strong artisanry that we inherited. We still have the chance in this country to be able to benefit from and still have a lot of artisans, unlike a lot of other countries and cities that went from vernacular to modern to contemporary very quickly and lost their artisans. We have lost many of our artisans in Lebanon, but not all of them, and we are very lucky to have a very strong artisanal sector in our country. This is what gives Lebanon its specificity, and I wouldn't say its identity, I don't like to use that word very much, but I would say its strength and its very strong specificity. I think this is the word I'm more comfortable with. So I would say, one: the artisanry. And two: its industrial potential. Beirut has very strong industrial potential, and at some point in the post-war years, we still had a strong industrial sector. In the Hariri years, it faded away. Many of the industrial ventures went bankrupt because of the very high interest rate. It's coming back now; we're seeing that the industrial sector is slowly rebuilding itself. But again, for it to be optimal, you need a nation-state that encourages this and that would bring not only investments but would also make sure that all the state and economic policies are strengthening that and not halting it like they did in the late 90s and early 2000s. So keeping our artisanry and making sure it evolves and perpetuates, encouraging the youth of this country to remain and be artisans, and forcing many of us in the diaspora to produce and make things in Lebanon, and making sure the industrial sector remains strong, and making sure that the new nation-state pushes toward that. If we are able to keep these two poles, I think we can meaningfully impact the Lebanese economy and urban development.

2- How do you respond to critiques that commercial development in BCD has excluded the public?

This is just a consequence of a much larger pro-

blem that enabled Beirut to, at some point, be overtaken by the private sector. Because the nation-state was nonexistent, because the socio-political conditions of the country made it so, and because the geopolitical context of the region was very complex and unstable since Sykes Picot. So we're talking about the beginning of the 20th century. Again, I think this question is part of a much broader problematic, and I think that answering it with a straightforward answer isn't necessarily the solution. I think what's much more interesting is to have the willingness and courage to dive into and zoom out into those much bigger issues that enabled the Beirut Central District to be mainly a commercial plaza filled with mixed-use development projects, stripped of its artisanry, stripped of its factories and industries, and of what made it so interesting and rich back then, so attractive that many postcards of the early 70s, sent all over the world, portrayed Beirut as so charming.

3- What incentives can push private developers to consider building affordable or mixed income housing?

None. Because it's not their role. The private sector is mostly here to develop a plot, to make money, and to make a profit. So it's as if you are asking a banker whether he could go bankrupt for the well-being of the depositors. The banking crisis that happened in Beirut, where the powerful people and banks made sure their money escaped from the banks when the crisis began, is a very strong symbol of that, and of the much larger Ponzi scheme that occurred in Beirut. Mid-income housing may be done like in places like New York where, at some point, it could generate profit because it is a need. But somewhere like Beirut, where you do not have a nation-state or public authority that can exert pressure or set up zoning laws to make sure that some zones in Beirut are exclusively set and organized for that specific purpose of mid-income housing, then no, absolutely not. How can you ask a private developer to build any kind of project that doesn't make a profit, if there's no nation-state that pushes him to do so, and if you do not have the urban, zoning, and social factors that would allow something like that to happen?

4- Would your firm or business be interested in participating in a PPP (public-private partnership) model to revitalize Beirut's Central District?

While I'm mostly going into the curation sector right now, I think within the curatorial realm this is a little bit of what we're doing with "We Design Beirut," and with my own startup "Archifeed" this is what we've also been trying to do: democratize design and architecture. In the case of our exhibit, we tackled very pressing and important social, political, and historical topics like what happened during the 2023 war until today. We worked with nine architecture schools; we made a brief and asked every student to respond to this context, to the social, political, and urban situations that emerged because of that war, and because of what came before and what is happening now. So instead of most architecture schools where you present your project and then have it die in a drawer after, and be forgotten or just placed in the student's portfolio with the chances of it being seen being nearly zero, we decided to do a student exhibition, which is the biggest student expo to be done in Lebanon and the region. So the fact that we are able to do that, in a certain way, gives that opportunity to the students who are usually not given a voice; it's purely restricted to the academic realm. Through "We Design Beirut," we are able to revive artisanry and make sure that designers in this country are given the opportunity to be under the spotlight, to show and exhibit their work. I do not personally have an architecture firm, but my father has one. Whether he would be ready to take part in such a project? Maybe. But the reality is that so far we have not seen it. And I think that as long as we do not have a strong nation-state that is able to say that these are projects encouraged and promoted by us, and that we as a state make sure that you receive the institutional funding to be able to create such projects, then it would be very unrealistic. Specifically taking into account that we are not even in the peak of what was once the booming economic environment of this country. But now, given all the crises that we face economically, it becomes very complicated for private initiatives or groups to come and say that we're going to build mid-income or social or mixed-income projects without taking into account the profit that needs to be made. A lot of money is needed to make these projects happen. If a lot of money were coming into our country and foreign investments were coming in, then I would say yes. But in the situation we are currently in today, I don't think this is something that is really possible.

5- How can commerce coexist with memory, activism, and public life in the Martyr's Square?

In some ways, I think these things sort of contradict themselves. If you look at what happened during the 2019 protests, they were protesting because of the inequalities that existed in the country. It was very interesting to look at the images of the protesters in the Beirut Central District while these protests were happening. I did a project in Columbia where the goal was to map the public, private, and institutional plots in the Beirut Central District. It was very interesting to see these protesters occupying these once private commercial spaces. It was really fun to see how some people reclaimed the land that was taken from them, the land that should have been public land but instead, because of the conditions of this country, remained exclusively private. To be able to see how these private spaces were reclaimed in times of protest was quite interesting. Given the way Solidere was built and laid out, and how the Central District was engineered, commerce cannot coexist with memory, activism, and public life. It becomes very complicated today to change this vision or layout or urban grid that they established there. So I would say it's quite unrealistic to put these things in the same topic; they contradict themselves. And these contradictions were exposed in 2019. As long as you do not have a very strong nation-state that puts its foot in to regulate all the urban anomalies that exist today in Beirut, then all of these remain very academic, politically correct topics that can sound great on paper but are very far from the political, social, and economic realities we face here today in Beirut.

Main Insights

The Martyr's Square today functions as a void, devoid of identity or symbolic resonance, primarily reflecting the halted reconstruction and unfulfilled political visions that followed the post-2005 collapse of state authority. Once celebrated as "la place du peuple" and emblematic of a modern, socially mixed Beirut, the square has lost its former role as a vibrant civic space. This transformation mirrors the broader condition of Beirut's Central District, which has become inaccessible and alienating to ordinary citizens due to its privatized, high-cost development model. Rather than holding collective meaning, Martyr's Square now embodies the incompleteness and fragmentation that shape the city's urban fabric. This fragmentation is not solely the result of Solidere's interventions but part of a larger pattern of social and economic segregation seen in global cities lacking strong public institutions. In this context, mixed-income housing and pedestrian connectivity are deemed unrealistic without a functioning nation-state capable of enforcing zoning, building public transport, and providing financial incentives. Any meaningful reactivation of the square must therefore extend beyond its boundaries to include a wider urban vision addressing surrounding blocks. Preserving Lebanon's artisanry and industrial sectors is essential for a sustainable and socially grounded urban and economic revival.

Proposed Urban Strategies Derived from Interview Findings

1- Reclaim Public Land and Re-Establish a Nation-State–Backed Civic Vision

Reclaiming Martyr's Square and nearby plots is essential to reverse decades of privatization that stripped the area of public meaning. A dedicated public development authority could regulate the square's future and guarantee accountability, something that has been missing since the halt of the Solidere plan. Rebuilding basic urban governance structures is a prerequisite for any long-term strategy to function.

2- Restore the Vernacular Urban Fabric and Support Artisanship

Reviving artisanship would restore Beirut's unique cultural specificity and counter the homogeneity of commercial developments. Creating a designated artisan district around Martyr's Square can protect existing crafts while attracting new generations of makers. Supporting small-scale commerce ensures a return to the organic, mixed urban character the square once had.

3- Densify Public Life: From Void to Civic Platform

Removing the existing parking lot or relocating it vertically would free the ground plane for public use and eliminate the emptiness that currently defines the square. Reintroducing mixed cultural, social, and recreational programs would restore the square's historic role as a gathering place. A flexible, open design could support everything from daily leisure to large public events.

4- Reintegration of the Square With the City, Urban Connectivity

Pedestrian pathways should reconnect Martyr's Square with surrounding neighborhoods through shaded, continuous, and safe routes. While long-term transformation of highways may be complex, tactical interventions can begin to dissolve the physical barriers. These connections would strengthen both daily mobility and the symbolic unity of the city.

5- Establish Public Transportation Access to the Square

A future transit node would anchor Martyr's Square as an accessible center for all socio-economic groups. Reliable public transport would reduce car dependency, making pedestrianization and public life more feasible. Complementary last-mile mobility options could further integrate the square into the broader city.

6- Reinterpret Memory and Activism Within the Urban Form

Embedding memory into the landscape would acknowledge Beirut's layered history without turning the square into a static monument. Spatial elements could support both everyday use and public expression, allowing the site to host protests, gatherings, and cultural rituals. This integration ensures that memory and activism remain central to the square's identity.

7- Rebalance Public–Private Partnerships Through Clear Regulation

Public–private cooperation can only work if the state reclaims its regulatory role and enforces conditions that protect public interest. Transparent frameworks could require developers to provide public amenities in exchange for development rights. This rebalances power without fully rejecting private investment.

8- Rebuild Beirut's Industrial and Economic Ecosystem

Strengthening local industries and creative production is key to making future development socially and economically resilient. Urban policies should incentivize manufacturing, design, and craft sectors to return to the city's center. Embedding local production into new developments ensures that economic growth supports Lebanese workers rather than replacing them.

Habib Battah

Habib Battah is an investigative journalist and political analyst with over 20 years of experience reporting on Lebanon and the Middle East. He is the founder of Beirut Report and has contributed to outlets such as The Guardian, BBC News, Al Jazeera English, CNN, and Fortune. His work on postwar reconstruction, land use, privatization, and state development projects has been recognized with the Columbia University Oakes Award and the Samir Kassir Press Freedom Award. Battah holds a BA in Journalism from the University of Texas at Austin and an MA in Near Eastern Studies and Journalism from New York University. He has also taught journalism and media studies at the American University of Beirut and served as a journalist fellow at Oxford University.

Questions Concerning General Thesis Topic

1- How would you describe the identity of Martyr's Square today?

It feels more like a highway than an urban square. The streets around it are very fast-moving. There are no shops, no shade, nothing that encourages you to stay. It feels like a desert, almost like a wasteland honestly. There's no reason to go there, and it's not even safe to cross the street. You have the Petit Serail archaeological excavation and the Martyr's Statue, but the space isn't inviting. It's not designed for easy access, and there's nothing to do once you're there. In the old days, there used to be a Christmas tree in the early 2000s. People would come from all over Beirut to take pictures with it, even Muslim families. Everyone would gather there with their kids. I also think of it as a place for protests, full of a sea of people. The only time Martyr's Square has felt alive or welcoming was during protests. For very brief moments, it felt like a real public square. But in general, today it feels like a dead space. When we were walking there, it was so hot. We got thirsty and couldn't even find water. Where in Lebanon can you not find a dikken? They basically created this Frankenstein of a space that has nothing to do with the rest of the country. The lack of even one dikken is a perfect example. You can't find any of the affordable street foods that Lebanon is known for foods that are made for outdoor public life. Because of Solidere's overarching, foreign essence, the space looks and feels disconnected from the rest of the city. It doesn't resemble Beirut.

2- What role did the Square play before the civil war, and how has that role changed?

From what I've read and seen, it used to be a bustling transportation hub with huge amounts of pedestrian traffic. People would sit around, there was landscaping, flowers, life. You could see the presence of people. It was lined with shops. It functioned as an actual square, unlike now. With the Solidere plan, it was redesigned with this idea of height and power, which was honestly bullshit. They proposed cascading steps that would lead to the sea. It looked nice in the renderings. But today, instead of a lively public square, it's just a highway. In the past, it was a center of pedestrian activity. Now, it's a space you pass through rather than a space you inhabit.

3- Do you feel Beirut's Central District is accessible to ordinary citizens, or does it feel alienating?

It's definitely alienating

4- What symbolic or emotional meanings do you think Martyr's Square holds today?

I think it depends on the generation. For the older generation, it's depressing. It doesn't represent any of the good memories that once happened there. It's a site of memory erasure. I actually wrote an article on this, called Erasing Memory in Downtown Beirut, where I looked at how Solidere forced people out, even landowners. They didn't just build new buildings; they erased streets. Most of what is now highway or parking lots used to be neighborhoods. The younger generation doesn't know that. For younger people, they've never seen the past, and probably don't really care about it. To them, it just looks like a parking lot, or they associate it with protests. Maybe they see it as a place of political activism, but activism that didn't really lead anywhere. So either way, older or younger, there's a kind of sadness attached to it. For me, I lived in Beirut mainly toward the end of the war and saw the whole reconstruction process. I see Martyr's Square as a confused space. They tried to make it a place people would return to, then they removed the statue, then brought it back later. They deleted both the good and bad memories. They created this tabula rasa; erasing everything, it makes you feel numb.

5- How do you personally experience the physical, social, or economic borders that exist within Beirut?

It feels like the city isn't connected. Moving between neighborhoods feels like shifting between completely different worlds. It doesn't feel like you're in the same city when you're in Gemmayze, or Hamra, or Downtown, or Zarif, or Zkak el Blat. Each place feels totally different. There's no continuity, I would say.

Questions About Thesis Masterplan Proposal

1- Do you believe a mixed income housing model is feasible in Beirut and Beirut's Central District?

It's going to take a lot of change to make that happen because people don't have any avenues to participate in shaping public policy. This is the problem with NGOs as well, because they allowed the World Bank or the IMF to come and say, "Oh, we're going to allow public participation and we're going to do consultations with experts," but most of the time those experts are just NGOs. And the NGOs falsely represent the public interest since they have no real political connection in terms of accountability and are not tied to the societies. They are just people who might be Lebanese, who have come from some western institutions and are basically technocrats. They are people who are experts in their field, but there are a million ways to be an expert in your field. So that's the problem with the idea of technocracy, which is currently the way we envision change happening, through technocrats, NGOs, educated people, and that's a very small segment of society that continues to dominate even when there are consultations. So, what is affordable housing if we can't have socialism? Who stands for socialism today in our NGO environment? Which NGO will push for affordable housing? None. An example is one group that widened the sidewalk on a street in Hamra. You can't widen the sidewalk without providing alternative places to park or public transport. The NGOs and groups are the ones who are getting the chance to have a seat at the table now, but are they calling for affordable housing? Are they calling for public transport? Are they calling for building our government? They are just concerned with small-scale, performative projects. It kind of becomes like "art development." When you need development, art comes later. Nobody who has a seat at the table is calling for affordable housing. Nobody talks about these actual policies: affordable housing, affordable healthcare, public spaces, public services. So the question is: why aren't these NGOs and groups advocating for these policies? And if someone else could do it, who would do it? Who will be given access to policymaking? It's frustrating because these groups are selling themselves as the alternative, but what is their alternative vision? We don't know. As much as we hate the parties that are currently ruling us, they are the ones who fought against the feudal

ist class. They were the original thawra. It's not that easy to fix these problems. In Europe, for example, the concept of power sharing doesn't exist. They are not navigating the same political and economic terrain of collapse and war. The stakes are so different compared to here. So, in order to implement these big ideas like public housing and changing the order of the city, it only comes from an overwhelming force of the state, a powerful central state. When looking at places like Dubai or Brussels or Vienna, there's overwhelming violence and force in the development of their projects. Whether we should have that or not is an open question. If we look at public housing across the western world, it's been done through force of government, force majeure, and we don't have that in Lebanon. We don't have that kind of force. So maybe we have to manage something different.

2- What's your impression of the proposal to introduce cultural centers and new old souks around the Martyr's Square?

I'm happy to see it happen. We should have cultural spaces.

3- Do you have a positive or negative impression of the highways and bridges that surround the downtown area?

There isn't any reason that we should have highways running through that area of the city. The fact that the highway that takes you to the airport runs through the downtown is very silly; it's hard to get to the airport. You should be able to bypass downtown to get there. Why does the national highway run through the residential streets of the downtown? It was done that way because they were so desperate to bring people in; they thought that if they ran highways through it, people would come. It shows that the project forged many desperate attempts to get people to visit downtown. Ideally, the highway wouldn't have to pass through it. It seems like it's contrived to force traffic into that area, but it made the area less walkable and more congested for no reason.

4- Do you think a network of pedestrian pathways could help reconnect surrounding neighborhoods of Beirut's Central District?

Sure, I think it's a good idea.

5- In your view, what would meaningful community participation look like throughout the design, implementation, and maintenance of a project like this?

The challenge is building structures and decision-making bodies. That's what we need. The problem today is that we rely heavily on NGOs, experts, and technocrats who might not be in tune with the majority of the people in the country. They come from an elite class. I think planning, and the alternatives to planning, are coming from elite places. It's a very limited group of people, whether in politics or NGOs, and it's not addressing the public's needs in any sustainable or representative way.

6- What potential risks or unintended consequences do you see in implementing this type of urban intervention?

There's a lack of funding and a lack of people who are trying to do this. I don't see any movement or lobbying toward any kind of proposal like this. So basically, power and financing. If it was implemented, a risk could be that people are walking and being happy? What you're talking about is great, but it's very expensive to do it. I wish they would do it. But the few tunnels that were built in CDR and Solidere's history cost us dearly and raised our debt. You cannot keep building things without a productive economy. In order to embark on such a big national project, you need a source of revenue, and that's always been Lebanon's problem.

7- If you could change one thing about Martyr's Square today, what would it be?

I think it needs to be a space that's inviting, that allows for public activities. Is it even safe? The traffic around it is so fast, so is it even a safe place for people to use? It's hard to imagine it as a public space for people to use safely because the traffic around it is so fast. Can it really be saved? I'd love to see the archaeological sites in that area be accessible. There's great potential for that. But you really have to make the area more accessible by rerouting the traffic. Having a diversity of affordable places to eat and shop is essential.

8- How do you imagine participating or contributing to a "new old souk" in Beirut's Central District?

I would visit it; I would patronize it. Going there, making it a place for meeting. It is something to do other than walking nowhere in the downtown. It can be a good reason to go there.

9- What do you hope Martyr's Square becomes for the next generation?

I hope that the whole area of Solidere will one day be democratized, where there will be affordable food and affordable housing. The public should be able to benefit from its land. At the end of the day, the land should belong to the people, and I hope one day they can realize that, instead of it being some sort of island or elite space. It's the heart of the city, but increasingly it seems like the city has changed. I hope that in the future people will be able to redeem some of what has been lost, in whatever way that is feasible.

Civil Society Specific Question

1- What kind of urban interventions do you think best support inclusion and daily life?

Maybe I'm a little bit skeptical that urban intervention can create inclusiveness. Any ways that public spaces can be usable, like building playgrounds for example. Public spaces with picnic tables, for example, is something we lack in Lebanon. It allows for a place to work, eat, and hang out. I think urban interventions need maintenance also. You need to have a maintenance structure to support them. We lack places where people can have peace of mind. These places are so rare in Lebanon, somewhere you can't hear the noise of cars and motorcycles. There's no place like that. It's not just a question of urban interventions. In order to intervene, you need to have resources and space, so I don't know how possible that is. Instead of trying to create spaces that don't exist, maybe you should revitalize the spaces that already do exist.

Main Insights

Martyr's Square today embodies a profound urban and symbolic void, functioning more like a highway interchange than a civic space, stripped of shade, seating, vendors, safety, and walkability. Once a vibrant transportation and commercial hub, the square has been transformed through car-oriented, top-down reconstruction that prioritised aesthetics and control over human scale and everyday public life. This shift produced a space that people simply pass through rather than inhabit, contributing to a wider sense of emotional detachment and collective memory erasure. For older generations the square represents loss and displacement, while younger people know it mostly as a protest site or a parking lot. The fragmentation of the square reflects the fragmentation of Beirut itself, a city divided into isolated districts with little continuity, where physical form mirrors political, social, and economic divides. Structural barriers further limit any move toward inclusive planning, since technocratic and NGO driven initiatives lack both accountability and the political power needed to deliver affordable housing, public transport, or genuine public services. The presence of highways slicing through the city centre deepens this disconnect by destroying walkability and reinforcing the square's isolation. Yet the interviews highlight clear avenues for reclaiming Martyr's Square through practical and community centred action, including rerouting traffic to ensure pedestrian safety, reopening archaeological sites, supporting affordable and locally rooted commercial activity, and focusing on revitalising existing public spaces rather than pursuing grandiose projects. Together these insights point toward a future in which the square can recover its role as a living public realm grounded in cultural continuity and everyday urban life.

Proposed Urban Strategies Derived from Interview Findings

1- Re-route and Slow Down Traffic Around Martyr's Square

Redirect major vehicular traffic away from the square. Reduce lanes or introduce traffic calming to make the area walkable and physically safe. Remove or redesign highway segments that cut through downtown. Restore the square's basic usability as a public space.

2- Reintroduce Everyday, Local, Affordable Uses

Allow dikken (kiosks), small vendors, and affordable places to eat. Encourage small shops rather than luxury or franchise retail. Create space for casual, everyday gathering instead of high-end consumption. Make the square resemble Beirut again culturally, socially, and economically.

3- Restore and Open the Archaeological Sites

Make archaeological areas publicly accessible, not fenced-off or hidden. Integrate them into pedestrian routes, seating areas, and shaded spaces. Transform them from static relics into active parts of daily life.

4- Prioritize Simple, Low-Maintenance Public Amenities

Add shade structures, trees, benches, and water access. Create calm areas where one can sit, rest, or work. Offer basic comfort, something currently missing entirely.

5- Focus on Revitalizing Existing Spaces, Not Creating Grand New Ones

Strengthen, repair, and open the spaces already present rather than inventing new monumental forms. Avoid purely symbolic or performative redesigns. Ensure change is practical and grounded, not cosmetic.

6- Ensure Economic and Social Access, Not Just Aesthetic Improvement

Any redevelopment must include pricing and access considerations, not just physical form. Cultural centers, souks, and gathering places must be reachable and usable by everyone, not just the elite. Prevent repeating Solidere's exclusionary model.

7- Build Genuine Community Participation Structures

The failure of NGO-led and technocratic participation should allow the establishment of participation methods that include local residents, workers, and long-time users, not just experts. Involve people who live the city daily, not only institutional actors to tie the project to the real public, not just professional or elite circles.

8- Imagine a "New Old Souk" as a Place of Everyday Activity

Design the souk as a space for meeting, strolling, buying food, and informal gathering. Avoid commercial homogenization; prioritize mixed, small-scale local commerce. Create a reason for people to come, not just pass through.

Karl Abi Karam

Karl Abi Karam is a curator, cultural heritage specialist, architect, and advocate for classical design whose work bridges exhibition-making, heritage interpretation, and the preservation of architectural traditions across the Middle East. Holding an MPhil in Heritage Studies from the University of Cambridge and an MA in Architecture and Historic Urban Environments from The Bartlett School of Architecture at UCL, he brings a research-grounded yet aesthetically attuned approach to curatorial practice. Since 2017, he has contributed to major cultural projects, including exhibitions at the Louvre Abu Dhabi, Shindagha Museum, Qasr al Hosn, AlUla's Mawrid program, the Mohammed Bin Rashid Library Museum, and several Dubai Expo 2020 pavilions. Alongside his curatorial work, Abi Karam is the co-founder and content creator of Classical Lebanon, a digital platform dedicated to preserving, promoting, and revitalizing the tradition of classical architecture in Lebanon. He currently serves as Chief Curator at the Nabu Museum, where he participates in the creation of projects exploring identity, symbolism, and collective memory. Through his combined architectural expertise, interpretive storytelling, and commitment to cultural preservation, Abi Karam continues to shape accessible, contextually rich heritage experiences that connect historical narratives with contemporary audiences.

Questions Concerning General Thesis Topic

1- How would you describe the identity of Martyr's Square today?

Completely soulless. This is thanks to Solidere. Historically, every city square was designed around a landmark meant to reinforce the city's identity and act as a gathering point, ideally surrounded by beautiful buildings. Unfortunately, the regal structures next to the Square were completely obliterated when they could have been preserved. Now, that area is merely a group of parking lots. The Square has thus become an arena for contested ideologies where people gather to vent their frustration, but ultimately, nothing changes because the site itself holds no spiritual, metaphysical, or symbolic meaning; it is a vacuum. The statue is the only element remaining. The demolition of structures that could have been saved is the old police station in that area. This entire process and its consequences are analyzed in Giorgio Tarraf's thesis, Beirut: The City Destroyed by Peace, which offers an excellent look into how such planning effectively stripped the city of its core identity.

2- What role did the Square play before the civil war, and how has that role changed?

The identity of Martyr's Square has changed in every possible way. If you look at historical research, at one point before the monument was even built, the site featured a beautiful garden complete with garden follies and gazebos where music was played. It was once a place where the French, alongside Lebanese authorities of the time, set up exhibitions to showcase Lebanon's industrial capabilities. It was a site of pure beauty, featuring a wild, romanticized landscape with follies inspired by Lebanon's diverse architectural heritage. During the sixties, the area started to become more commercialized. In some ways, before Solidere arrived, it was already becoming a prototype for what Solidere would later do. Crucially, however, it was still a place where people gathered and where different sects and professions would intermingle. Whenever you look at old photos of Martyr's Square, you see traders, port workers, businessmen, and socialites. There were different classes and sects walking side by side on the same street. Now, it is just a parking lot. A plaza turned into a parking lot, and that is all it is today.

3- Do you feel Beirut's Central District is accessible to ordinary citizens, or does it feel alienating?

Is it accessible in the sense that people can walk there and enjoy what is left of it? Yes, it is. But in terms of the price point and the types of brands present, certainly not. I believe the area is accessible to no one other than as a kind of theme park where the architecture has become extremely corporatized. This architecture follows an internationalist approach that strips buildings of identity. Look at historic buildings like the Le Grand Théatre des Milles et Une Nuits building opposite the mosque or the entrance to Nejmeh Square. What is valuable about that architecture is that, if you examine the capitals of the columns, they feature motifs of vegetables and fruits Lebanon grows. These symbols reinforce what we can nurture and what our soil offers. It is a part of who we are. In contrast, architects today strip ornamentation entirely. Much of contemporary architectural philosophy is based on Adolf Loos's idea of "Ornament and Crime," which treats ornament as degeneracy. In reality, when you remove ornamentation and the composition tied to proportion, you are left with buildings that only serve function. As Roger Scruton once said, whatever is built only for function eventually becomes useless. When you design something that is objectively beautiful, its function can change over time. A hotel can become a café, a café can become a hall or a bank, because people want to keep beautiful buildings around. If you want something to be sustainable, make it beautiful. Every building created with beauty in mind survives because people preserve it and reinvent it across generations. So, yes, it is alienating when you strip a land of its identity through its buildings; it creates a culture of materialism. The concept of form follows function becomes a form of brainwashing. When I went to classical architecture workshops after completing my traditional architecture education, I was humbled. I had to rewire my brain. There is no real language, no composition, and no rules taught in many universities. I had to re-educate myself by measuring ruins and traditional works of architecture and understanding that a language does exist. If you tell the average professor you want to design something in a traditional sense, the response is often that it is kitsch, nouveau riche, or fake. They scoff at you. This is an ivory tower mindset that discourages questioning, often using political arguments like calling it fascism, which is disingenuous. Beauty is for everyone; it speaks to the soul of every human being. I am glad that institutions like the ICAA (Institute of Classical Architecture & Art) and INTBAU (International Network for Traditional Building, Architecture & Urbanism), along with summer schools, workshops, and online movements, are challenging this. Architecture schools cannot ignore it anymore. I think over time there will be a rise of new traditionalist architecture around the world, and I believe that will help Lebanon heal in many ways. There is a reason Batroun is so popular now: it is beautiful, charming, and quaint. You do not get that kind of foot traffic with glass towers and concrete blocks. People are drawn to such places without even asking why. An excellent book that explores these questions is Christopher Alexander's The Timeless Way of Building.

4- How do you personally experience the physical, social, or economic borders that exist within Beirut?

I go out of my way to overcome them. Despite the trauma of the civil war ingrained in previous generations, the existence of concrete highways and anti-beauty structures, you have to force yourself to overcome these borders physically and mentally. To some extent, it requires effort to ignore past community traumas and disregard what is taught in architecture schools, and instead go explore. The hidden gems tucked between the concrete blocks and glass buildings around Beirut certainly make for a great reason to overcome those physical and mental borders.

Questions About Thesis Masterplan Proposal

1- Do you believe a mixed income housing model is feasible in Beirut and Beirut's Central District?

I think it should be. I believe the only way for that to happen is through legislation and laws, but also by building beautifully. In London, for example, you see various social classes living in the same neighborhood. That is a really good thing because it prevents the creation of isolated or gated communities for the ultra-rich or the poor. One of the most important social housing projects in the UK during the Victorian period produced beautiful and dignified buildings for social workers such as brick residential buildings with ornament. For people to feel a sense of dignity, their environment also needs to feel dignified. There is a reason why in places like Deir el Amar, most of the homes around the palace were humble, yet because they were beautiful and well designed, they could serve many purposes over time. We need to bring dignity to our designs through the timeless principles of traditional or classical architecture. So yes, it is feasible, but it requires legislation and a strong government, which unfortunately we do not have. Without that, everything becomes a corporate or money grab.

2- What's your impression of the proposal to introduce cultural centers and new old souks around the Martyr's Square?

I think it is a great idea. You definitely need activation spots. The National Museum of Beirut, for example, feels a bit too distant because you need a proper pedestrian walkway or a bus system to reach it. Ideas like cultural centers and souks are always good, but the challenge lies in how we approach the design, and this is where my bias comes in. I am not afraid of the word bias because everyone has their own perception. What matters is that we challenge ideas with logic and with precedents, understanding what has worked and what has not. If we design any kind of cultural center, I believe it should not be modernist, post modernist, or internationalist. These approaches do not stand the test of time. They can feel alienating. We need to return to design principles that worked historically. This does not mean replicating the Roman Empire. Look at the Italian Renaissance: it was not a reintroduction of Roman

aesthetics or values, it was a reinterpretation. Art Deco, like the Chrysler Building, is rooted in classical principles, and so is Art Nouveau. The principles remain, but we reinterpret them using the technology and materials available today. People often say we should design things that reflect our time. But if our time is engulfed in chaos, should we simply reproduce that chaos? The Renaissance emerged after the Black Plague. Imagine if architects then insisted on designing buildings that expressed that trauma. They chose instead to overcome it through beauty. We should do the same. As for location, these areas are excellent. The site sits next to a mosque and a church, and it needs something that complements that spiritual and cultural presence. We definitely need a cultural institution.

3- Do you have a positive or negative impression of the highways and bridges that surround the downtown area?

They are necessary because you need to get from point A to point B, but it is certainly not beautiful or calming to the spirit to be stuck on that highway. There needs to be a complete overhaul of the infrastructure, reintroducing the tramway and placing some elements underground to create walkable spaces. My impression is definitely negative, but they are a necessary evil for now. Once a solution like yours is proposed, their presence should be minimized. So overall, negative, but currently unavoidable.

4- Do you think a network of pedestrian pathways could help reconnect surrounding neighborhoods of Beirut's Central District?

Sure, but only if you anchor them with spaces that are beautiful. Parks, monuments, artwork, commissioning regional craftsmen to design beautiful benches, reintroducing ironwork, creating spots of beauty and art. If these pathways connect meaningful and attractive places, then absolutely, it is a great idea. You have to anchor them so the walk does not feel dull or painful. It should feel enriching. Think of Rome. It never gets old. It does something to the spirit and the mind each time you experience it. Even if you have seen the Colosseum before, the more you learn about it over the years, the more your eyes open to its secrets and intricate design. This is what anchored pathways can do. So yes, the more pedestrian pathways

the better, but the question is how to anchor them and give them meaning.

5- In your view, what would meaningful community participation look like throughout the design, implementation, and maintenance of a project like this?

I think first you would need a reintroduction of aesthetic judgement and a reintroduction of timeless architectural values. You would need comparative studies that explain why certain things are good for the soul and the mind, a complete reeducation of what architecture and design should be, and a process that shows people, whether they are architects or not, that they have a say in their city. When you look at what communities want worldwide through polls and studies, they want traditional architecture. They do not want big modern blocks or aggressive contemporary buildings. We need to get away from treating architecture as an elitist field because I have noticed that whenever someone criticizes a starchitect project, their followers respond by saying, who are you to criticize? Everybody has a say in their city regardless of their profession. Polls show that people gravitate toward beauty rather than shock value, trends, or what is labeled iconic. Architecture schools often teach people to shock and to make individual statements, even when they try to frame it around contextualism or sustainability. But we need places of calm, simple places of calm. It is okay to be boring. There is nothing wrong with it. For community participation, a committee needs to be set up, but it must be given the tools to understand architecture as a language. Many people feel they know what looks right but do not know how to verbalize it. Educational programs on architecture, led by professionals, institutions, or organizations, would be useful to distribute knowledge so that when the committee is formed, members are equipped to defend their communities effectively. You have to give people the tools to know how to criticize.

6- What potential risks or unintended consequences do you see in implementing this type of urban intervention?

The multiple deadlocks and political dead ends. The messy situation that has to do with who owns the land. The issue will be more about bureaucracy and design. You or I could come up with something that is traditional or classical, but then still have to face the bureaucracy. The main challenge is the bureaucracy or the lack of it.

7- If you could change one thing about Martyr's Square today, what would it be?

I would reconstruct what was lost, exactly as it was. Every building that was purposely demolished should be studied through a classicist lens by someone well versed in proportions and ornamentation, in order to faithfully and tastefully recreate something that looks like it has stood the test of time. The idea that you cannot reconstruct because it is "fake" does not make sense. The Japanese, for example, revitalize their heritage structures every couple of decades to keep them standing. There is nothing wrong with reconstructing something that worked and was beautiful. If anything, it is an honor to the people who lived there before. The philosopher Chesterton talked about the "democracy of the dead." He argued that it is up to us as a society to honor the good work our ancestors have done, ensuring that the good work we create can be protected by future generations. If we create a society that honors past work, we ensure that the next generation continues to maintain it. I hope that we can restore all the buildings that were destroyed, bring back the park, bring back the institutions, and create a place where people can congregate and feel proud of their main public square. Right now, what is our main spot? What is the content that comes out of that area today? Thirteen-dollar tomato sandwiches and matcha? No one is talking about reopening the theatre or how we lost a plaza. So, I would hope we can bring back those lost buildings.

8- How do you imagine participating or contributing to a "new old souk" in Beirut's Central District?

I would absolutely go there. The place that still feels like an old souk to me is Basta in Beirut. The antique shops are incredible. The variety is unbelievable, from very شعبي places to auction style shops. It is all in the garages and ground floors of many heritage buildings, some old and some new, and you move from one building to the next. This idea of meandering paths and beautiful buildings is not something you can replicate through a masterplan. It is something people give meaning to over time. If you create something beautiful, people will naturally gravitate toward it. Sometimes when a master plan becomes too detailed, you risk compartmentalizing the space and making it sterile, or too surgical. Instead, if you create a beautiful environment and engage in light zoning (for example, classifying it as a souk), people will gradually shape it into their own space. It becomes natural, and that is what we need. In old souks, what is beautiful is the combination of chaotic crates of vegetables and fruit on the ground floor, while above you have orderly triple arches. The contrast between order and chaos works perfectly. Some elements of non-surgical activity are good because they give people freedom to use the space as they wish. Public loitering is okay. If you start policing how people should behave, the space becomes like a mall. So yes, I would definitely participate in that economy, just as I do when I go to Basta; I always find incredible things.

9- What do you hope Martyr's Square becomes for the next generation?

I hope it becomes exactly what it was for previous generations. That is it. It was there for a reason, a meeting place surrounded by beautiful buildings, and that is what is needed today.

Civil Society Specific Questions

1- How have communities historically interacted with Martyr's Square as a site of protest or gathering?

Squares and plazas have always drawn organised gatherings, and Martyr's Square follows that pattern. What matters now is that we focus on creating beautiful streets with meaningful third places. People will shape their own life in them. Take Hamra Street for example. Yes, it is modern, but because its individual cafes have long been places for journalists, thinkers, and philosophers, people sometimes protest there because it has a vibe that encourages it. Historically, large open spaces can actually make protests easier to control. I do not think architecture on its own can fix deeper political and moral struggles that come from society itself. But it can shape how we live and feel. As a society, and as part of the human race, we will always face the same issues we have faced for centuries such as corruption, good and evil. We can try our best to minimize them, but we do so by instilling good values through architecture in the sense that you uphold beauty as an objective, rather than subjective, pursuit. When you create beauty, you see less crime and less tension. You give people a sense of belonging. I tend to think that, because there are so many problems around the world and in Lebanon, focusing on architecture as an exercise in beauty is a good way to confront rather than to cope with its harsh realities. You need to elevate yourself and overcome them. You have to find beauty through suffering, something you see a lot in Christian art. The subjects are often about suffering, yet there is beauty in overcoming it.

2- In your view how can memory and resistance be preserved in built form?

One effective way to preserve them is through the creation of monuments within public parks. For example, when people want to commemorate a fallen leader or honor those who sacrificed their lives for the greater good, you do it through a beautiful monument or a museum that documents their journey. Some museums show the uniforms soldiers wore, the journals they kept, or the letters they wrote to their families. You preserve memory through storytelling, or in museological terms, interpretation, which is the communication of meaning and significance about collections, sites, or ideas to an audience. It is about creating that connection. And there is a fine line in creating a monument that commemorates a traumatic event. It cannot lean into a heavy nihilism that destroys the spirit, and it also cannot lean into a romanticisation that sanitises the hardship. It is a genuine balance. For example, the current conversation about preserving the grain silos destroyed in the port explosion leans heavily into a nihilistic camp. The architecture is brutal in both the literal and the metaphorical sense, and there is still no consensus on what happened or how to approach the site. How does one monumentalize something like this when the public has not agreed on the facts? If you force a consensus, particularly from an academically elite point of view, you risk deepening divisions. If there is a strong insistence on creating a monument without a proper shared understanding, it has to be approached neutrally and carefully. It must be designed in a way that speaks to everyone by recognizing what is actually beneficial for the human mind. Neuroscientifically speaking, we find that the traditional approach supports human well-being, so the design should apply timeless principles drawn from vernacular, classical, and traditional architecture to create a place that is calming and that offers space for contemplation and reflection.

3- What kind of urban interventions do you think best support inclusion and daily life?

Good manners are needed. This idea is well-articulated in a 1924 book by Trystan Edwards titled, Good and Bad Manners in Architecture, which prompts the development of good civic qualities and encourages the design of buildings that are considerate of their surroundings. We must reflect this same consideration in how we conduct ourselves with each other. The best way to support inclusion is to practice good etiquette, as this directly affects others and entails making things accessible for all. For example, you can restore a beautiful neighborhood, but look at how people act in Gemmayzeh after certain hours when they should not be playing loud music, but they blast music anyway. In Batroun, you are not supposed to play music at certain times because it is still a residential area. You can intervene in ways that look aesthetically beautiful, but you also have to educate the public through government initiatives. People often act as if no one around them will be affected, so there needs to be an education system. You enforce fines, you introduce school programs and lectures about respecting your neighbors, about designing things in ways that do not offend others, and about carrying yourself with dignity while creating a dignified space. You can come up with the best design, but if you do not instill good manners, then what is the point? There are plenty of places to enhance accessible space in Lebanon and to truly make it beautiful, but without the educational implementation, they become hotbeds of ultra-consumerism.

4- How can NGOs or grassroots groups be given decision making power in public space projects?

In an ideal Lebanon, NGOs shouldn't exist, and I believe that one of Lebanon's end goals should be to ensure they cannot come to be. We need good governmental institutions and local grassroots guilds to replace them. On a surface level, of course, some NGOs do good things in the short term, and they have done fantastic work in a state that has effectively collapsed decades ago. Having said that, their reliance on external funding creates a vulnerability to foreign policy influence that may not align with local community needs. We are living in an age of consumption and materialism, and in Lebanon's case, geopolitical turmoil, and there is a huge psychological warfare being waged against us. People focus on symptoms because they are easy to judge, but it is harder to acknowledge the root cause. A truly grassroots guild system would be far better. This model involves bringing together passionate skilled individuals and encouraging local funding. Lebanese patrons should rise to the challenge and use their privilege to push for the creation of good work through these transparent, community-driven structures.

5- What risks do you see in revitalizing areas that are already contested or emotionally charged?

The primary risk in revitalizing an area, particularly historical centers, stems from the unchecked nature of our consumerist approach to urbanism. While I am not arguing for or against any specific economic system, the issue is that free-market operations, without proper governance, lead to a loss of "good manners" and commercial exploitation. When revitalization attracts foot traffic and business, it often draws people seeking quick, short-term profit. This degrades the public realm through noise pollution, the takeover of space by groups like the valet services or golf carts, as is unfortunately seen in Batroun. The risk is that making an area beautiful attracts the wrong kind of attention, transforming a living space into a theme park. To mitigate this, revitalization must be balanced by strong regulations that prevent exploitation and the active promotion of good manners and respect for the public realm, ensuring the area remains vibrant without becoming a commercial commodity.

Main Insights

Urban regeneration in Beirut must prioritize beauty and dignity as fundamental civic principles capable of reducing social tension and fostering belonging. Memory and resistance are best honored through contemplative monuments, museums, and storytelling rooted in traditional architectural languages rather than through raw ruins that deepen division without societal consensus. Social inclusion depends not only on physical design but on civic education, public etiquette, and a culture of respect that prevents disorder and hyper-commercialization. A sustainable civic model requires locally rooted grassroots guilds rather than reliance on externally funded NGOs, while strong governance is needed to prevent revitalized areas from being overtaken by short-term commercial exploitation. Martyr's Square exemplifies the consequences of demolition and privatization, having lost the historic gardens, mixed uses, and diverse social life that once made it a vibrant civic heart, and mirroring a wider downtown where corporatized, ornament-free architecture alienates the public and erodes cultural identity. Restoring continuity through traditional and classical architectural principles offers a path toward more sustainable, adaptable, and emotionally resonant urban environments, including dignified mixed-income housing supported by legislation. Cultural centers and souks must be authentic, accessible, and locally grounded, while highways and bridges should be gradually minimized to repair urban fragmentation. Pedestrian pathways must connect meaningful destinations to be effective, and community participation should be guided by aesthetic literacy and genuine empowerment rather than token consultation. Overcoming bureaucratic paralysis and entrenched political obstruction remains essential, as reconstructing lost heritage, encouraging organically evolving souks, and restoring Martyr's Square as a proud civic hub collectively point toward a more coherent, inclusive, and culturally rooted urban future.

Proposed Urban Strategies Derived from Interview Findings

1- Reintroduce beauty and dignified architecture

Use traditional, classical, and proportion-based design principles to create calming, meaningful public spaces that foster belonging and reduce social tension.

2- Create beautiful, walkable streets and meaningful "third places"

Activate streets with cafés, cultural spots, and human-scale environments to encourage daily use, gathering, and spontaneous civic life.

3- Integrate monuments and contemplative landscapes into public parks

Preserve memory and resistance through balanced, non-traumatizing monuments, museums, and interpretive storytelling spaces embedded in green areas.

4- Implement education-based urbanism ("good manners" urban strategy)

Pair physical interventions with civic education campaigns, noise regulations, and public etiquette programs to improve social behavior and reduce disorder.

5- Develop a local guild-based model for community decision-making

Shift from NGO dependency to locally funded, community-driven guilds that hold transparent decision-making power over public space projects.

6- Strengthen governance to prevent commercial exploitation

Regulate nightlife, valet services, and privatized uses to avoid turning revitalized areas into theme parks. Ensure revitalization enhances, rather than commodifies, public life.

7- Reconstruct lost heritage buildings and restore historic urban fabric

Faithfully rebuild demolished structures, gardens, and institutions around Martyr's Square to revive the site's cultural identity and civic pride.

8- Introduce dignified mixed-income housing through legislation

Promote social diversity by enforcing housing laws, ensuring aesthetic dignity, and avoiding purely functionalist or low-quality typologies.

9- Create authentic cultural centers and locally rooted souks

Avoid mall-like designs; instead enable organic, incremental development with local vendors, meandering paths, and light zoning to allow bottom-up shaping of place.

10- Reorganize mobility by minimizing highways and reintroducing transit

Reduce the dominance of highways and bridges, move some infrastructure underground, and revive tramway systems to create safer, walkable connections.

11- Anchor pedestrian pathways with meaningful destinations

Ensure walkability is purposeful by linking neighborhoods to parks, monuments, community hubs, artisanal landmarks, and cultural institutions.

12- Promote culturally grounded reconstruction as a tool of healing

Use reconstruction to revive collective memory, spiritual meaning, and a sense of continuity — aligning with international traditions of rebuilding heritage.

13- Enable community participation through aesthetic literacy

Equip residents with architectural education and comparative studies so they can meaningfully evaluate proposals and co-shape their city.

15- Reduce bureaucratic and political deadlocks

Address land ownership complications, regulatory failure, and institutional paralysis that block urban regeneration.

16- Encourage organic, lightly regulated public markets

Support flexible, semi-chaotic souks that allow spontaneous vendor activity, fostering authenticity rather than controlled commercial environments.

17- Restore Martyr's Square as a national civic heart

Rebuild its historic beauty, activate it with cultural and social functions, and reestablish it as a shared space for gathering, pride, and intercommunal life.

Rana Hassan

Rana Hassan is a community facilitator, urban researcher, and feminist practitioner whose work centers on collective processes, grassroots urbanism, and the politics of space in Lebanon. With a background in Urban Studies and a Master's in Urban Planning and Policy from the American University of Beirut, her research explores urban social movements, feminist urbanisms, informal settlements, displacement, and participatory planning. She is also a PhD candidate at the Polytechnic University of Madrid, where her doctoral work examines grassroots initiatives as catalysts for civic engagement in city-making. Hassan is a co-founder of Kabcoop, a feminist facilitation cooperative in Beirut, where she supports cooperatives, horizontal groups, and community organizations through group facilitation, non-violent communication, and the creation of safe, inclusive environments for collective decision-making. In addition to her facilitation work, she serves as a board member at Public Works Studio, contributing to research and advocacy on housing, land, and urban justice. Her experience spans post-disaster reconstruction, social architecture, and fieldwork in Palestinian refugee camps and informal settlements. Through her combined expertise in facilitation and urban research, Hassan brings a nuanced understanding of community dynamics, participatory processes, and the transformative role of social movements in shaping urban life.

Questions Concerning General Thesis Topic

1- How would you describe the identity of Martyr's Square today?

A ghost town. The only times it had life were during protests. Other than that, it is lifeless. I never go there unless there is a movement happening. I have no relationship with that area at all. As long as nothing is happening there, it is a place with nothing in it. There are only pigeons.

2- What role did the Square play before the civil war, and how has that role changed?

We read and hear that it was a very central space in the city, both for transportation and as a public space. I remember that after the civil war, when we visited Beirut, we used to go to the square to play as kids because it was the only open square. So in the nineties, we visited it as one of the important places in Beirut. Children could play there. My parents would not usually allow us to play in the street, but in Martyr's Square they did, since it was an open public space. This is my experience with the square. I did not live through the period when it had shops and many people went there. I lived in Beirut near the Saray area before Solidere took our house from us, so I lived in downtown. But we usually went to the Wadi Abu Jmil area more than Martyr's Square because Martyr's Square was closed to us, being near the Saray and the Parliament.

3- Do you feel Beirut's Central District is accessible to ordinary citizens, or does it feel alienating?

Definitely alienating. In the period when they fixed the spaces and opened Solidere in the 2000s, we used to visit. There was suddenly an open space we could go to, sit in, and walk around. The Roman ruins, the small gardens. But even then, if we sat on a bench they would not allow us to put our feet up. There was a lot of surveillance and security. It was not a comfortable place, but at least it was an open space for us and accessible. But accessible only to the more acceptable people. They were very suspicious of anyone they profiled as someone who could potentially cause any kind of damage to the area. The Solidere security would not allow them to enter. So it was accessible, but only to people the security deemed acceptable. It was

a lively center mainly when there were events, like music festivals near the Roman Baths. Other than that, it had a very controlled, middle class type of liveliness.

4- What symbolic or emotional meanings do you think Martyr's Square holds today?

I think it depends on the person, the generation, and their lived experience. For the new generation, it is very tied to political movements and protests. It is a space we took over at some point, and in that moment an emotional meaning was created. But I do not think this is constant. For me now, for example, I do not have any real connection to Martyr's Square. If I sometimes walk around the Azarieh area, some thawra memories come back to me, but there is no continuity to this emotional connection. So it depends on the generation. I do not think there is one single thing that defines its symbolism.

5- How do you personally experience the physical, social, or economic borders that exist within Beirut?

Right now, the main borders for me are the traffic. I live in Furn El Chebbek, so going to Hamra, for example, becomes a very stressful thing I have to think about. I need to pass through this area, and it takes a long time because of the traffic. When I pass through Saifi Village, I feel strong borders. You enter and immediately see the disparity between social classes, which is a harsh border for me. Walking from Khandaq El Ghamik to Monot, passing through the Beirut Digital District, you feel a very strong sense of social borders. I feel it mostly when I see the nice clean buildings that are totally abandoned, especially in the downtown area. They are empty because no one wants to pay the high rents. When you see that, you experience the harsh, even violent borders that these buildings create. So it is not exactly about accessibility. There are areas where you feel comfortable, and areas where you do not.

Questions About Thesis Masterplan Proposal

1- Do you believe a mixed income housing model is feasible in Beirut and Beirut's Central District?

Not realistic and not really feasible. Who would want to do affordable or social housing in Beirut? The mix that happens between people in neighborhoods now is a mix that took place throughout history. An area like Furn El Shebbek was lower middle class before some buildings were demolished and rebuilt as high rise buildings with concierges and all that, so these are now for a higher class. In the building I live in, for example, most people are paying old rents that are very cheap. So this is a mix that happened organically. But to intentionally fill a new empty building with people from different social classes, I do not think it is doable. We do not have a government that provides social housing. If we did, it would be a different story. The economic market alone would never dictate this. Without regulation on rent and real estate prices, it is not realistic. Also, why would people want to live in downtown as it is now? You would want to live in a neighborhood with basic amenities like dekkens, cafes, vegetable stalls. Basics are nonexistent. So there is no reason for someone to live there unless it is free housing or squatting. If it changed and improved in ways that increase the quality of life, then maybe it becomes possible, but where and how? In the end, the people setting the policies are not doing so for public interest. Ideally, it would be nice if the center were for everyone equally, but in our reality it is very hard to imagine and hard to see how we would reach that point.

2- What's your impression of the proposal to introduce cultural centers and new old souks around the Martyr's Square?

For cultural centers, I feel it is possible because we have spaces that have the potential for this. For the souks, I feel that if they are not connected to housing, if the basic amenities of a neighborhood are missing, and if there are no residents living nearby, the souks will remain like Souk El Akel, something that happens every once in a while and is not permanent. For a permanent souk, people need to be able to walk there. If it were close to an area that already has residents, I think it could work. The area you are proposing has residents,

but they are mostly upper class residents who do not really have the culture of going to a souk. There is an example in Fassouh where they opened Nation Station, a souk that operated twice a week. This area had lower middle class residents who actually visited it, and it was accessible to them. But near Khandaq and Bashoura, it might make more sense to have a souk than in the area you chose, which does not really have a souk culture. However, if the elements you proposed, like the transportation hub, existed, then maybe the other interventions would make sense. At the moment they do not, given the current functions of the area. It also depends on who comes to the area and what the functions are. Then the chances of it not becoming an empty souk are much higher. You can think about how the city was used during times when people had more freedom, like during the revolution when laws were not strictly followed, and learn from that to assign functions. I feel that the Azarieh building does have potential to be a cultural center as you proposed. It is in front of The Egg, has a courtyard, and is connected to Martyr's Square, so that could be interesting.

3- Do you have a positive or negative impression of the highways and bridges that surround the downtown area?

They are very isolating, especially the Ring Bridge. They divide areas from each other. It is very hard to feel continuity within the city when we have these huge roads with very fast traffic cutting through the center of the city. So definitely negative. You cannot even physically reach downtown from places like Salim Slam without taking many detours, whether walking or by car, because there is a highway between them with no pedestrian crossing.

4- Do you think a network of pedestrian pathways could help reconnect surrounding neighborhoods of Beirut's Central District?

I am not sure about pedestrian pathways, since we do not have any pedestrian streets in Beirut. The pedestrian streets in downtown today are completely empty. I feel pedestrian streets are important in neighborhoods where you need safety for children from cars, but a pedestrian path alone does not necessarily create a connection. It depends on what is happening in the area. But definitely, limiting the number of fast cars pass

ing through can change a lot. So car limitation is more important than pedestrianization. In parallel with public transport availability, this can work. We have a strong reliance on cars and taxis rather than walking. No one really walks. You can take a taxi that drops you exactly where you want or a bus, so we do not have the culture of walking to and from places. Reducing high speed highways can open the possibility for a different way of life in the area. Fewer road blockades would also help.

5- In your view, what would meaningful community participation look like throughout the design, implementation, and maintenance of a project like this?

There are many tools for community participation. It is meaningful only if the people organizing it actually want to listen to the people, not just do it to tick a box. If the outcome of the participation is tied to decisions and affects the decision making process, then any method can be effective, whether more or less inclusive. Our problem here is that participation is usually done through NGOs, but as an activity rather than something that actually influences policy and decision making. Participation should be similar to the debates that used to happen organically on the street. There should be tools or structures of participation that directly affect policies. There is something called a citizens assembly. It is an available and used tool in many places, and in Lebanon we are starting to create a citizens assembly on the subject of electricity in Hamra. It is a tool that requires people to learn about the subject well. Because if you usually ask people, for example, if they want a pedestrian street, they will often say no. But if you explain all the aspects and concepts of a pedestrian street and how it can improve their quality of life and movement, and people understand the question, their answers can be very different from their initial reaction. A citizens assembly is a way to have a consultation process that includes learning the technicalities and details. If you want to make a strategic plan for downtown, they can learn the difference between having green spaces or not and how this affects or improves their lives. So they learn, then deliberate, then make a decision. There are ways to have very structured, deep participatory planning, but you need the intention to actually listen to the outcomes of the assembly. In the end, the decision making is in the hands of the government, unlike NGOs, which lose power

when their funding ends. NGOs work on many small projects, but the big vision should be held by the municipality or whoever has responsibility for the public interest. If we had a strong state, it should take responsibility for this. Or it could be the government in charge of the big picture, while NGOs help facilitate the process in collaboration with the private sector. But the big picture should belong to the government, not the private sector, since their motive is profit. And NGOs have to think about their own sustainability, especially now as funding is diminishing. NGOs can give suggestions and propose ideas for laws, but the decision in the end is in the hands of the government.

6- What potential risks or unintended consequences do you see in implementing this type of urban intervention?

Downtown has seen many interventions over the years, each with different goals. There was once a project called the Garden of Peace in downtown. Someone once told me they worked on it, a foreign European firm, but where is this project now? How many projects were proposed with the intention to change things but were never connected to a civic participatory process or coordinated with the authorities to actually be implemented? Even some places that were worked on to change their function have not changed in reality. For example, when they opened the square and declared it a cultural space, it was not used as such because it lacked supportive elements around it, such as organizations taking the spaces and activating them. If the process is not an interconnected multilevel one connecting the public, organizations, and municipal bodies, then nothing will happen. If we do not have these three levels, the project could remain on paper, or it could even be implemented physically but fail to change the reality of the space. Beirut Souks is an example. They opened it, but is it really a souk? It is just an open air mall. So it is not enough to assign a new function. You need to connect it to other levels of planning.

7- If you could change one thing about Martyr's Square today, what would it be?

I would remove Solidere as an institution. It is a privatized area, and this really affects everything. If you remove all the barbed wire, protections,

and security they have around the Parliament, the area could be used in a completely different way. If you allow street vendors and carts to be present, it could transform the space. It would become a real square.

8- How do you imagine participating or contributing to a "new old souk" in Beirut's Central District?

It depends on what is happening there. If we imagine a scenario without Solidere, without harsh borders, and with people actually using the area in a natural way, then I would go. Sometimes when I feel like walking or walking my dog, I go to the waterfront area in downtown because there are no cars and there is space to walk freely. We need more spaces like that, where we can simply walk comfortably. If the functions and services needed to sustain daily life existed there, then I would definitely go.

9- What do you hope Martyr's Square becomes for the next generation?

I hope we have more public spaces that are usable, accessible, and full of life, whether Martyr's Square or any other place in the city. We should use them more and have spaces that are truly inviting. When they first opened the Solidere area, people would go there to ride bikes, kids would play, and people would sit there. We needed that then, and we still need it now. But the spaces that are supposed to be public today are either inaccessible or have become more privatized. We need public spaces that are unrestricted, unblocked, not highly monitored, where people are free to do as they please. Especially children, whose only available space to play in is their apartments. This really changes their relationship with their city. Now they do not have any connection to the city because they do not have public spaces to play in. These spaces are what create a relationship between people and their city. So I would love for the square to become used and open, not just surrounded by streets.

Public Sector Specific Questions

1- Do you think it's feasible to renegotiate Solidere's land control for public interest use?

It should be feasible. It is not realistic, but it should be feasible. Right now there is no one, no political party, truly working on these topics. They do not ask why these central areas are taken over by a private company that is paying the government pennies. No one from the current ruling class is concerned with asking these questions. That is why I do not think it is realistic, but it needs to happen. What happened in the 2019 thawra or the 2015 Tel3et Re7etkon movement could have transformed into an occupation of squares and public spaces. It could have become something imposed on Solidere and the ruling class by force from the bottom up. If there were a real civil society movement truly capable of taking over these spaces and forcing a change in the laws, then this could be a way. But under the current status quo, it is very difficult. The funds are not an issue. The squares and buildings are already there. If there were fewer borders and fewer restrictions on how you use Solidere, and if the rents were not exaggerated, all you need are policies and injecting life. If the places in Solidere were opened by people who run shops in other areas and could afford to open there, the whole character of the place would change. Solidere is not even interested in renting out the vacant shops. It is not their priority. So it is not something that needs a big fund or complicated management. The municipality can play this role. You do not need the private sector to manage streets. Dissolving Solidere should be doable because they have a limited contract that ends soon, but I am not sure about the laws or mechanisms in place for what happens when the contract ends.

2- What mechanisms exist or are missing for public participation in Beirut's urban planning processes?

None exist. We do have some people working on proposing laws and policies, and they try with organizations to create participation, but it is not real participation. It is mostly suggestions coming from civil society. For example, Horsh Beirut was closed to the public for a very long time. There was a big campaign to reopen it. Eventually it worked, and it was reopened to the public. The Rawcheh

Daliyeh case also had a project to build a hotel there. The public outcry and campaign succeeded in preventing this, and nothing was built. So campaigns can be useful to stop projects and sometimes even change their course. These campaigns are the closest thing we have to public participation. They function as resistance to projects coming from the government. It is not real participation; it is a natural form of social movement used to prevent the government from doing something. The government's way of writing and enforcing laws is not always aligned with the public interest, so people and organizations mobilize to resist. Civil society is very important in this context. They have the tools for advocacy and know who to speak to. NGOs and organizations have more experience in this. It might not be participation, but it is a mechanism that allows people to play a role in the city. Ideally, all policies and major changes in the city should take into consideration the people who live in it. The mechanisms to do this are many and available. The problem is not the mechanisms; it is the will of the people in charge.

Civil Society Specific Questions

1- What kind of urban interventions do you think best support inclusion and daily life?

After the crisis, the city became much less inclusive because it became less safe. This was caused by the lack of electricity at night, which created darkness throughout the city. You do not feel safe. There is a type of danger you feel in Beirut now that I did not feel before. It is mostly from the darkness at night. You walk and you do not know where you are going, and you feel unsafe. The areas that are lit, mostly because shops and restaurants light the streets, feel automatically more inclusive. You feel safer walking there. It is essential to have fewer barriers and to have streets that are easy to move through, with sidewalks. The bare minimum is street lights and sidewalks. Inclusive means that people with strollers should be able to walk. In Lebanon, it is almost impossible. Even the streets that have sidewalks have cars parked on the sidewalk. For streets to be more inclusive, they should be visible, without hidden corners, dark spots, or dangerous alleys. These are the basic things people need to feel safe. Newly constructed buildings often have fences surrounding them, taking a portion of the sidewalk. In turn, these residential streets do not have shops or stores on the ground floor, which automatically makes them less safe. No people are there to see what is happening at all times. These types of laws that allow buildings like this do not pay attention to the actual street they are built on. The street becomes something to pass by, not something to live within. Shops and kiosks on the street that light the area make you feel like it is a street you can safely walk in.

2- What risks do you see in revitalizing areas that are already contested or emotionally charged?

I do not see many risks in revitalizing these areas. The real risk is that the authorities make us afraid of each other. For example, they say the narrative is that Nejmeh Square is unused because when the open protest by the 8 Azar coalition happened, they set up tents there. But it is not the protest that closed the area. It is the government that put barbed wire all around it. So the problem was the government's response to the protest and the sit in, not the movement itself. Usually the rhetoric they use is meant to scare people

and make them think that someone else is taking their rights, not the people in charge. So I feel the authorities will always do things like this to avoid taking responsibility for causing division. They will pit people against each other whenever they can. This enters the public narrative. Our role as civil society members and activists participating in the public realm is to question these narratives. So the real risk is not in changing the area, but in the authorities feeling an existential threat when people unite or push against Solidere, for example. They will definitely put out narratives to stop that. So the risk is not in the intervention itself, but in how the people in charge might react to it.

Main Insights

Beirut's central districts and Martyr's Square are shaped by privatization, securitization, and inequality, with Solidere's control and the ruling class's indifference making any renegotiation of land for public interest necessary in principle but politically unrealistic without strong bottom-up pressure. Genuine public participation is effectively nonexistent, as civil society campaigns act mainly as reactive resistance rather than structured decision-making, despite the availability of tools and expertise. Basic infrastructural failures; poor lighting, obstructed sidewalks, inactive ground floors, and car-dominated streets undermine safety and inclusion, reinforcing harsh physical and social borders. Martyr's Square is now a "ghost town," emptied of its historic social and transport functions and activated only during protests, while downtown remains exclusive, surveilled, and socially selective, with empty luxury buildings and militarized checkpoints intensifying class divisions. Mixed-income housing is viewed as unrealistic without state-led housing policy, rent regulation, and neighborhood amenities, and cultural centers or souks are viable only if tied to nearby residents and daily needs. Meaningful transformation requires reducing car dominance, softening high-speed infrastructure, reintroducing public transport, dismantling privatized and securitized barriers, and creating participatory structures like citizens assemblies whose outcomes influence policy. Ultimately, reclaiming Martyr's Square and the city center as open, inviting public spaces used in daily life and accessible to all, remains essential for rebuilding residents' relationship with their city.

Proposed Urban Strategies Derived from Interview Findings

1- Prepare for the End of Solidere's Contract and Transition Management to the Municipality

Since Solidere's control is viewed as unjust, outdated, and nearing expiration, the municipality should develop a legal and administrative plan to reclaim streets and public spaces, reduce restrictions, and reintroduce affordable rents to revive activity.

2- Open Vacant Solidere Spaces to Local Shop Owners and Small Businesses

The interview stresses that reviving downtown does not require major funding, just policy changes that allow existing shop owners from other neighborhoods to open businesses in currently empty spaces, injecting life back into the district.

3- Remove Security Barriers, Fences, and Excessive Controls Surrounding Downtown

To counter the "ghost town" effect, the square should be opened by removing barbed wire, checkpoints, and surveillance practices that currently block access, allowing people to naturally reclaim the space.

4- Institutionalize Real Public Participation Through Formalized Structures (Citizens Assemblies)

Since current participation is limited to campaigns resisting harmful projects, Beirut needs structured mechanisms; citizens assemblies or binding consultation processes, to ensure public input shapes planning decisions.

5- Strengthen Everyday Safety Through Lighting, Active Streets, and Ground-Floor Uses

A basic strategy for inclusion is fixing lighting, ensuring accessible sidewalks, preventing cars from blocking pedestrian space, and encouraging shops and kiosks at street level to create naturally supervised, safer streets.

6- Dismantle Narratives of Fear by Reframing Public Space as Shared Civic Ground

The interview warns that authorities weaponize fear to justify closing spaces. Urban strategies must include communication campaigns, storytelling, and participatory events that rebuild trust and counter divisive narratives.

7- Reclaim Martyr's Square as a True Civic Square by Removing Cars and Enabling Informal Uses

Removing vehicular dominance and allowing street vendors, carts, and informal activities is positioned as essential to transforming the square into a lively, democratic public space.

8- Rebuild Public Transport and Reduce Car Dependence to Break Physical Borders

Highways and fast traffic create harsh urban separations. Strategies should emphasize reducing car speed, limiting through-traffic, and building accessible transit routes enabling people to move between neighborhoods without detours.

9- Locate Cultural Centers and Souks Only Where Daily Life Already Exists

Permanent souks or cultural spaces should be placed near areas with resident populations (e.g., Khandaq, Bashoura) rather than purely upper-class zones, ensuring they function as real, everyday destinations rather than occasional events.

10- Create Multi-Level Coordination Between Municipality, Civil Society, and Local Organizations

Past projects failed because they were not anchored politically or socially. Any intervention must align municipal authorities, civic groups, and local actors so physical upgrades translate into real change.

11- Build Public Spaces That Are Open, Unrestricted, and Unmonitored

The interview stresses the need for spaces where people, especially children, can freely play, gather, and build emotional ties to their city. This requires designing open-access squares and parks without privatization or heavy policing.

12- Introduce Basic Neighborhood Amenities in the Center to Enable Future Housing Feasibility

Mixed-income housing cannot work without dekkens, cafes, stalls, and everyday services. A precursor strategy is reestablishing these functions to make downtown livable.

Karim Salam

Karim Salam is the founder of Lebanese Academic, a platform that examines Lebanon's urban, economic, and cultural systems through structural analysis rather than nostalgia or politics. He works in the field of artificial intelligence but remains deeply active in Beirut's civic and architectural scene, studying the incentives and feedback loops that determine why things function, or fail, the way they do. His framework treats cities as systems of power and meaning, where design, governance, and economics are inseparable. Karim believes that downtown Beirut is the key to reunifying the city and reactivating civic life, if its ownership logic and development incentives can be restructured. His work argues that the city's biggest holdback isn't technical or aesthetic, it's structural.

Questions Concerning General Thesis Topic

1- How would you describe the identity of Martyr's Square today?

Martyrs Square today isn't a square. It's a parking lot. It's a medium that cars pass through to get from point A to point B, but there's no reason to actually be there. A square by design has specific functions; places that attract you, centers of activity, public transportation hubs, cafes, amenities. Martyrs Square has none of that. They did a tabula rasa on it after the war and just kept it empty. We can wonder why. Maybe they haven't agreed on what to build there, and anything you build sends a message about what the city values. So far they've built one luxury tower, a fancy hotel, kept the Virgin Megastore building - that's about it. The identity of Martyrs Square today is emptiness, incompletion, and capitalism. It represents sadness. It's a blank canvas they destroyed and then froze in place, and it's the exact opposite of what it used to be.

2- What role did the Square play before the civil war, and how has that role changed?

Before the war, Martyrs Square was massive - commercially and as a public transportation hub. It was the focal point of the city, the connecting point for the entire city. Hotels, cafes, transportation all converged there. If you needed to get anywhere in Beirut, you went through Martyrs Square. Now it's the exact opposite of all those things. No public transportation, no commercial activity, no reason for most Lebanese to go there. The role changed from connector to barrier, from public commons to private void. And this wasn't accidental - it was built into how Solidere operates.

3- Do you feel Beirut's Central District is accessible to ordinary citizens, or does it feel alienating?

It's deeply alienating. The cafes and restaurants downtown are extremely expensive because that's how Solidere designed it. They created artificially inflated rents through price floors - only massive corporations can afford to rent there. Most Lebanese are completely priced out. The maximum a regular person can do is walk around, but even that's becoming more alienating. Solidere still controls the area as a private company, so there are things you just can't do. They removed public benches from the souks so people don't loiter. You can only sit if you're purchasing something. Areas like Wadi Abu Jamil are completely walled off and securitized - you can't even enter. You feel it in the restaurants you can and can't go to. You feel it in the places where there are no benches to sit unless you're buying food. The roads around downtown act as moats. The Ring Highway doesn't connect downtown to the rest of Beirut - it separates it. This alienation was intentional. When your mandate is to serve shareholders rather than the public, exclusion is the default outcome.

4- What symbolic or emotional meanings do you think Martyr's Square holds today?

Martyrs Square holds emotional meanings of sadness, emptiness, incompletion, and loss. It symbolizes what happens when private capital dictates public space - you get a void that maximizes extraction while minimizing community. It holds symbolic meaning for protest and resistance. During 2019, it became common ground where people from all backgrounds gathered precisely because it was empty and unclaimed. That reclaiming was powerful, but temporary. The square also symbolizes the death of heritage. The way archaeological ruins were treated around Martyrs Square - literally dumped in piles like trash - shows how little value the development model places on historical memory. They bulldozed over 200,000 cubic meters of ancient Beirut and dumped it into the sea. What remains is just broken stones with no context. For many Lebanese, it represents broken promises. Solidere promised mixed-income development and a return to downtown's diverse character. What they built instead was exclusion and emptiness. It feels like collective defeat.

5- How do you personally experience the physical, social, or economic borders that exist within Beirut?

Downtown feels separated from the rest of Beirut. The highways and bridges surround it like fortifications. Areas are walled off. There are no pedestrian pathways that naturally connect downtown to Hamra, Achrafieh, or Gemmayzeh. You drive around downtown; you don't walk through it. You feel the economic borders in the restaurants you can't afford, in the benches that have been removed. The only places you can sit are where you're spending money. There's no residential life, so there's no community. Without residents, there's no daily activity that makes an area feel alive and accessible. These borders weren't accidental. Current legislation explicitly benefits real estate profit at the expense of public good. The state serves the economic interests of the dominant elite, and Solidere's structure ensures that shareholder returns matter more than public access.

6- If you could change one thing about Martyr's Square today, what would it be?

Make it an actual square again. That means adding the amenities and functions that define what a square should be - a public transportation hub with buses and shared taxis, ground-floor activity with cafes and restaurants that are affordable, public seating where people can sit without having to purchase something, green space with trees and shade, cultural programming for events and concerts, and proper heritage integration where those archaeological ruins are actually respected instead of dumped in piles. But here's the thing - you can't change just the square in isolation. Martyrs Square is empty because all of downtown is empty. It's a symptom of the wider structural problem. If you want to fix Martyrs Square, you have to fix Solidere's incentive structure. You have to bring back residents. You have to create mixed-income commercial activity. You have to make downtown a place people actually want to be, not just a financial asset on a balance sheet. Making Martyrs Square an actual square requires making downtown an actual city center. And that requires changing the model from extraction to stewardship, from speculation to sustainability, from shareholder returns to community building.

Questions About Thesis Masterplan Proposal

1- Do you believe a mixed income housing model is feasible in Beirut and Beirut's Central District?

Of course, I believe in mixed-income housing. It's not just feasible - it's essential. But it needs to be done properly, in a guided way that makes sense. It takes a lot of planning, but it's definitely possible. The key is that you need to change the structure of Solidere to make that work. Right now, developers have zero incentive to build affordable housing because they can make more money building luxury-only, and there are no legal requirements for affordability. Solidere sells land to the highest bidder without consideration for what gets built. Mixed-income housing works globally - cities like Vienna, Barcelona, Copenhagen have mandatory social housing percentages in private developments. This isn't radical; it's standard urban planning. It actually benefits developers long-term too. Mixed-income developments create residents, residents create foot traffic, foot traffic supports commercial activity, and commercial activity increases property values. Empty luxury buildings generate zero income. Occupied mixed-income buildings generate steady rental income and sustained property appreciation. But to make this happen, you need to restructure Solidere's ownership - maybe 70% private, 30% public/cooperative governance. You need to mandate mixed-income requirements legally. And you need to switch from selling land outright to leasing it on 99-year terms. When Solidere retains ownership and has a long-term stake, their income comes from successful projects, not from selling and walking away. Suddenly their incentive aligns with public interest.

2- What's your impression of the proposal to introduce cultural centers and new old souks around the Martyr's Square?

Absolutely essential, but it goes way beyond just Martyrs Square. It needs to be part of a wider master plan for all of downtown. A cultural and touristic center makes complete sense if it's done right, connect it to the university strategy, activate heritage sites properly, create public spaces for events. But this can't be isolated to one square. Downtown lost its cultural function when Solidere focused purely on commercial luxury. Pre-war downtown had theaters, cinemas, bookstores,

cultural events. That's been completely erased. Tourism right now focuses on natural beauty or religious sites, but cities need urban tourism too. Tourists want to see living, breathing city centers - not sterile zones. If you're bringing universities downtown, cultural centers emerge organically. Students create demand for lectures, theater, music, art. Academic institutions bring conferences and international visitors. If heritage was managed properly - integrated into public spaces, made accessible, given real context instead of being tossed in trash piles - it could be a major draw. Beirut has 5,000 years of history. That's an asset other cities would kill for. But cultural and touristic centers only work when they're part of a living neighborhood. You can't artificially create culture in a vacuum. You need residents, students, mixed-income commercial activity, and public spaces. Then cultural programming emerges naturally and sustains itself.

3- Do you have a positive or negative impression of the highways and bridges that surround the downtown area?

Negative. The highways and bridges act as moats. They separate downtown from the rest of Beirut rather than connecting it. The Ring Highway was designed for vehicular efficiency, not urban livability. It moves traffic quickly around downtown but creates barriers for pedestrians. You can't casually walk from Hamra to downtown or from downtown to Gemmayzeh without navigating hostile infrastructure. The highways make downtown feel like a separate zone - you drive around it, not through it. This reinforces the sense that downtown isn't part of the wider city. It's an island. The infrastructure design signals that downtown is for people with cars, not for people using public transportation or walking. This immediately excludes lower-income residents. The highways are a physical manifestation of Solidere's model - infrastructure that serves capital movement rather than community building.

4- Do you think a network of pedestrian pathways could help reconnect surrounding neighborhoods of Beirut's Central District?

Definitely. Pedestrian pathways are essential for reconnecting downtown to the rest of Beirut. Right now, the infrastructure separates rather than connects. Downtown acts as a barrier be

tween eastern and western Beirut, between the coast and inland neighborhoods. Downtown is the geographic center. If it functions properly, it's the link that allows the entire city to flow. If it's dead or inaccessible, Beirut becomes a collection of disconnected neighborhoods rather than a unified city. Cities don't come alive through car traffic - they come alive through people walking, shopping, eating, sitting, talking. Pedestrian pathways would mean safe, attractive walking routes from Hamra to Martyrs Square to Gemmayzeh that don't require navigating highway crossings. It means continuous urban fabric where you can walk from neighborhood to neighborhood without dead zones. It means bike infrastructure connecting all of Beirut through downtown. Beirut's small enough that biking could be a primary mode of transport if the infrastructure existed. But pedestrian pathways can't work in isolation. They need to be part of a comprehensive plan that includes residents living downtown, mixed-income commercial activity, public transportation hubs, and safety. Pedestrian infrastructure is both cause and effect - you need it to create urban life, but you also need urban life to make it feel safe and appealing.

5- In your view, what would meaningful community participation look like throughout the design, implementation, and maintenance of a project like this?

Meaningful community participation requires changing the structure of Solidere through a public-private partnership model. Right now, Solidere is a private company accountable to shareholders, not to the public. The company was legally structured to prioritize shareholder returns, and the government gave it excessive leniency. Real community participation would mean restructuring Solidere from 100% private to maybe 70% private, 30% public/cooperative governance. That 30% would include municipality representatives, urban planning NGOs, resident cooperatives, university consortiums, small business associations, heritage conservation groups. But this can't just be consultation theater where they ask for your opinion and then ignore it. Community representatives need actual voting power on Solidere's board - the ability to block projects that don't serve public interest. It also means transparency and accountability. Right now, there's almost no transparency. Solidere's master plan designated

only 2% of downtown for archaeological excavation in violation of Lebanese antiquity law, but there was no accountability. Community participation means public access to plans, financial projections, environmental impact studies, and the ability to challenge decisions through legal and political mechanisms. Instead of Solidere deciding what gets built and then "consulting" the community, the process should start with community needs. What kind of housing do people need? What commercial spaces would small businesses use? What public spaces do neighborhoods want? Then design and implementation follow from those needs. In the design phase, you'd have community workshops where residents and business owners shape the vision. In implementation, local hiring requirements for construction. In maintenance, Solidere's role shifts from "sell and walk away" to long-term stewardship - managing public spaces, coordinating with residents' associations, ensuring the area remains accessible. This is about fixing the power imbalance. Original property owners felt their constitutional rights were undermined because they were never given their day in court. True community participation means giving original property owners, current residents, small businesses, and the wider public a say that actually matters.

6- What are your thoughts on establishing a traditional old souk in Beirut's Central District, similar to the historic markets of Tripoli, Byblos, and Saida?

I'm skeptical about whether you can artificially create an "old souk." A souk is something that forms organically. It grows through the community around it - through residents who live above the shops, through merchants who've worked the same stalls for generations, through customers who come daily because it's part of their neighborhood rhythm. You can't just build a souk and expect it to function like Tripoli or Saida because those souks have centuries of accumulated social and economic relationships. Downtown Beirut currently has none of that. There are no residents, no organic community. The souks that Solidere built are mostly empty because they're just physical structures without the social fabric that makes a souk a souk. But you can create modern markets that serve similar functions. Look at London's Borough Market or Barcelona's La Boqueria - these are modern markets with cleanliness and safety

regulations, but they're still vibrant, mixed-class spaces where people from all backgrounds come to buy food. The key is creating market structures where Lebanese small business owners can afford to rent stalls. You need to keep rents low enough that it's not just luxury brands but actual working-class and middle-class merchants. You need a mix of retail types - food vendors, craftspeople, used books, clothes. And critically, these need to be integrated into residential areas because markets don't work if they're just tourist destinations. They need to serve local residents' daily needs. The Solidere souks failed because rents were too high for small merchants, there was no residential population to support daily commercial activity, they were designed for luxury shopping rather than daily market needs, and there was no connection to actual community. If you restructure Solidere's incentives and bring back residents, you could create market spaces that evolve into something like traditional souks over time. But you can't force it. You have to create the conditions - affordable rent, residential density, mixed-income population - and let the social and economic relationships develop organically.

7- What do you hope Martyr's Square becomes for the next generation?

A place that actually functions as the heart of Beirut. I hope it becomes what it used to be - a meeting place, a transportation hub, a commercial center, a public commons where people from all backgrounds can gather. I hope it becomes a neutral space. In a city divided by sect and class, Martyrs Square could be common ground - where university students from all over Lebanon come to study and socialize, where workers and executives both eat lunch, where protests and celebrations happen, where Beirut remembers it's one city, not a collection of enclaves. I hope it becomes an economic engine with mixed-income commercial activity that creates jobs for Lebanese people, not just foreign corporations. Markets where small businesses can thrive. Cultural centers that attract tourism but serve residents first. I hope it becomes a symbol of possibility. Right now, Martyrs Square symbolizes failure and extraction. I hope it becomes a symbol that Lebanon can actually build something good, that public interest can win over short-term capital extraction, that citizens can reclaim their own city. And I hope it becomes a link - physically and symbolically connecting all

parts of Beirut. Where you can walk from Hamra to Gemmayzeh through vibrant streets, where public transportation brings people from every neighborhood, where the city feels like a whole again. But that won't happen on its own. It requires changing the structural incentives before 2029 when Solidere's contract expires. If we don't act now, the next generation will inherit another decade of empty buildings and missed opportunities.

Public Sector Specific Questions

1- What are the main challenges to public led urban renewal in Beirut?

The power structures and the incentive misalignment in Solidere's business model. Solidere is a private company with a mandate to maximize shareholder returns, not serve public interest. As long as the incentive structure prioritizes short-term capital extraction through land sales, public-led renewal is impossible because the incentives are fundamentally misaligned. There's also no real public oversight. The company's formation created a confusion of public and private interests. The government gave Solidere excessive leniency while offering only vague outlines of public responsibility. The company's bylaws didn't even specify what percentage of revenue had to go to rehabilitation of the center - it could theoretically be zero percent and still be within legal rights. There's a lack of democratic participation. Original property owners had no real voice. Shareholders had no individual power. Community members had no input. Urban planning decisions were made by a board accountable only to shareholders, not to citizens. And politically, the Lebanese state serves the economic interests of the dominant elite. Real estate developers and politicians are increasingly indifferentiable. Then there's the absence of protective legislation. Current laws explicitly benefit real estate profit at the expense of public good. There's no mandatory social housing requirements, no strong heritage protection laws, no meaningful environmental review, no requirements for public space in private development. Financially, downtown prices prop up the entire Lebanese real estate sector. If downtown reprices to reflect actual market conditions, it triggers a cascade effect that exposes artificial inflation everywhere else. Banks, developers, and investors can't afford that repricing because it would collapse their balance sheets. And the Lebanese state has no money - any public-led urban renewal would need financing, but the government can't fund it. But here's the key insight - these challenges are real, but they're not insurmountable. The solution isn't for the government to take over Solidere's role - they have absolutely no capacity for that; it would be disastrous. What we need to do is stop the leakage but keep the company in a new form. Redesign it so it becomes a force for civic good. The vision and mission of Solidere needs to

change - its identity needs to shift so it doesn't focus on shareholders, because that by default doesn't have public interest at heart.

2- How do urban planning regulations currently enable or block inclusive developments in Martyr's Square?

Current regulations explicitly block inclusive development by prioritizing real estate profit over public good. The construction sector's growth is supported by well-enforced, increasingly lax regulations that explicitly benefit the maximization of real estate profit at the expense of the public good. There's no mandatory mixed-income requirements. Unlike cities like Barcelona, Vienna, or Copenhagen, Beirut has no laws requiring developers to include social housing or affordable units. Developers can build 100% luxury and face no consequences. There are no public space requirements - no regulations mandating that private developments include accessible public spaces, plazas, or green areas. This allows Solidere to create a district that's entirely privatized. Heritage protection is weak. Lebanese antiquity law states that archaeological sites belong to the state and must be preserved, but in practice the law has no teeth. Solidere's master plan designated only 2% of downtown for archaeological excavation, and developers regularly destroy sites without real consequences. The old rent law creates bizarre incentives where property owners often choose to demolish buildings rather than maintain them because they can't monetize their assets otherwise. This leads to loss of historic buildings and affordable housing simultaneously. Current legislation allows developers to count palm trees in indoor lobbies as "green spaces" - there's no requirement for actual parks or public green areas. And Solidere was exempted from taxes for ten years. Shareholders' capital gains and dividends were tax-free. This cost the Lebanese government an estimated $500 million to $1 billion per year in lost revenue while the country was desperate for funds. The regulations literally subsidized private profit at public expense. The regulations don't just fail to enable inclusive development - they actively block it by design. This isn't accidental. When real estate developers and politicians are indifferentiable, the regulations get written to serve elite interests. Changing the regulations requires changing the political economy that creates them. That's why structural reform of

Solidere is so important - it's not just about one company; it's about changing the model that shapes all of downtown.

3- Do you think it's feasible to renegotiate Solidere's land control for public interest use?

Yes, it's feasible, but it needs to be done through Solidere, not against it. The key is that Solidere was created by law, so it can be reformed by law. It's a private company, not a state ministry embedded in patronage networks. Parliament can issue legislation to restructure its governance and mandate. And critically, Solidere's contract expires in 2029. When that deadline approaches, there's a natural window for renegotiation. The company doesn't have an automatic right to renewal - that requires government approval. Solidere's original justification was that it served public interest. If it's failed that mandate for 30 years, the government has legal and moral grounds to restructure the company to actually fulfill its stated purpose. Here's the thing people miss - shareholder interests aren't incompatible with reform. This isn't a zero-sum game. The current model generates almost no revenue because empty buildings don't pay dividends. A restructured model that actually activates downtown would generate better long-term returns for shareholders through rental income, property appreciation, and sustainable development. The way to do it is ownership restructuring - change Solidere from 100% private to 70% private, 30% public/cooperative governance. Shareholders keep majority control, but decisions get filtered through a governance layer that includes municipality representatives, urban planning NGOs, resident cooperatives, and heritage conservation groups. Then you shift the mandate from selling land to leasing it. Solidere should lease land on 99-year terms rather than selling it outright. This way they retain ownership and capture long-term value appreciation. Their income shifts from one-time land sales to sustained leasehold income. This realigns incentives completely - Solidere now has a stake in what gets built because successful projects generate more rent. Their role shifts from "land bank selling to highest bidder" to "curator and steward of downtown." They control tenant mix, support public-interest projects, maintain infrastructure, and ensure the district functions for all Lebanese. You'd mandate that Solidere must dedicate a specific percentage of revenue to affordable housing,

public spaces, heritage preservation, and community programming. Unlike the original vague bylaws, these would be legally binding with clear metrics and accountability. Look at the Howard de Walden Estate in London or the Grosvenor Estate. These are private landowners who manage entire neighborhoods through leaseholds. They're highly profitable precisely because they've built sustainable ecosystems where residents, businesses, and cultural institutions all thrive. It's not radical; it's a proven model. The feasibility isn't technical - it's political. Solidere's current shareholders and the political elite they're connected to benefit from the extractive model. Renegotiating land control means challenging those entrenched interests. But here's the leverage: the current model isn't working for anyone, not even shareholders. Empty buildings generate zero returns. If you can make the case that restructuring actually benefits shareholders long-term, you remove their incentive to resist. The window is 2029. If we don't start the conversation now, Solidere will just extend its contract for another decade with no changes. The feasibility depends on building political will and public pressure before that deadline.

4- How might the lack of heritage conservation laws impact reactivating archaeological sites around the Martyr's square?

The lack of heritage conservation laws means archaeological sites around Martyrs Square are treated like trash - literally. The ruins there are what I call a trash dump of ruins. Solidere took archaeological materials from all over downtown - Phoenician, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman - and tossed them in piles around Martyrs Square like garbage. They're broken, mixed together from different periods and locations, completely decontextualized. tAnywhere else in the world, this would never happen. Archaeological sites are supposed to be preserved on-site with proper documentation, context, and protection. In Beirut, over 200,000 cubic meters of archaeological deposits - seven million cubic feet of ancient history - were literally bulldozed and dumped into the Mediterranean Sea during the 1990s reconstruction. Lebanese antiquity law clearly states that known archaeological sites belong to the state and must be preserved. But the law has no enforcement mechanism. In practice, economic logic overrides heritage protection. Developers have more power than archaeologists. Construc-

tion timelines are sacred; archaeological timelines are expendable. Developers who destroy sites face no meaningful consequences. Sometimes they "document" ruins with quick photos before bulldozing - that counts as "preservation." Ministers who should enforce heritage laws owe their positions to the same political and economic elite that owns development companies, so they regularly overrule the Department of Antiquities. Developers also use time pressure tactics - working quickly on weekends or holidays before archaeologists or activists can mobilize opposition. By the time anyone notices, the site's already destroyed. This makes it nearly impossible to properly reactivate archaeological sites because we don't even know what was lost. Most sites were destroyed without proper documentation, so we can't tell the full story of Beirut's history because the evidence was bulldozed. The ruins that do exist around Martyrs Square are decontextualized - just random piles of stones with no interpretive framework. After decades of watching heritage get destroyed, there's cynicism about any "heritage preservation" project. People assume it's performative. And we've missed a massive economic opportunity - properly managed archaeological sites could be a major tourist draw. Cities like Rome, Athens, and Istanbul build entire tourism industries around ancient history. Beirut has 5,000 years of archaeology, but it's been treated so poorly that it can't be leveraged as an asset. What needs to happen is enforcing existing laws - Lebanese antiquity law already exists; it just needs to be applied. Developers should face real penalties for destroying heritage. The sites around Martyrs Square that still exist should be properly excavated, documented, and integrated into public spaces with context and storytelling. We need heritage protection with teeth - create new laws that give the Department of Antiquities real power to stop developments that threaten archaeological sites. But here's the deeper issue - heritage conservation laws don't exist because heritage isn't valued. In a system that prioritizes short-term capital extraction, 5,000-year-old ruins are just obstacles to development. Until you change the incentive structure, until heritage becomes an asset rather than a liability, laws alone won't fix the problem. But laws are a start. They create the framework for accountability.

5- What mechanisms exist or are missing for public participation in Beirut's urban planning processes?

Mechanisms for public participation are almost entirely missing. What exists is mostly performative. Occasionally developers or government agencies hold "public consultations" where citizens can voice opinions, but these rarely have any real impact on final decisions. The plans are usually already finalized; the consultation is just a checkbox. When major projects are announced, there's media attention and public debate, but this happens after decisions are made, not during the decision-making process. The most effective form of "public participation" has been direct action - protests. The 2019 uprising showed that when people occupy public space and demand change, they can sometimes force concessions. But this shouldn't be the only mechanism. What's missing is comprehensive. Cities like Barcelona and Paris let residents vote on how a portion of municipal budgets get spent - participatory budgeting. Beirut has nothing like this. New York has community boards where local residents review and approve development projects in their neighborhoods with real power to block or modify proposals. Beirut has no equivalent. In many cities, major development projects must go through mandatory public review periods where citizens can comment, challenge, or propose alternatives. In Beirut, most of this happens behind closed doors. For major projects that reshape the city, citizens should be able to call referendums to approve or reject plans. Lebanon has no direct democracy mechanisms for urban planning. In many countries, residents' associations or heritage groups can sue to stop developments that violate planning laws or environmental protections. In Lebanon, original property owners felt they were never given their day in court. Citizens have limited legal recourse. Public participation also requires access to information. Solidere's financial reports, master plans, land sales, and development agreements should all be public record. Most aren't. And Solidere's board is accountable only to shareholders. There are no seats for community representatives, municipality officials with real power, or public interest groups. The absence of public participation mechanisms isn't an oversight - it's by design. Solidere was created to avoid the "inefficiencies" of democratic decision-making. The real estate holding company model was chosen precisely

because it streamlines decision-making by concentrating power in a board accountable only to shareholders. The trade-off was explicitly made: efficiency over democracy, speed over inclusion, capital over community. What should exist? Participatory governance structure where Solidere includes public representatives on the board with real voting power. Mandatory community review where all major development projects go through public review with binding community input. Transparent information where all plans, contracts, financial reports, and impact assessments are publicly available online. Legal empowerment where residents' associations and heritage groups have legal standing to challenge developments that violate public interest. And participatory budgeting at the municipal level where Beirut residents vote on priorities for public space development and infrastructure improvements. Creating these mechanisms requires legislation. The 2029 window is the opportunity to build public participation into any renewed mandate. Without these mechanisms, any talk of "public interest" or "community benefit" is just rhetoric. Real public participation means real power to shape outcomes, not just the right to complain after decisions are made.

Private Sector Specific Questions

1- In your experience what makes a downtown area economically sustainable and socially vibrant?

Residentiality. People living there. That's it. That's the core principle. A downtown without residents is a dead zone. Everything else flows from having actual residential population. Residents create constant demand - they need groceries, pharmacies, barbers, cafes, restaurants. They shop daily, walk their dogs, sit in parks. This sustained activity supports small businesses and creates foot traffic that makes an area feel safe and appealing. They activate streets at all hours. Office workers leave at 5pm, tourists come and go, but residents are there morning, evening, weekends. This creates safety through constant presence and economic activity beyond 9-to-5. When people live somewhere, they care about it. They form residents' associations, they pressure landlords to maintain buildings, they create social networks that make neighborhoods function. Residents need affordable options for daily life, which creates space for small Lebanese businesses, not just multinational corporations and luxury brands. You also need true mixed-use - genuine integration of housing, workplaces, shops, cultural spaces, schools, parks. Monoculture kills cities. Diversity creates vitality. You need multiple price points. Rich, middle-class, working-class all need to coexist. When you isolate only one income bracket, you kill economic sustainability. Luxury-only areas sit empty because there aren't enough ultra-rich people to fill them. Mixed-income areas stay occupied because they serve broader demand. The street level is everything. If ground floors are occupied by banks, luxury boutiques, or closed facades, streets feel dead. If ground floors have cafes, bakeries, bookstores, and small shops that are affordable, streets come alive. People need to be able to get there easily without cars - buses, shared taxis, eventually metro. Accessibility is everything. You need public space - parks, plazas, benches, places you can exist without spending money. This creates social life beyond commercial transactions. And you need reasonable rents. If rental prices are so high that only massive corporations can afford space, small businesses get priced out and the area becomes a desert of empty storefronts. Sustainable downtown areas have rental markets that allow diverse businesses to operate.

What kills downtown areas is speculation - when land is treated as a financial asset rather than as urban space, buildings sit empty while owners wait for prices to appreciate. This is exactly what happened in Beirut. Monoculture kills it - all office buildings, all luxury residential, all high-end retail. When you design for only one use or one income bracket, you kill the diversity that makes cities work. Car-centric infrastructure kills it - if downtown is designed around car movement rather than pedestrian life, it becomes a place you drive through rather than a place you stay in. And extraction model kills it - when developers sell land and walk away, they have no incentive to ensure what gets built actually functions. Solidere's model is the perfect example: they got paid, they distributed dividends, and they don't care that buildings sit empty. Solidere did everything wrong. No residential strategy - almost no one lives downtown. Artificially inflated rents - only luxury brands can afford space. Sold land rather than leasing it - no long-term stake in success. No public transportation integration. Created barriers rather than connections. The result: empty, expensive, alienating. Economically unsustainable and socially dead. What would work is looking at models like the Howard de Walden Estate in Marylebone, London. They lease land, curate tenant mix, support small businesses, maintain public spaces, and ensure mixed-income residential. The result is one of London's most valuable, livable neighborhoods. It's economically sustainable because it's socially vibrant. And it's socially vibrant because people actually live there.

2- How do you respond to critiques that commercial development in BCD has excluded the public?

I completely agree. Commercial development in Beirut's central district has excluded the public by design. This isn't a bug; it's a feature. Solidere is a privately run company, so by default it's exclusive - its mandate is to serve shareholders, not the public. The pricing exclusion is obvious - the cafes, restaurants, and shops downtown are extremely expensive because Solidere created artificially inflated rental price floors. This ensures that only massive corporations can afford to operate there. Most Lebanese are completely priced out. There's physical exclusion - areas have been walled off and securitized. Public benches were removed from the souks to

prevent "loitering." The message is clear: you're only welcome if you're spending money. Residential exclusion is total - downtown has almost no residential population, and what little exists is luxury-only. There's no mixed-income housing, no social housing, no affordable options for regular Lebanese. Commercial exclusion means small Lebanese businesses can't afford the rents. The commercial mix is dominated by international brands and luxury retail. The traditional mixed-class commercial activity that characterized pre-war downtown has been completely erased. Culturally, Solidere ignored the characteristics of downtown as a meeting place between different classes and communities in Lebanon and instead built a development attractive only to large global corporations. The diversity that made downtown downtown was systematically removed. And governance exclusion is complete - citizens have no say in downtown's development. Original property owners were forced to accept share compensation rather than keeping their land. Current residents have no representation. Community input is non-existent. Why did this happen? Solidere's business model required exclusion. Their strategy was: sell land at high prices to luxury developers, distribute profits to shareholders, repeat. This model works for shareholders only if you keep prices artificially high. And keeping prices high means excluding the public. The prime minister effectively created a colonization of the public by private interests. The government gave up 25% of public land, exempted Solidere from taxes for ten years, and granted expropriation rights - all to enable a private company to maximize returns. The result was exactly what critics predicted: images of luxury that bombard the popular imagination in surrounding quarters while the duality between the city center and the rest of the capital gets reinforced. Downtown became an island of exclusion while the rest of Beirut deteriorated. This wasn't an accident or a mistake - it was the logical outcome of the incentive structure. The critique is 100% correct. But it's not just about "commercial development" - it's about the entire model. Changing this requires structural reform: restructure Solidere's governance to include public representatives with real power, mandate mixed-income development with requirements for social housing and affordable commercial space, switch to leasehold model where Solidere retains land and curates for public benefit rather than selling to highest bidder, price regulation to ensure rental

markets allow diverse businesses not just luxury brands, and public space requirements mandating accessible public spaces in all developments. The critique isn't that commercial development exists - it's that commercial development was designed to serve capital rather than community. That can change, but only through structural reform before 2029.

3- What incentives can push private developers to consider building affordable or mixed income housing?

This is the key question, and the answer is fundamental: the entire incentive structure of Solidere needs to change to change the incentives of developers. Right now, private developers have zero incentive to build affordable or mixed-income housing in downtown because they can make more money building luxury-only, there are no legal requirements for affordability, Solidere sells land to the highest bidder without consideration for what gets built, and artificially inflated prices make luxury the only financially viable option.

You can't just tweak this with small policy changes. You need to completely redesign how Solidere operates, and that redesign needs to happen at the level of Solidere's mandate, vision, and mission. The company's identity needs to shift from serving shareholders to serving civic good. And here's why this matters: the government can't adopt Solidere's role. The Lebanese state has absolutely no capacity to take over downtown development. It would be disastrous. So we need to stop the leakage but keep the company in a new form - redesign it so it becomes a force for public interest rather than private extraction. The core change is switching from freehold sales to leaseholds. Right now, Solidere sells land outright and walks away. No stake in what gets built. Change the model so Solidere leases land on 99-year terms and retains ownership. Their income comes from leasehold rents, not one-time sales. Suddenly, Solidere's incentive completely changes. They now profit from occupied buildings, not empty speculation. Mixed-income housing gets occupied; luxury-only sits empty. When Solidere's long-term returns depend on successful projects, they suddenly care about what gets built and whether it functions. This is about changing the mandate - from being a land bank to being a curator and steward of downtown. But you also need legal mandates. For every 100 square meters of private develop

ment, require a percentage of affordable units. This can be on-site or through financial contribution. A 10% construction tax increase could fund social housing spread across Beirut. Cities like Vienna, Barcelona, and Paris have versions of this - it's not radical; it's standard urban planning. You need zoning requirements where certain zones make mixed-income mandatory, and you deny building permits for luxury-only projects that don't meet affordability criteria. If development uses public land, which much of downtown does, mandate public benefit requirements including affordable housing. Then you restructure Solidere's governance - 70% private, 30% public/cooperative governance including municipality reps, urban planning NGOs, resident cooperatives. Public representatives vote on land use decisions. Now there's a decision filter asking: "Does this serve public interest or just shareholder returns?" Mixed-income housing becomes a governance requirement, not an optional add-on. You also need to make mixed-income financially viable. Reform old rent laws that create perverse incentives to demolish rather than maintain. Create renovation funds financed by construction taxes to help property owners maintain buildings. Provide state-sponsored low-interest loans for renovations. Allow conversion of empty luxury units to mixed-income with tax benefits. Create buyback programs where government purchases unsold luxury units and converts them to affordable housing. And critically, stop propping up artificially inflated prices that make only luxury viable. Let downtown reprice to reflect actual market conditions. Sustainable pricing means actual transactions and diverse development. The university housing strategy creates demand for affordable units. Provide incentives for universities to establish campuses downtown. Student housing is affordable residential by definition. 200,000+ students in Lebanon need housing; downtown has space. Incentivize employers to provide workforce housing downtown. This creates built-in demand for mid-range units. But all of this only works if you change Solidere's mandate first. The current incentive is: maximize price per square meter, build luxury, ignore whether it sells. The new incentive should be: maximize occupancy and long-term value, build mixed-income, ensure it functions. This requires both carrots - tax breaks, subsidized financing - and sticks - legal mandates, zoning requirements. But most importantly, it requires structural reform of Solidere so the company it

self becomes an engine for mixed-income development rather than an obstacle. You're not fighting against developers; you're redesigning the system so that serving public interest becomes profitable. When Solidere's returns depend on creating a functioning city rather than extracting maximum value from one-time land sales, suddenly building affordable housing makes business sense.

Main Insights

Beirut's challenges in the downtown area emerge from structural and governance failures rather than from aesthetic or technical limitations. The core issue lies in the incentive framework shaping redevelopment, particularly Solidere's shareholder-oriented model, which makes exclusion, underuse, and speculative vacancy the predictable outcomes of the system. Martyrs Square, once the city's civic anchor, has become a capitalist void; a parking lot and symbolic blankness that reflects an approach centered on value extraction rather than on supporting public life. This shift also transformed the square from a connector into a barrier: while it historically linked Beirut's social and mobility networks, post-war redevelopment severed these ties in favor of speculative priorities. Infrastructure around the area, especially the Ring Road and its feeder highways, has further entrenched fragmentation by privileging vehicular flow at the expense of pedestrian continuity, effectively turning mobility corridors into moats isolating Hamra, Gemmayzeh, and Achrafieh from the historic core. Underlying these spatial dynamics is the absence of residential life: without mixed-income, mixed-use housing, the area cannot generate the everyday activity, safety, and commercial vitality found in living neighborhoods. Consequently, meaningful transformation requires reforming the governance model itself, not only redesigning public spaces. Restructuring Solidere's mandate toward long-term stewardship is essential for design interventions to endure. In parallel, heritage must be treated as a cultural asset rather than disposable rubble; integrating archaeological layers into the urban fabric can restore identity and support a distinctive cultural economy. Finally, cultural vibrancy follows people and pricing structures: authentic cultural and touristic activity can thrive only when embedded in affordable, lived-in neighborhoods where residents, students, and daily-use markets create sustained demand.

Proposed Urban Strategies Derived from Interview Findings

1- Restructure the Governance Model of BCD / Solidere

Transform Solidere from a pure shareholder-extractive company into a public–interest development authority (e.g. 70% private, 30% public/cooperative governance). Shift from land sales to 99-year leaseholds, so the company's income depends on long-term performance and occupancy rather than one-off speculation. Legally mandate allocations of revenue to affordable housing, public space, heritage and community programming.

2- Reintroduce Residential Life as the Core Driver

Rezone large parts of BCD for mixed-income, mixed-use housing (social, student, workforce and market-rate units). Convert vacant luxury apartments into mid-range rentals or student housing via tax incentives and regulatory tools. Encourage cooperative and local ownership models to secure long-term affordability and rooted communities.

3- Redesign Martyr's Square as a Genuine Civic Hub

Turn Martyr's Square from a parking lot into a multifunctional urban square: Public transport node (buses, shared taxis, future mass transit). Affordable ground-floor commerce (small cafés, kiosks, daily services). Generous public seating and shade that does not require consumption. Space explicitly designed for protest, debate, events and celebrations. Treat the square as the city's common ground, not a leftover void.

4- Build a Continuous Pedestrian and Cycling Network

Stitch together Hamra, Martyr's Square, Gemmayzeh, Achrafieh and the Corniche through safe, shaded walking and cycling corridors. Retrofit highways and large roads with crossings, wider sidewalks and bike lanes, so downtown becomes a place you move through on foot, not just by car. Reframe highways and bridges from "moats" into porous connectors.
shareholder dividends.

5- Reinstate the "Souk Logic" with Affordable Urban Markets

Transform failed luxury souks into affordable market halls and street markets for Lebanese small businesses, craftspeople and food vendors. Maintain low, regulated rents and flexible leases so working- and middle-class merchants can operate. Embed markets within residential and transit-rich areas so they serve daily needs, not just tourists.

6- Protect and Activate Heritage and Archaeology

Enforce existing antiquity laws and introduce real penalties for destruction or dumping of ruins. Turn remaining archaeological areas around Martyr's Square into open-air archaeological parks with proper interpretation, rather than random stone dumps. Integrate visible archaeological layers into plazas, promenades and cultural routes to build a distinct urban identity and cultural economy.

7- Reform Planning Regulations to Enable Inclusion

Introduce mandatory mixed-income / affordable housing quotas in all major developments. Require public space and green space provision (real parks, not potted palms in lobbies) in private projects. Align zoning and building codes with public interest goals, not just maximum real estate yield.

8- Institutionalize Meaningful Community Participation

Create a permanent downtown community board (residents, original owners, NGOs, universities, small businesses, heritage groups) with real voting power on major projects. Implement participatory budgeting for public space, mobility and heritage projects. Guarantee transparency and public access to masterplans, financial projections and impact assessments, plus legal standing for communities to challenge harmful projects.

9- Use Universities and Culture as Structural Anchors

Attract university campuses and educational institutions into downtown to generate steady demand for housing, cultural events and affordable services. Develop a network of cultural centers, theaters, lecture halls and exhibition spaces integrated with streets and squares, not isolated monuments. Link heritage sites, markets and cultural venues into coherent cultural/touristic circuits embedded in everyday urban life.

10- Pivot from Extraction to Stewardship

Reorient downtown's development logic from short-term capital extraction to long-term stewardship of land, heritage and community. Measure success in occupancy, diversity, civic use and cultural vitality, not just land values and

Chapter 9 cover photo:

Areal view of Beirut. In the foreground, the al Amin Mosque and St Georges Cathedral, Beirut's historic city centre and Place de l'Étoile. In the background, the skyscrapers of Minet el Hosn.

Source:

SCHW. Beyrouth vue aérienne. 10 Jan. 2019. Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Beyrouth_vue_a%C3%A9rienne.jpg

9- Conclusion: Insights, Outcomes, and Future Directions for Martyr's Square

9.1- Feedback to the Initial Research Questions

This thesis set out to address a series of foundational questions concerning the future of Beirut's Central District and, more specifically, Martyr's Square. Can the square be reclaimed as an inclusive civic space after decades of privatization, infrastructural fragmentation, and political erosion? What planning, policy, and design strategies can repair the city's fractured urban fabric? What role can collective memory, grassroots activism, and participatory governance play in shaping a renewed urban center?

The research conducted across six core components historical analysis, theoretical framing, spatial documentation, comparative case studies, architectural design, and stakeholder interviews demonstrates that the answer to these questions is both urgent and affirmative. The findings show that Martyr's Square holds the capacity to become a socially cohesive, historically grounded, publicly governed urban core, provided that its regeneration is rooted in community needs, memory sensitive design, and an accountable planning framework.

This thesis therefore advances the argument that reclaiming Martyr's Square as an inclusive, community centered civic space grounded in historical memory, participatory planning, and multi scalar urban connectivity is essential for repairing Beirut's fragmented urban fabric and re establishing a democratic and socially cohesive city center.

The interview analysis reinforces this conclusion. While 90 percent of respondents described the square as empty, void, or nonexistent, they simultaneously identified it as symbolically irreplaceable as a space of protest, refuge, revolution, and collective identity. This paradox is central to the thesis. The square's physical emptiness is precisely what magnifies its symbolic and political weight, suggesting that reconstruction must honor a balance of flexibility, openness, and programmed civic life.

9.2. Initial Background, Urban Analysis Outcomes

The historical review of Beirut's planning trajectory reveals a century long pattern of discontinuity, erasure, and contested modernity. From Ottoman reforms and French Mandate urbanism to post-war reconstruction under Solidere, Martyr's Square has repeatedly been reshaped by top-down interventions that either instrumentalized or obscured its civic and symbolic functions. Archival research shows that its transformation into a "vital void" after the civil war was not incidental but emerged through deliberate political and economic processes prioritizing land valorization over public life. Spatial analysis conducted during 2025 further illuminates how infrastructure, particularly highways, oversized intersections, and privatized plots, has severed the district from its surrounding neighborhoods. The square's contemporary condition as a traffic roundabout and surface parking lot exemplifies the dominance of vehicular mobility and the absence of a human-scale public realm

Three critical findings emerge from the urban analysis:

1- Physical fragmentation mirrors political fragmentation. The same forces that divided Beirut socially and politically are projected onto the urban fabric through disconnected streets, restricted zones, and land controlled by private entities.

2- Collective memory is active but unsupported. The square remains deeply imprinted with layers of martyrdom, protest, displacement, and civic aspiration, but the built environment fails to host or express these memories meaningfully.

3- Community and grassroots interventions demonstrate alternative futures. Post blast mobilization and pop-up cultural initiatives show how public space can be temporarily reclaimed when institutional frameworks fail.

9.3- Interview Synthesis: Statistical Insights and Cross-Sector Convergence

The interviews provided a rich empirical foundation for assessing the feasibility and desirability of inclusive redevelopment. A quantitative analysis of all 10 interviews revealed clear thematic patterns:

1- Perception of the Square Today:

90% described Martyr's Square as empty, alienating, or nonfunctional.

80% expressed that the square feels more like a highway interchange than a public space.

100% of civil society and public-sector interviewees identified structural fragmentation as a primary barrier to public use.

3- Collective Memory and Identity:

100% acknowledged the square's symbolic importance either as a protest space, war memory site, or civic landmark.

Civil society interviewees emphasized activism, while public-sector interviewees highlighted its historic role as a national symbol.

3- Feasibility of Mixed-Income Housing:

80% across sectors found it culturally or politically unfeasible within the BCD.

Private-sector interviewees stressed land value constraints; civil society highlighted political obstacles.

4- Preferred Interventions:

90% supported reintroducing souks and small-scale commercial activity.

100% supported pedestrian pathways, though 70% argued that pathways alone are insufficient without transportation and greenery.

100% supported adding shade, trees, and seating as immediate priorities.

80% emphasized revitalizing existing spaces

rather than building entirely new structures.

5- Governance and Participation:

100% of public-sector interviewees cited institutional weakness and unclear governance as primary barriers.

75% of civil society interviewees demanded meaningful participation through surveys, public hearings, and co-design workshops.

Across sectors, 100% agreed the square must remain open, non-militarized, and publicly governed.

Cross-Sector Convergence

Despite operating in distinct spheres, all sectors converged on four central ideas:

1- The square lacks basic public-space qualities.

2- Vehicular infrastructure prevents it from functioning as a civic place.

3- Its symbolic power must be retained and strengthened.

4- Public governance and collective participation are indispensable.

These findings substantiate the thesis argument that Martyr's Square must be rebuilt simultaneously as a physical, social, economic, and symbolic space.

9.4- Comprehensive Synthesis of All Proposed Urban Strategies for Martyr's Square & the BCD

1- Rebuild Governance, Reform Solidere, and Reclaim Public Authority

Transition Solidere from a private, extractive model into a public-interest, accountable governance structure. Prepare for the end of Solidere's contract: reclaim streets, plazas, and permitting authority for the municipality. Create a dedicated public development authority for Martyr's Square. Modernize planning laws, digitalize permitting, and enforce regulations transparently. Enable multi-level coordination between municipality, ministries, civil society, universities, and local groups. Introduce policy tools (99-year leases, public-private partnerships with clear conditions, diaspora investment).

Core Principle: Governance must shift from privatized control to accountable public stewardship.

2- Transform Martyr's Square into a True Civic Heart, Not a Parking Lot or Highway Island

Remove parking from the square and adjacent streets. Pedestrianize the square fully and redirect traffic around it. Remove security barriers, fences, and checkpoints; reopen visual and physical access. Provide flexible open space that supports everyday uses and large civic gatherings. Use shade, trees, seating, lighting, and public restrooms to create basic comfort. Treat the square as the city's "common ground" for protest, culture, leisure, and democratic life. Reintegrate archaeological layers into the public realm.

Core Principle: Restore the square's role as Beirut's civic stage and democratic symbol.

3- Reconnect the City: Undo Highways, Heal Fragmentation, and Build Walkable Continuity

Remove, soften, or bury highway segments that isolate the BCD. Stitch Martyr's Square to Gemmayzeh, Saifi, Bashoura, Khandaq, Hamra, and the Corniche. Create a fine-grain network of shaded walking paths, cycling lanes, and small plazas. Anchor walking corridors with meaningful destinations (markets, archaeology, cultural hubs). Develop a corridor linking Martyr's Square to Karantina as a "social balance zone."

Core Principle: Physical reconnection is foundational to social and symbolic reconnection.

4- Reintroduce Public Transport and Reduce Car Dependence

Establish a transit node at Martyr's Square (future tram/microbus hub). Create peripheral parking and restrict car circulation in the BCD. Implement tactical traffic-calming and stepwise pedestrianization. Use mobility reform to dissolve socio-economic barriers created by highways.

Core Principle: A people-first mobility system is essential for an inclusive center.

5- Activate Public Life Through Everyday Commerce and Affordable Markets

Shift from luxury retail to everyday, accessible, small-scale commerce. Reintroduce kiosks, juice stands, craftsmen, cafés, small shops, and "dikken." Supplement the "new old souks" with affordable markets, flea markets, weekly farmers markets. Diversify market typologies: food, crafts, antiques (linked to Basta/Bashoura), cultural goods. Ensure low regulated rents and flexible leases to attract real local vendors.

Core Principle: Everyday economies, not elite consumption to bring life back.

6- Reinstate Residential Life and Enable Mixed-Income Housing (with contextual nuance)

Across interviews there are two positions, which can be reconciled: Supporters who propose to convert empty luxury housing into mid-range rentals or student housing, introduce incentives or zoning for mixed-income housing where feasible and make mixed-use neighborhoods livable by restoring basic amenities (dekkens, services). While the skeptics argue one should avoid forcing mixed-income units directly into the BCD unless daily life infrastructure is restored first.

Unified Principle: Housing must return, but it must be socially rooted and supported by everyday services.

7- Restore Heritage, Archaeology, and Vernacular Urban Fabric as Living Layers

Enforce heritage laws and penalize destruction of ruins. Create open-air archaeological parks integrated into walking paths and public spaces. Rebuild or reinterpret lost heritage structures when culturally meaningful. Protect and revive artisanship and craft-based economies. Avoid superficial nostalgia; use heritage as continuity, not replica.

Core Principle: Memory must be active, accessible, and interwoven with daily life.

8- Integrate Memory, Identity, and Civic Storytelling into Urban Form

Preserve scars of conflict (e.g., the Martyrs statue) with interpretive tools. Create contemplative landscapes, monuments, and open-air museum elements. Incorporate storytelling, digital tools, plaques, and educational layers. Recognize the square as a site of protest, grief, and national identity.

Core Principle: Memory should be neither sanitized nor monumentalized; it should live.

9- Build Robust, Deep, and Continuous Public Participation

Establish neighborhood councils, citizen assemblies, and a permanent downtown community board. Use participatory budgeting for public space, mobility, and heritage decisions. Introduce storytelling tools, exhibitions, pop-ups, and transparent communication channels. Move beyond NGO-led participation toward structured, binding mechanisms.

Core Principle: Participation is not consultative; it is co-governance.

10- Create Social and Cultural Infrastructure Rooted in Community Needs

Build community hubs for youth, elderly, families, unemployed workers. Develop cultural centers only if publicly resonant and grounded in daily life. Encourage universities, cultural institutions, theaters, and learning spaces to return to downtown. Use food, art, and culture as social catalysts in public space.

Core Principle: Public space must serve real people, not abstract programs.

11- Introduce Nature-Based Urbanism and a Distributed Green Network

Reintroduce trees in Martyr's Square. Convert parking lots into community run micro forests and green pockets. Develop dispersed green nodes throughout the BCD. Use greenery to create comfort, resilience, and less militarizable environments.

Core Principle: Greenery is a public right and a psychological reconnection tool.

12- Shift from Extraction to Long-Term Stewardship and Local Production

Support local industries, crafts, and creative economies. Encourage bottom-up, lightly regulated markets and economic ecosystems. Promote ecotourism, affordable lodging, and cultural tourism tied to Beirut's identity. Regulate nightlife, privatization, and commercial exploitation to prevent "theme-park urbanism." Rebuild downtown as a living economy, not a financial asset.

Core Principle: The city center must generate value for its people, not extract it from them.

9.5- Main Design Strategies and Evolution of the Project

The analyses undertaken in this thesis inform a set of core design strategies that guide the proposal, including re-centering Martyr's Square within a continuous network of pedestrian connectors, restoring its symbolic axes and spatial legibility through memory-driven design, creating multi-purpose public platforms, developing an inclusive economic ecosystem, and embedding participatory governance as a foundational planning tool. While the thesis initially considered Martyr's Square as an isolated intervention, the research process, particularly interview insights and spatial legibility mapping, revealed that the square's recovery is impossible without re-integrating its wider urban constellation. This led to an expansion of the project scope to include key connective corridors linking the square with Gemmayzeh, Saifi, Bashoura, and the port. Interview data strongly validated this shift: 100% of civil society and public-sector interviewees emphasized that revitalizing the square cannot occur without addressing the highways and fragmented pedestrian routes that sever it from adjacent neighborhoods. Consequently, the project evolved from a single-site design intervention into a multi-scalar urban strategy aimed at reconnecting Martyr's Square with its metropolitan, historical, and socio-political networks.

9.6- Final Vision for Reclaiming Beirut's Martyr's Square

The final proposal integrates historical, spatial, and social insights into three core components. These three components form an integrated framework for reviving the square as a living civic platform rather than a static monument.

1- Spatial Reconfiguration and Pedestrian Priority

The design proposes reclaiming the ground plane by eliminating surface parking, rerouting vehicular traffic, and establishing a radial pedestrian system. Interview responses showed that 80% of participants across sectors view current traffic as the primary obstacle to accessibility and safety.

2- Memory Grounded Public Realm

Drawing on archival research and interview reflections, the design incorporates memory through flexible gathering spaces, interpretive landscapes, and visible archaeological layers, reflecting the square's evolution from maidan to protest ground to national symbol.

3- Inclusive Economic and Cultural Programming

The proposal reintroduces the "new old souks," artisan zones, and affordable street-level commerce. The interviews revealed strong support for this strategy: 100% of private-sector interviewees agreed that economic vibrancy requires small-scale, affordable commercial activity. 75% of civil society interviewees emphasized artisanship as essential to cultural continuity. 90% of all interviewees supported reactivating souks as a means of democratizing the area's commercial identity.
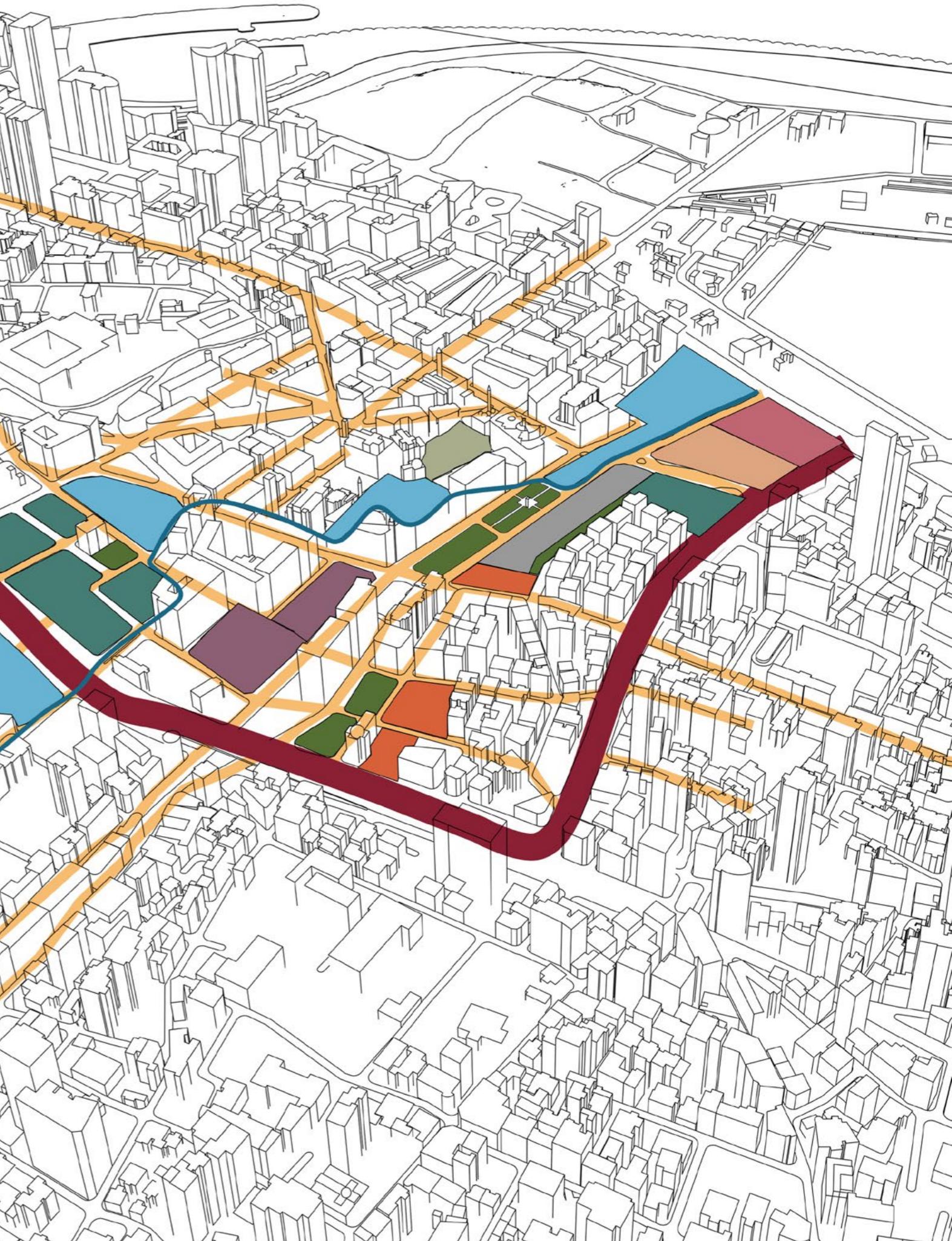
New Modified Masterplan

The principal modifications involved the incorporation of a fourth archaeological site that had previously gone unrecognized, the broader redistribution of green spaces through the introduction of pocket squares wherever spatial potential permitted, and the enlargement of the area designated for the new Old Souks to allow for a wider variety of shops and restaurants. The lots allocated for affordable and mixed-income housing were retained despite criticism from some interviewees, as affordable housing remains critically needed in Beirut even if some consider it an inefficient use of prime land. Additionally, a large public plaza was introduced in place of the previously proposed expansive green zone, responding to the pressing need for an open civic space where people can gather, demonstrate or seek collective protection in times of social or political unrest.

Public Plaza

Archeological Spine Connection

Archeological Site

Archeology Museum

Affordable Housing Units

Cultural and Touristic Center

Farmers Market

Green Space

New Old Souks/Market space

Pedestrian/Car Limited Area

Pedestrian Street to Mar Mkhayel

Transportation Hub

Underground Freeways
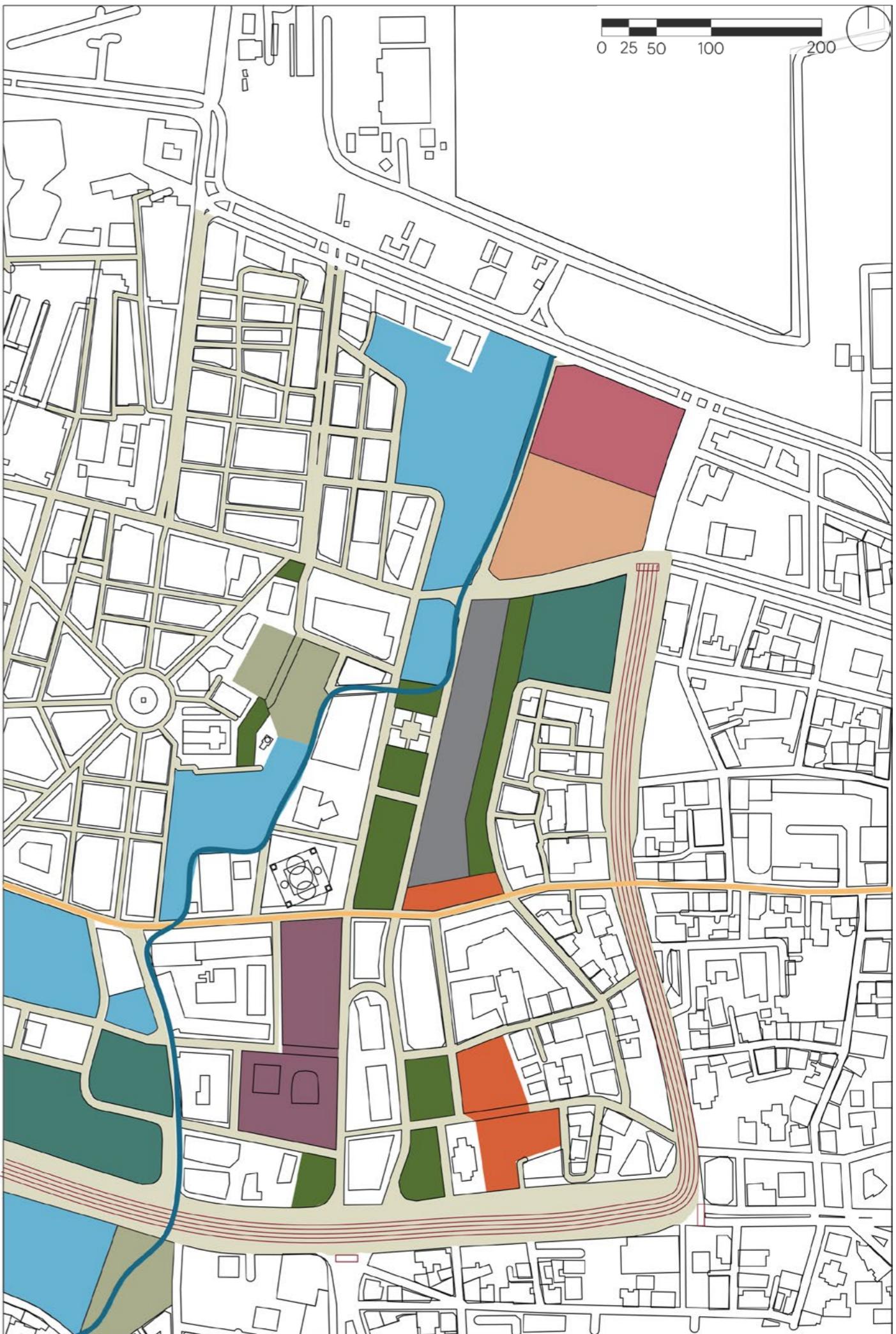
9.7- Outcomes of the Project and Benefits for the City and Community

The proposal generates significant spatial, social, and institutional benefits including:

1- Reconnecting Fragmented Urban Fabric

By prioritizing pedestrian pathways, shaded corridors, and accessible public spaces, the design strengthens continuity across formerly divided districts, symbolically reversing the legacy of the Green Line.

2- Rebalancing Public and Private Power

The proposal advocates for reclaiming public land and establishing a state led civic authority to guide development. This recommendation was supported unanimously by public sector interviewees and by 75% of civil society participants, who criticized the lack of regulatory capacity in the current planning system.

3- Reviving Public Life and Collective Belonging

Through flexible civic platforms, shaded squares, and heritage based programming, the project fosters daily use, social mixing, and cultural expression. Interviews confirmed that people crave simple, low-maintenance amenities like shade, seating, vendors, accessible food and identified these as prerequisites for restoring the square's public character.

4- Strengthening Local Economies

Affordable souks, artisan markets, and small-scale commercial activities create opportunities for local producers and reinforce Beirut's vernacular identity. This aligns with the interview insight that economic accessibility is a core dimension of social inclusivity.

5- Reinstituting the Square as a Democratic Stage

By embedding memory and activism into the spatial design, the square regains its historical role as a platform for civic dialogue, dissent, and collective visibility which are functions repeatedly emphasized by interviewees from all sectors.

9.8- Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This thesis acknowledges several limitations such as the absence of reliable municipal data due to governance instability, land ownership opacity in Solidere controlled zones, the inability to access certain archival datasets and planning documents and political volatility that continually reshapes planning realities. Future research should extend this work through detailed mobility and environmental simulations to test pedestrianization scenarios, economic feasibility studies for artisan districts and affordable commerce, participatory workshops with local stakeholders to further refine the proposed design and comparative governance studies focusing on how post-conflict cities reclaim privatized land.

9.9- Final Reflection

This thesis demonstrates that urban regeneration in Beirut cannot be achieved through top down planning alone. It must instead grow from collective participation and shared decision making. The interviews conducted throughout the research function as a small yet revealing microcosm of what broader involvement could accomplish, showing how diverse perspectives can reshape strategies and generate more inclusive directions for future development. Martyr's Square, repeatedly reshaped, erased, rebuilt, and reclaimed through Beirut's history, stands as a physical expression of the city's shifting identity, collective memory, and unresolved fractures. Recognizing this, the thesis proposes a path forward grounded in historical continuity, spatial justice, and public governance, one that repositions Martyr's Square as a place of memory and as a civic platform that is open, accessible, and integrated into everyday life. Empowered by a participatory framework, the square has the potential to heal fragmentation and reconnect Beirut on social, spatial, and symbolic levels. In this sense, the thesis is an academic inquiry that also serves as a model for what can emerge when communities are invited to co author their urban future. Reclaiming Martyr's Square as a democratic and resilient heart for Beirut is therefore envisioned as the starting point for a more unified, inclusive, and self determined city.

10- Annex: Photographic Survey Done By Author (Summer 2025)
(Photo Index Map at the end of the chapter)
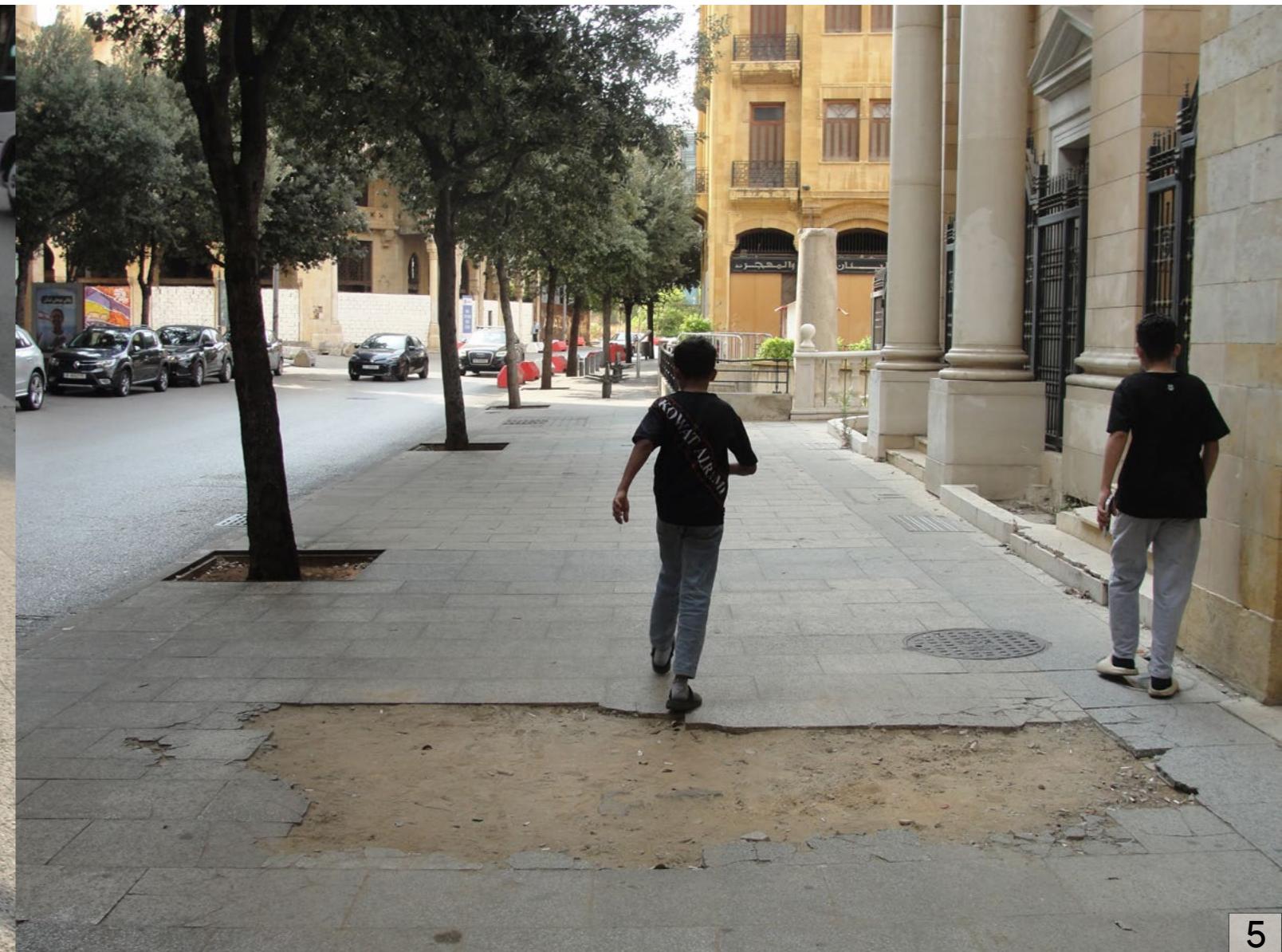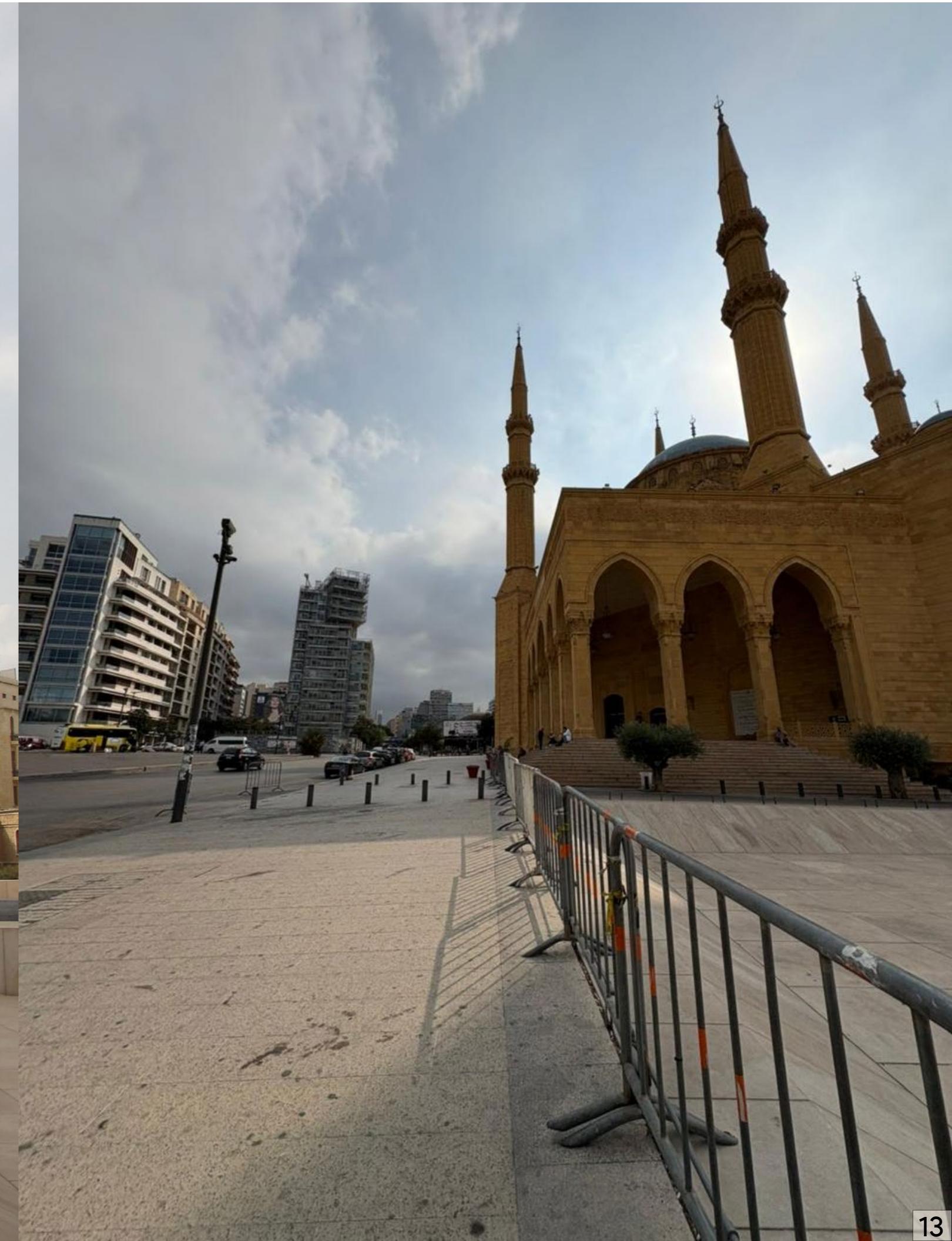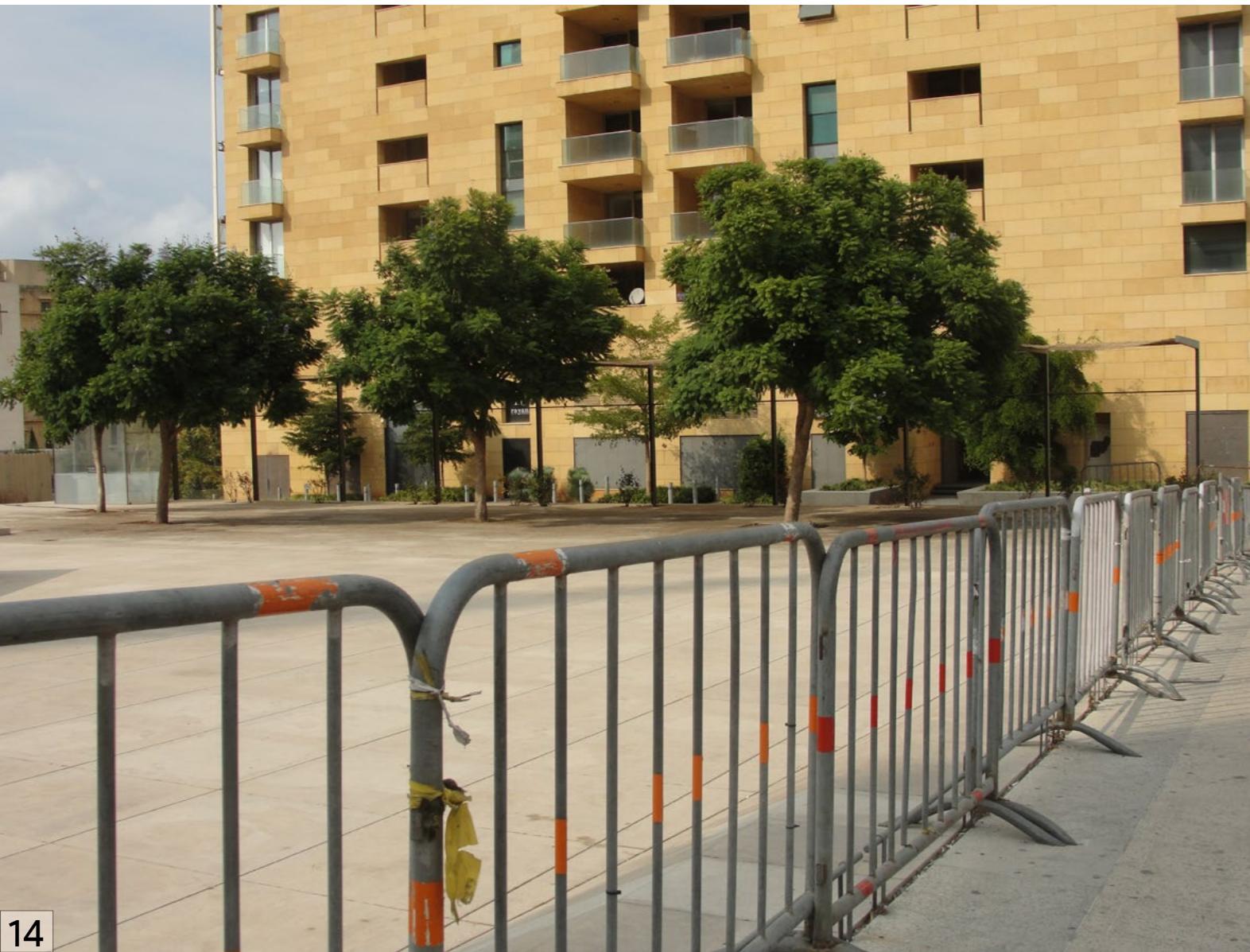
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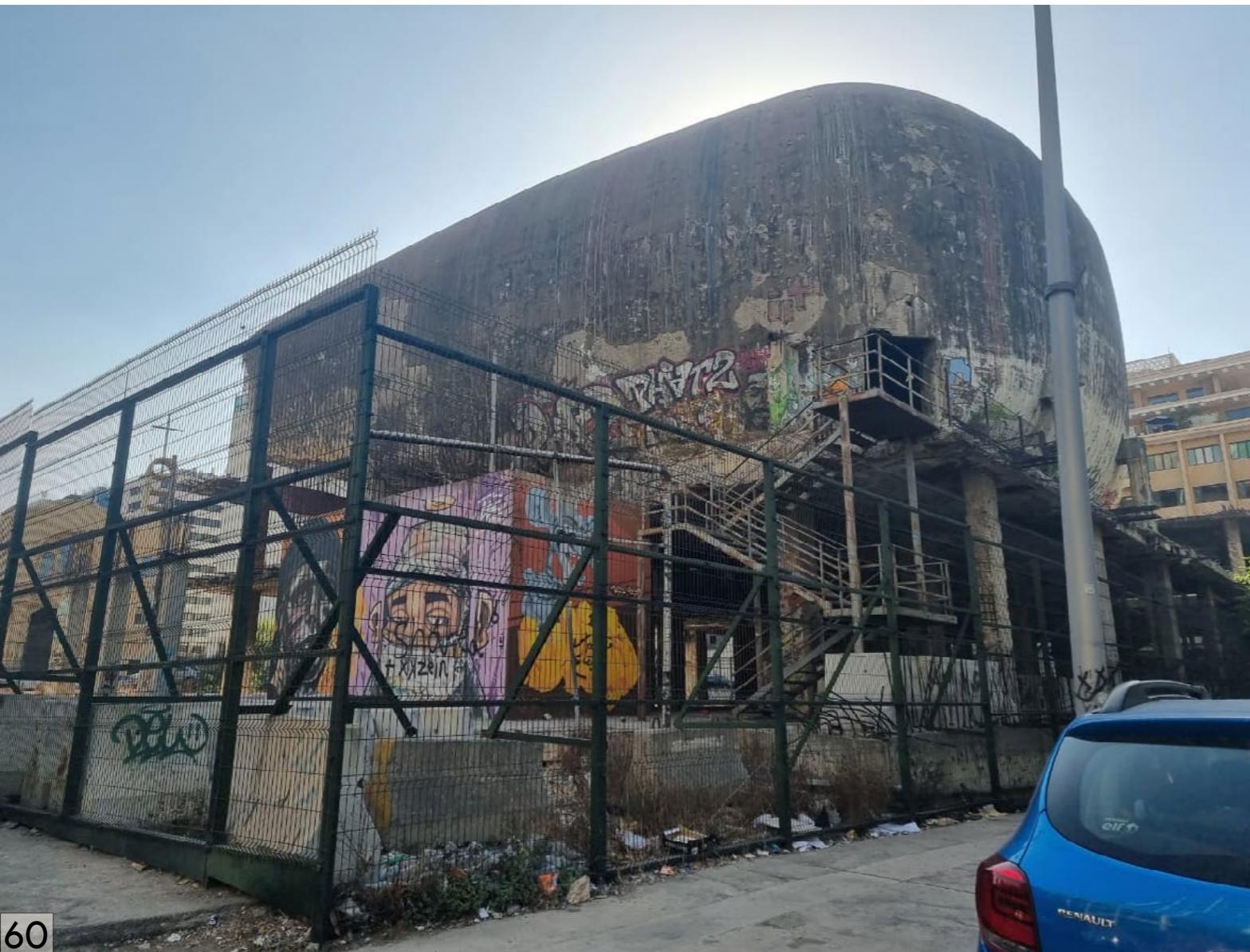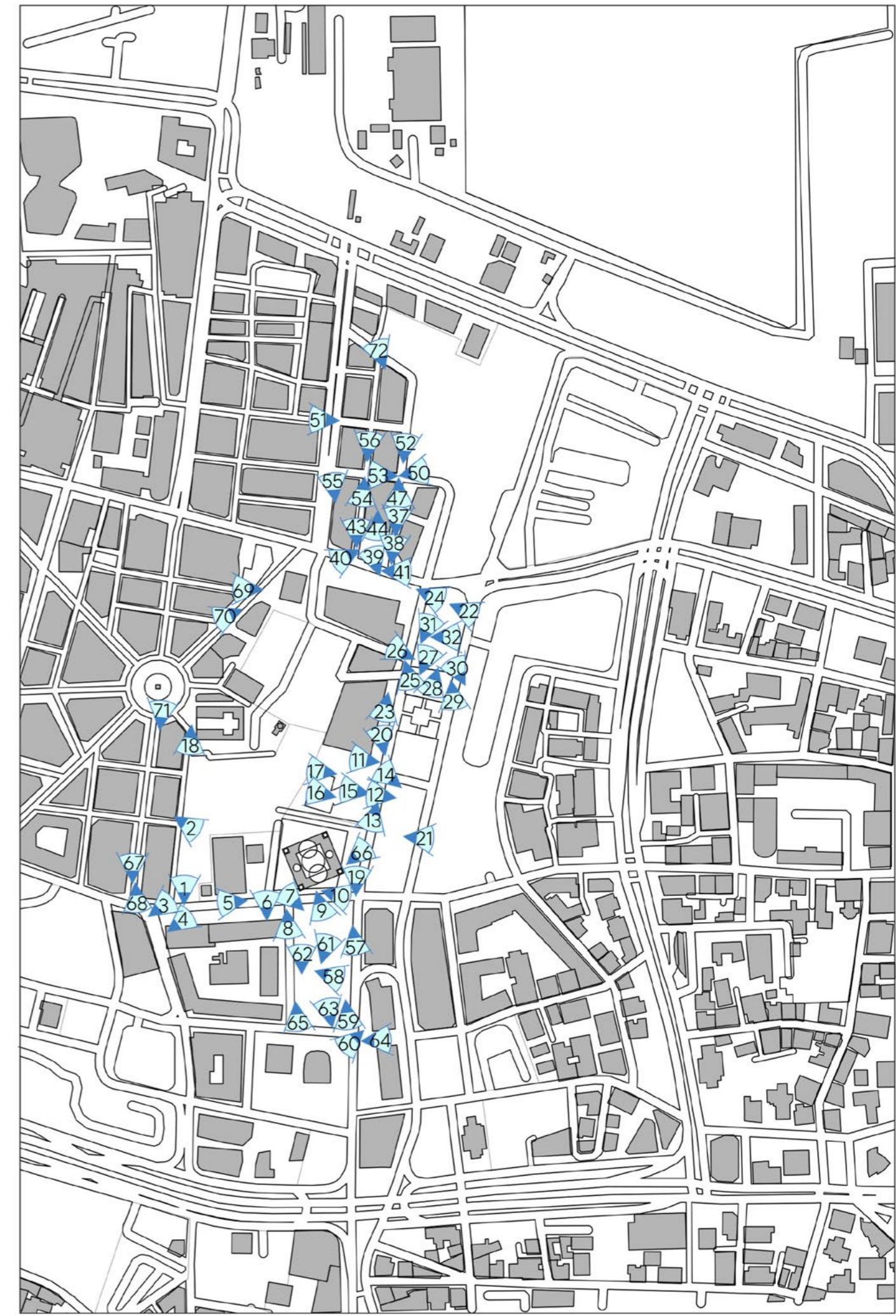
Native trees of lebanon that can be used in the desegnated green areas.

Cercis siliquastrum
Judas Tree
الخروب البري
Deciduous, used for
ornamental color Toler-
ates coastal conditions.

Pistacia palaestina
Wild Pistachio
البطم الفلسطيني
Drought-hardy, good
urban canopy tree.

Tamarix aphylla
Tamarisk
الطرفاء
One of the best trees for
salty wind near the sea.
Can stabilize soil.

Acer obtusifolium
Syrian Maple
القيقب السوري
Tough, drought-tolerant,
grows well in coastal urban
soils. Light shade tree

Ziziphus spina-christi
Christ's thorn jujube
السدر / النبق
Very heat and drought
tolerant. Great as a shade
tree in coastal areas.

Morus alba / nigra
Mulberry
التوت
Historically planted in urban
Beirut. Tolerates polluted air
and humidity

Arbutus andrachne
Palestine Strawberry Tree
القطلب
Evergreen, fits streets
and plazas. Needs well-
drained soil

Calotropis procera
(shrub form)
Oshar / Sodom Apple
العشر
Natural urban survivor. Thrives
in abandoned lots and hot
pavements.

Olea europaea
Olive
الزيتون
Thrives in heat and
dry soil

Ficus carica
Fig
التين
Works well in tight
courtyards, walls, and
urban gardens. Needs
some pruning

Pistacia lentiscus
Mastic Tree
المصطكى / الضرو
Evergreen, small,
handles wind and
salty coastal air.

Ceratonia siliqua
Carob
الخروب
Drought tolerant
Handles poor soil
and salty air

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