

## Feature Articles

# Historicizing Early Modernity — Decolonizing Heritage: Conservation Design Strategies in Postwar Beirut

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This article provides a critical overview of the conservation of colonial heritage in Beirut's central and pericentral districts. It argues that in Lebanon's postcolonial/post-civil war context, conservation activities have inevitably been linked to the political, cultural and economic realities of the present as well as to the attitudes of various stakeholders toward issues of modernity, national identity, and authenticity. The article starts by explaining the evolution of Beirut's colonial townscape during the late Ottoman and French Mandate periods. It then discusses recent strategies of urban and architectural conservation along three lines of thought: the market-based, the concept-based, and the institutional-based. The article concludes by framing both the debate over and practice of conservation in Beirut within national and regional contexts.

*[I]t might be more fruitful to understand heritage, tradition, and modernity as strategic political positions, rather than as fixed or essential qualities of sites or cultural practices, much less of individual identities. Individuals routinely shift from one cultural position to another, adopt one identity or another, as occasion demands.*

— Dell Upton<sup>1</sup>

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For the past two decades, since the end of the Lebanese civil war, the practice of heritage conservation in Beirut has given rise to a wide range of architectural and urban interventions; it has also instigated heated debate about the definition of heritage and the nature and scope of conservation and planning legislation.<sup>2</sup> The time may now be ripe, however, to take stock of all that has transpired in discourse and practice during this period to characterize and assess Beirut's specific response to postwar conservation and frame it within regional and global contexts.

Most of what has been, and still is being, debated pertains to Beirut's colonial heritage, i.e., to the period from the second half of the nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth century. During this time the medieval city was partially razed as part of the Ottoman modernizing reforms (1900–1916) and then duly Haussmannized under the French Mandate (1920s–1930s). Because of this timing, the buildings and townscapes of this period may be qualified simultaneously as “colonial” and “early modern.” On the one hand, their conservation thus raises the issue of assimilating the colonial legacy as an integral part of national heritage, and on the other, it raises the issue of qualifying early modern architecture as eligible for conservation.

This article argues that in a postcolonial/postwar context like that of contemporary Beirut, conservation activities have necessarily been reframed according to the political, cultural and economic realities of the present as well as the attitudes of various stakeholders toward modernity, national identity, and authenticity. It also argues that postwar reconstruction has been the catalyst for redefining the city's position toward its colonial heritage. To discuss these issues, the article articulates a conceptual framework around two contemporary intellectual movements: postcolonialism and poststructuralism. The first is used to reposition colonial heritage vis-à-vis the local production of modernity; the latter helps redefine heritage as a constructed and dynamic notion subject to multiple geographical and temporal contingencies. Spatially and formally, the article also invokes the much-debated notion of “facadism” to qualify and discuss the diverse design strategies used to promote architectural and townscape conservation.

The article first provides an overview of the evolution of Beirut's colonial townscape and describes how such a landscape is replete with the continuing dialectics between modernity and national identity. It will focus here on Beirut's central district and its periphery, where the highest concentration of late Ottoman and French Mandate structures are still to be found (and are therefore also threatened by development). This is also the area where the most heated debates about diversified attempts at conservation have been conducted for the past two decades. The second part of the article then typologizes and discusses these attempts both on ideological and design-practice grounds. The article will conclude by framing Beirut's conservation debate and practice within national and regional contexts.

## REFRAMING COLONIAL MODERNITY: PARADIGM SHIFTS IN HERITAGE CONCEPTION

As Sabine Marschall wrote in “The Heritage of Post-Colonial Societies”:

*Heritage is commonly understood as a process of conscious, purposeful remembrance for the political, cultural or economic needs of those in the present; it involves a subjective representation of valued objects, significant persons, places and symbolic events of the past, closely allied with issues of identity and power. . . . More especially so, post-colonial societies, following their attainment of independence from colonial rule, tend to be preoccupied with issues of representation and defining a new identity, for which selected aspects of the past understood as heritage serve as inspiration or foundation. The seizing of self-representation is often a key prerogative, as these societies attempt to complement (and complete) political freedom with a “decolonization of the mind.”<sup>3</sup>*

This issue of “decolonization of the mind” has emerged particularly strongly in recent literature on cities in the Arab World, where it has instigated a “paradigmatic” shift through the reconceptualization and redefinition of precolonial and colonial heritage and the deconstruction of their dynamic relationship to modernity and national identity.

In light of the extensive literature produced on this topic over the last two decades, this article will focus only on key references relevant to urban and architectural heritage in the Middle East. It will argue that the “decolonization” process in the region is occurring along two intersecting tracks. The first promotes a shift from the “traditional/Orientalist reading,” dominated by a static vision of the past as the only source of authenticity, and by an Islamic perspective that emphasizes the religious basis of urban form.<sup>4</sup> Yasser Elsheshtawy has qualified such a view as “outdated and counterproductive,” leading to “a narrative of loss.”<sup>5</sup> And Shirine Hamadeh has argued that it is rooted in the dual-city construct, “freezing the image of a society in time and space thus maintaining differentiation between the colonizers and the colonized.”<sup>6</sup> By comparison, a more dynamic view has emerged through postcolonial discourse. Here, colonial heritage is positioned as an integral part of the national identity construct, and the provincial city is seen as capable of shaping a unique response to metropolitan modernity. The provincial city has also been reframed within the contemporary globalization discourse, in which the concept of heritage conservation has shifted from the museumification of medieval cores to the “manufacturing of heritage” for tourist consumption.<sup>7</sup>

The second decolonization track, meanwhile, positions local “actors and stakeholders” as participants, rather than passive receivers, in the process of early modernization. Colonialism is thus interpreted as a simultaneous indicator of

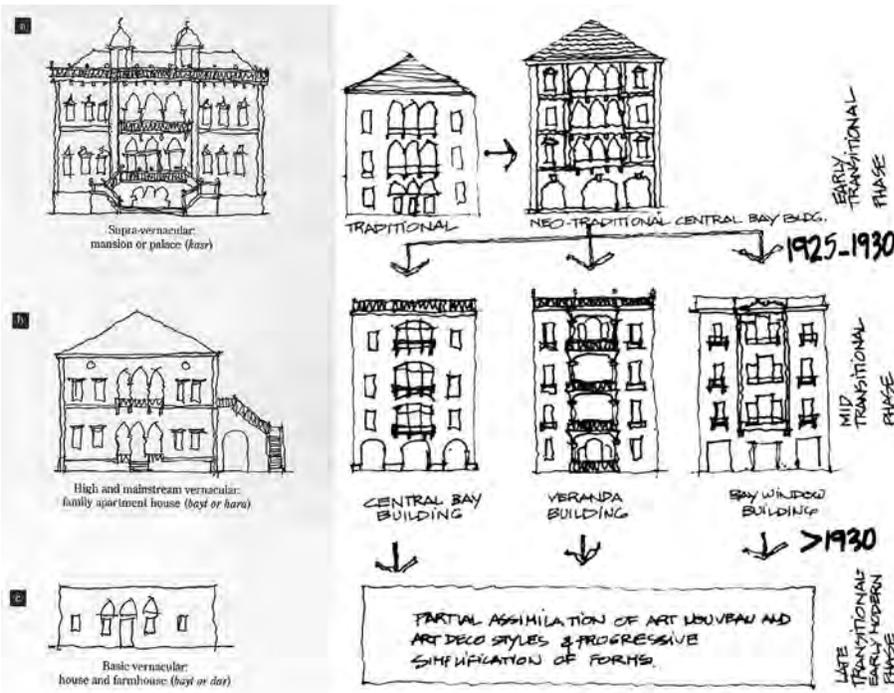


FIGURE 1. Early modernity: evolution of Beirut's residential architecture. Source: author.

Western hegemony and a conscious choice by the colonized to join Western modernity. In "Urbanism: Imported or Exported?" Mercedes Volait and Joe Nasr argued that "planning and architectural discourse can be shaped by domestic realities (such as economic and social structures and political intents) as much as by the experience of professional planners (whether indigenous or foreign)."<sup>8</sup> Colonial heritage may therefore be envisioned as the result of a hybridization between "native aspirations and foreign plans," forces which mutually and dialectically affected each other.

This complexification of the historical discourse has permeated the investigation of city profiles as well as single monuments and buildings. In "Weaving Historical Narratives: Beirut's Last Mamluk Monument," for example, Howayda Al-Harithy identified three different narratives of postwar conservation — the religious, the archeological, and the architectural — and showed how all three were woven around the same monument to serve socio-political and/or economic ends. Such an approach is anchored in the awareness of buildings as dynamic signifiers rather than objects with inherent meaning, a view that introduces a poststructuralist perspective to heritage conservation.<sup>9</sup>

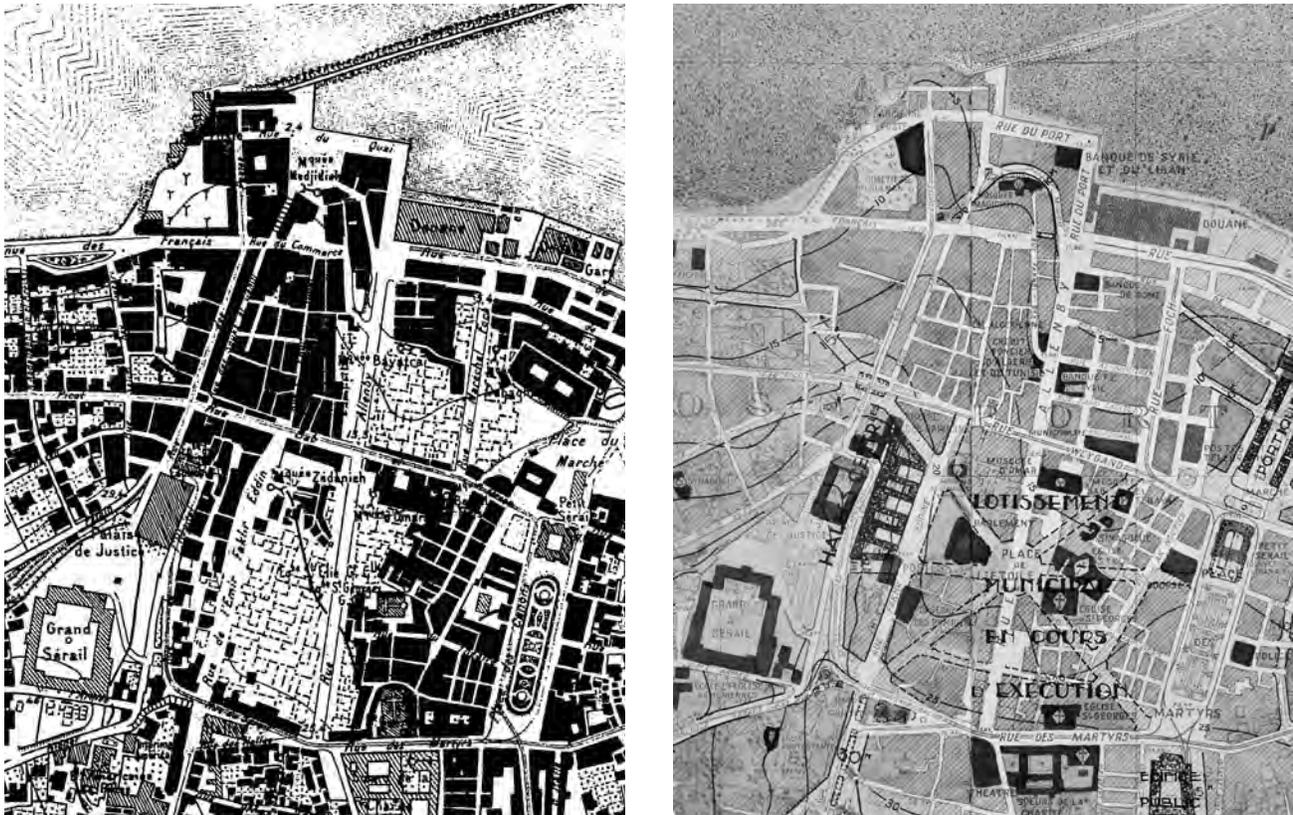
This article builds on both these postcolonial and post-structuralist discourses to investigate recent attempts at conserving early modern/colonial heritage in Beirut. It does this by reframing Beirut's recent urban history in terms of its dialectic relationship with Westernization and modernity. Concurrently, it explores ongoing architectural and urban conservation strategies from a pluralist perspective, engaging the multiple views of actors and stakeholders and their own legitimizing narratives.

#### CONTEXTUALIZING COLONIAL MODERNITY: FORMATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF BEIRUT'S CENTER AND PERICENTER TOWNSCAPES

The townscapes of Beirut's central and peripheral districts are the product of three stages of modernization, each of which generated its own dynamics of physical urbanization as well as its own response to imported architectural and urban models.<sup>10</sup>

*Early modernity: suburbanization/centralization.* As recently as the 1940s and 1950s the city center and its immediate surroundings formed a continuous spatial entity with no major breaks in its urban fabric. These areas were differentiated only by a gradual change in land use from office/commercial and institutional uses to high-density residential. This land-use pattern was established through successive phases of historical growth, initiated in the 1840s by the expansion of the city beyond its medieval walls. In less than a century, the adjoining agricultural hinterland was transformed into a sprawling suburb, then into a series of well-defined urban districts exhibiting a high diversity of socioeconomic characteristics and lifestyles.

Shaped by land speculation and an increasing rural-to-urban migration, Beirut's residential architecture also gradually transformed itself from the suburban bourgeois house (the triple-arched central-hall house) and ornate mansion, to the peri-urban apartment house, and then to the speculative urban apartment building (FIG. 1).<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, the old fabric of the central district was being razed to accommodate the Ottoman and French urban reforms. This gave rise to two successive waves of early modernization: the Tanzimat and



**FIGURE 2. LEFT:** The Tanzimat city, Beirut Central district in 1920 showing the early modernization of the city center by the Ottomans; two sections of the medieval core were demolished in order to regularize the urban fabric and build rectilinear streets linking the port to the periphery. **RIGHT:** The Haussmannian city, the 1932 Danger plan with the Etoile square superimposed on the medieval fabric.

the Haussmannized city center (FIG. 2). Most notably, during this later period, the Foch-Allenby and Place de l'Etoile schemes, consisting of star-shaped and wide, gallery-lined avenues, were superimposed on the medieval fabric.

A stage-set approach was adopted based on facade competitions that produced models for buildings in both areas. This meant that the traditional central-hall plan was replaced by an efficient office layout, while street elevations were differentiated by diverse stylistic treatments.

During this time the two symbols of local power, the Parliament and the Municipality buildings, also expressed the dual nature of an ambiguous search for national identity. The former adopted an Oriental-revivalist style that articulated historical regional references with neo-Mamluk overtones (FIG. 3). The latter provided a clear expression of the Neo-Islamic style developed in Cairo by turn-of-the-century Western and Western-educated architects (FIG. 4).<sup>12</sup>

*High modernity: decentralization/infrastructural imposition.* The independence period, extending from 1943 until the start of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, brought two major modifications, which would have a decisive impact on the preservation of the early modern heritage half a century

later. First, zoning law (law 70, decree 6285), established in August 31, 1954, created ten concentric zones of diminishing floor-to-area ratio (FAR) extending from the center of the city outward. Today, however, this zoning law, which is still enforced, works against the logic of urban conservation by stipulating that the highest allowable densities must occur in the historic core and its immediate periphery, precisely where the highest concentration of precolonial and colonial structures are found. The second major transformation was infrastructural, and consisted of the superimposition of the inner-city ring road around the central business district during the 1960s (FIG. 5). This created a physical break between the city center and its periphery.

*Late modernity: recentralization/segregation.* This period, also referred to as the third modernity, corresponded with the globalization trend that began in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>13</sup> It saw the completion of the city's inner ring road through the construction of Avenue Georges Haddad to the east and the widening of Rue Fakhreddine to the west. These infrastructural boundaries in turn set the limits of the post-civil war redevelopment area. This clearly demarcated the central from the peripheral districts, causing two planning systems



**FIGURE 3.** *The Parliament building and the clock tower of Place de L'Etoile. Architect: Mardiros Altounian (1889–1958). Source: ©The Fouad Debbas Collection, Beirut. Used with permission.*

to emerge side by side (FIG. 6). On the central district side, Solidere, the real estate company responsible for downtown reconstruction, is now implementing a detailed master plan with an integrated urban conservation strategy. However, outside Beirut Central District (BCD), the pre-civil war blanket zoning is still operative, leading to the ad hoc development of vacant parcels and the destruction and replacement

of late Ottoman and French Mandate structures by highrise apartment buildings.

How does this dual system affect the remaining colonial townscapes of the center and pericenter, and what are the resulting conservation strategies adopted by the public and private sectors?



**FIGURE 4.** *The Municipality building. Architect Youssef Aftimos (1868–1952). Source: Solidere.*

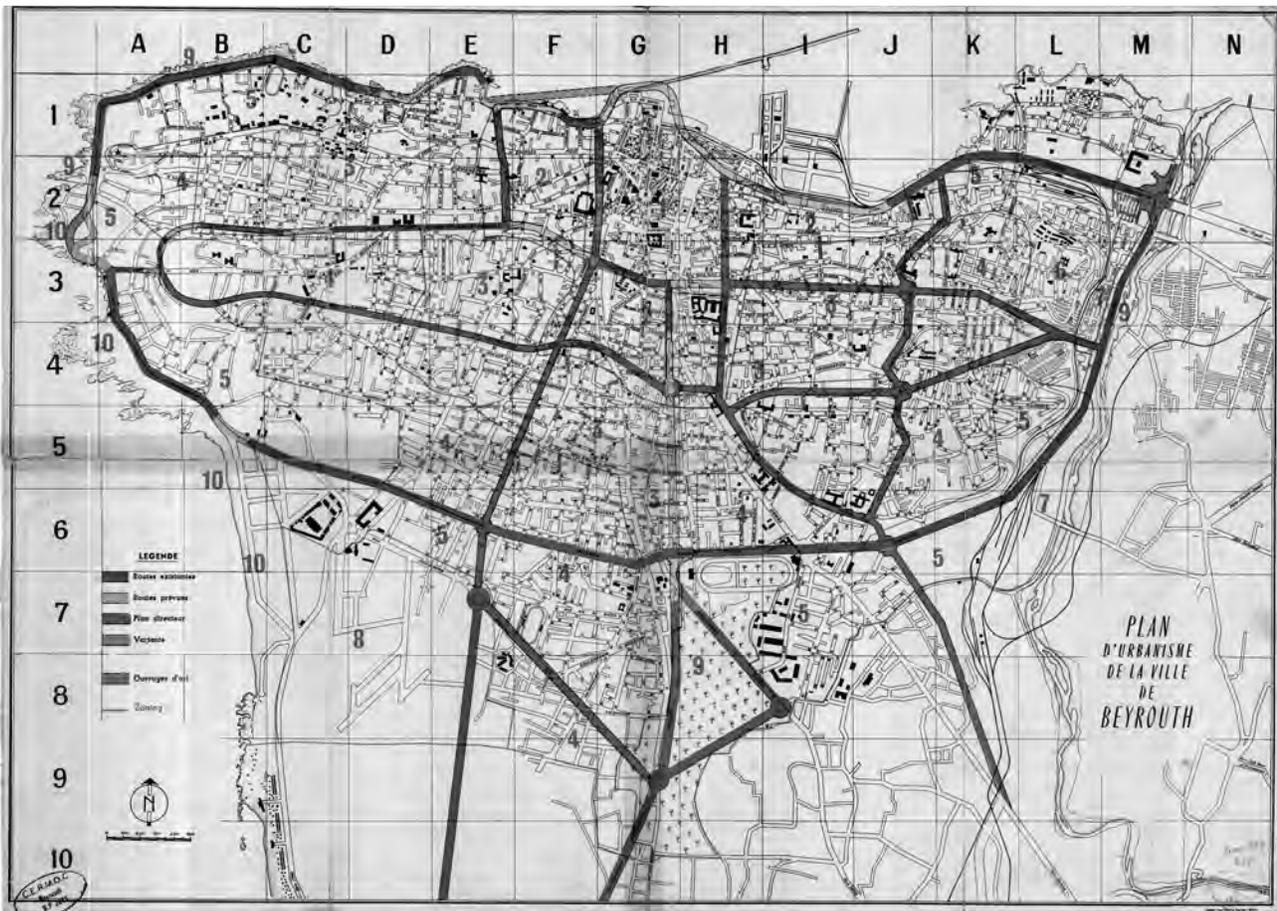


FIGURE 5. Segregation of the urban fabric through zoning and major circulation arteries during the 1950s and 1960s. Source: Institut Français du Proche-Orient.



FIGURE 6. Beirut Central District's detailed master plan contrasts with the periphery, still regulated by an outdated zoning legislation. Source: Solidere.

## TYPOLOGIZING CONSERVATION DESIGN STRATEGIES

I will refer to conservation design strategies in post-civil war Beirut as the outcome of negotiation between a client/developer and a designer, as framed by aesthetic, legislative, functional and economic considerations. Thus, the type and scope of a design intervention is generated by the intersection of the developer's agenda and the designer's conceptual orientation and readiness to compromise. The result is a validating narrative that may be different for each project.

To account for the diversity of interventions, it is necessary to differentiate between three strands of postwar heritage conservation: the *market-based*, the *concept-based*, and the *institution-based*. Each of these strands may be further apprehended through two complementary readings: *heritage as representation* and *heritage as manifestation*. The first reading emphasizes signification — i.e., the intended meaning to be conveyed by the project as agreed upon by the client and the designer, and as expressing their attitude toward the continuity of past, present and future. The second reading is spatial and physical. It addresses the issue of integration — i.e., the dialectical relationship of a building's frontage both to its interior and to the surrounding townscape. This dual spatial orientation necessarily invokes the notion of facadism — not in the reductive sense of preserving the original facades and the construction of a modern structure behind them, but in the more inclusive sense described by Jonathan Richards:

*Facadism presents a critical analysis of a concept that is central to the way in which the modern city is being remodelled. Facadism involves the preservation of historic facades, the creation of facsimiles in front of new buildings, and the decorative exercises of postmodernism. It has been accused of destroying architectural innovation, of divorcing the interior and exterior of buildings, and of reducing townscapes to stage sets. Yet defenders of facadism describe it as the way to link urban tradition and progress.<sup>14</sup>*

The two readings, the semantic and the spatial, represent attempts at articulating the relationship between an *ideological stand* and a *design strategy*. Of course, they must also take into consideration the two main determining factors of scale and context. Scale of intervention may range from individual infill sites, to freestanding landmark buildings, to district streetscapes. Concurrently, context necessitates a response to legislative and market constraints and their differences between center and pericenter districts.

## THE PERICENTER DISTRICTS: FACADISM AS ARCHITECTURAL STRATEGY

*From a market perspective*, Beirut's early modern buildings may be perceived both as an asset and a liability. As an asset, their heritage value can be seen as "symbolic capital" suitable for "the mechanisms of post-modern city marketing — relying on the unique identity of place."<sup>15</sup> Yet the FAR allowed by zoning law in the city's pericenter districts far exceeds the existing level of development. Most buildings dating to the colonial period are walk-up/pre-elevator structures with a maximum of four floors. From an economic point of view, optimizing parcel development thus requires either their vertical extension and/or vertical juxtaposition to compensate for the lost built-up area. Of the two strategies, vertical juxtaposition is the most prevalent solution; it consists of retaining the existing facade (or building) and adding a new highrise structure behind it. This approach liberates the designer from the constraining envelope of the existing structure and offers the freedom to lay out efficient floor plans from scratch.

To promote vertical-juxtaposition projects, developers have attempted to articulate a "double-winning" narrative, positioning themselves both as heritage guardians and providers of fashionable settings for contemporary living. One example is the narrative posted on the Web page of Greenstone, a real estate development company, describing a residential project, l'Armonial, in the trendy district of Furn-el Hayek (FIG. 7):

*Beirut has fallen into a haphazard building boom in recent years, which has seen the unfortunate loss of some of Lebanon's great architecture and neighborhoods. Based on its corporate citizenship philosophy, Greenstone is proud to play its role in safeguarding this rich architectural heritage for generations to come. By incorporating the traditional façade of the French Mandate building into modern residences, Greenstone's clients can purchase a piece of history without compromising their demands for modern living.*

*l'Armonial is a residence like no other in Lebanon. Located in the heart of one of Beirut's most traditional neighborhoods, it combines the 'modern' to the 'traditional'. It offers home-buyers an opportunity to have the modern amenities of new architecture while preserving the soul of the neighborhood.*

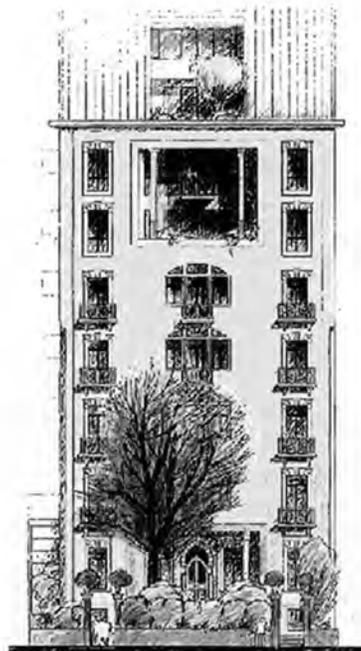
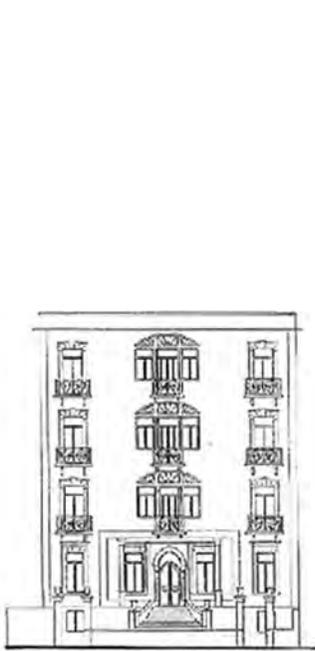
*Greenstone accomplished a construction feat by preserving the façade of the original building and actually incorporating it into the design of the new building. With traditional moldings, wrought iron, and additional subtle details, the building not only fits seamlessly into this traditional neighborhood but actually breathes new life into it.<sup>16</sup>*



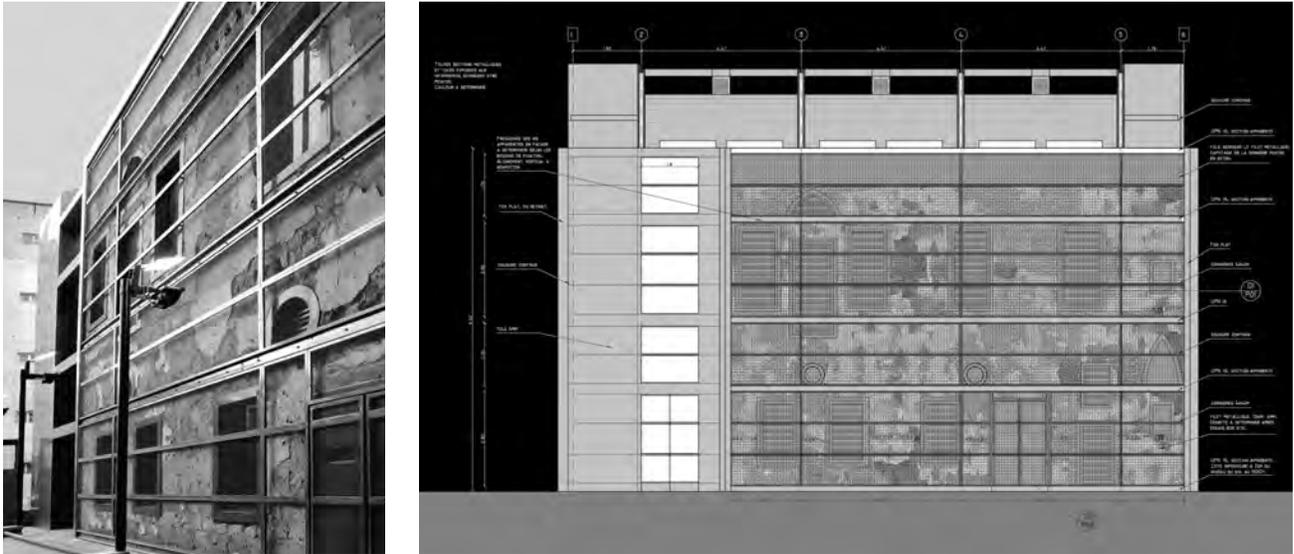
**FIGURE 7.** *L'Armonial residential tower, Furn el Hayek, Beirut.*  
Developer: Greenstone. Architect: Atelier des Architectes Associés. Photo by author.

In another project, the architects of *l'Armonial* (Atelier des Architectes Associés, Beirut) opted instead for the vertical extension of a 1930s residential building to accommodate a five-star boutique hotel. In this case, three additional floors were added to the existing four-floor structure to reach the maximum 40-meter height limit permitted by zoning (**FIG. 8**). The hotel was then crowned by a rooftop pool and a terrace bar with a panoramic view. Capitalizing on the original central-hall layout characteristic of pre-1930s residential buildings, the internal partitions were retained and the building's original apartments were turned into individual hotel suites. In keeping with the colonial spirit, the hotel was also branded with an Ottoman-retro theme. This strategy may be qualified as the reappropriation of colonial modernity for contemporary marketing, a trend described by Nezar AlSayyad as “manufacturing heritage and consuming tradition.”

*From the concept-based perspective,* early modern heritage may be left to the personal interpretation of the designer. Here the historical structure is seen as an uninhabited sculpture to be invested with the imagination of the architect. An emblematic project that belongs to this category is the architect Bernard Khoury's Centrale restaurant, “housed in a recuperated ruin of a 1920's residential structure that is placed under historical protection” (**FIG. 9**). As described by the architect:



**FIGURE 8.** *Hotel Albergio, Furn el Hayek, Beirut.* LEFT: original building. CENTER AND RIGHT: later vertical extension. Architect: Atelier des Architectes Associés. Courtesy of Atelier des Architectes Associés.



**FIGURE 9.** Centrale restaurant, Gemayzeh, Beirut. Architect: Bernard Khoury. **LEFT:** photograph of elevation. Photo by Joe Keserwani, Courtesy of DW5/Bernard Khoury). **RIGHT:** drawing of elevation. Courtesy of DW5/Bernard Khoury.

*The internal partitioning walls of the building and the slab of the first floor level had to be demolished. In the process of voiding out the interior of the existing structure, the outer envelope of the house had to be reinforced by placing horizontal beams that embrace the skin from the outer perimeter of the façade. . . . The steel beams used in the temporary reinforcement process are preserved. They now imply a new reading of the non-restored façade. Furthermore, we chose not to re-plaster the damaged facade, as it would have been the case in a traditional rehabilitation, instead, it is covered with a metallic mesh behind which the plaster finishing of the old façade remains in a state of decomposition. The mesh now enhances the poetic dimension of decay.<sup>17</sup>*

This deconstructivist approach mirrors the radical view of “conceptual urbanists” who “attempt to shake off assumptions of what the city was, is, or should be.”<sup>18</sup> They also seek to “appreciate its fluid instabilities as well as its inertia of material residue.”<sup>19</sup> Khoury’s reading of the past is thus purposefully inessential, and his relation to the future is temporary and fluid. It also betrays a sense of distrust toward the political context of “stable instability” characteristic of post-civil war Beirut. The dialectic between the inside and the outside that constitutes the fundamental problematic of both the market-based and the institution-based approaches is here made banal. For this fashionable restaurant and bar, the designer plays on the avant-garde leanings of local yuppies to express openly the unresolved interface between colonial and postwar modernity.

In contrast to the previous two approaches, *the institution-based perspective* regards early modern buildings as icons

of high symbolic significance that reference the emergence of Lebanon as an independent, modern state under colonialism. Two prominent buildings illustrate this view: the Grand Serail, headquarters of the prime minister of Lebanon (FIG. 10)<sup>20</sup>; and College Hall, the administration center of the American University of Beirut (AUB) (FIG. 11).<sup>21</sup> Both are monuments of colonial modernity pertaining to the Ottoman period, and their respective clock towers are symbols of a provincial capital brought into the orbit of the Western tempo.<sup>22</sup> Both monuments also occupy unique urban settings that reinforce their landmark status. The first sits on the “Capitol Hill” with a commanding view of the city center. The second is framed by the main entrance to the AUB campus.

The post-civil war restoration of the two buildings followed the same conservation design strategy in response to the fact that both were severely damaged during it. This involved replicating the old facades and building new interiors from the ground up to contemporary standards. As indicated by the following promotional descriptions, both projects evince a common narrative of continuity with the recent past while being at the forefront of progress:

*The Grand Serail followed the architectural design epitomizing the new Ottoman military organization known as the “New Order” (nizām cedid). Its elevated location and austere façade copied the Selimiye Barracks in Istanbul. The finished structure consisted of two tall floors with the longer façade spreading over 80 metres (260 ft). . . . Today, the Grand Serail is a blend of heritage architecture with a modern interior and high-tech amenities. Its reinstatement as the seat of the Prime Minister’s offices has consecrated the city center*

as the focus of political life. A faithful adaptation of the original Ottoman structure resulted in a larger, more functional building. The external walls were completely restored and stone from demolished buildings was used in the additional floor, thereby preserving a homogeneous facade.<sup>23</sup>



**FIGURE 10.** The Grand Serail. **TOP TO BOTTOM:** the building as it appeared in its original form, during the civil war, and as a postwar reincarnation. Source: Ayman Trawi.

And concerning College Hall:

When the new College Hall is dedicated in 1996, it will be the most modern academic administration center in the Middle East. The design (by the New York architectural firm of Haines Lundberg Waehler) and construction (by the Lebanese company Karagula) bring sophisticated planning, engineering and systems



**FIGURE 11.** College Hall, American University of Beirut. **TOP TO BOTTOM:** before (source: American University of Beirut/Jafet Library Archives and Special Collections); and after rebuilding (photo by author).

*together within a meticulous duplication of the original building's exquisite 19th century exterior. The new structure pays tribute to the past as it propels the University into the forefront of the information age.*<sup>24</sup>

In the case of both buildings the restoration effort has emphasized their standing as official symbols, legitimizing institutional continuity through an enduring presence in the townscape. Here visibility (the relationship of the building's exterior to its setting), takes precedence over integrity (the relationship of the building's exterior to its interiors). Thus, the restoration effort in both cases involved adding one floor to the original structures, and College Hall was moved 14 meters north of its original location. With a 25 percent increase in floor area and a clock tower that is 106 cm taller than the original, College Hall now also includes a two-level basement. Furthermore, the new College Hall "was designed to withstand earthquakes," while "internally, a central computer will monitor air-conditioning and electrical equipment."<sup>25</sup>

The divorce of the envelope of both monuments from their interiors may, however, qualify as an exercise in facadism not compliant with the ICOMOS Charter of Venice (International Council on Monuments and Sites). This states that "a monument is inseparable from the history to which it bears witness and from the setting in which it occurs. The moving of all or part of a monument cannot be allowed except where the safeguarding of that monument demands it or where it is justified by national or international interest of paramount importance."<sup>26</sup> However, regardless of the changes introduced to their respective envelopes and settings, both buildings are now part of the public consciousness. As intended, they are being assimilated as visual evidence of the capacity of the state and an important educational institution to rebound and to endure adverse historical events. Few question their authenticity.

As illustrated above, the controversy around facadism as a legitimate conservation strategy is far from being resolved. Ironically, it parallels Robert Venturi's postmodern reading of much of Las Vegas's strip architecture as "decorated sheds" where the sign claims precedence over the building.<sup>27</sup> However, in Beirut this controversy has been expanded from the architectural to the urban scale. The trend toward facadism as a "townscape" strategy in Western contemporary cities under the impact of excessive economic liberalism was addressed by an international conference entitled "Facadism and Urban Identity," held in 1999 in Paris.<sup>28</sup> Beirut's Central District reconstruction may be considered a reflection of this trend in a non-Western/postcolonial context.

#### THE CENTRAL DISTRICT: FACADISM AS TOWNSCAPE STRATEGY

At the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990, the only areas of the BCD spared extensive devastation were the Foch-Allenby

and Etoile areas (the Haussmannian part of the city) and the adjoining Banking Street dating to the early independence period. This colonial/early modern landscape formed a cohesive whole and exhibited a distinct urban character as the financial, governmental and religious nucleus of post-civil war Beirut. Together with the Serail Hill to the west, which overlooks the city center, the areas were designated as a single conservation district (FIGS. 12, 13). They also constituted the anchor around which the remaining BCD sectors, as well as their related network of streets and open spaces, were to be articulated.

The recuperation of these areas posed three fundamental issues: spatial and visual integration with the rest of the city center; urban identity, expressed in the classic duality of tradition and modernity, between facades and interiors, and between intended and perceived meanings; and recovery or reconciliation of architectural conservation with economic revitalization.

*Integration with the traditional city center.* The designated conservation area owes its architectural character to the diversity and distinctiveness of its building styles. This diversity stems from the juxtaposition of three types of frontages: the eclectic fronts of Foch-Allenby streets, the neo-Ottoman fronts of Maarad Street, and the early modernist fronts of the area between Etoile and Banking Street (FIG. 14). This range of design styles reflects the chronological modernization of the city center from the 1920s to the 1940s, with each style expressing the emergence of a new generation of office buildings.<sup>29</sup> Following the tradition of nineteenth-century Paris, all these facades, however, were built to the property line and subdivided into three sections: base, body and crown.

Besides the damage incurred by most of these buildings during the civil war, at the time the conservation effort was initiated their street fronts exhibited a high level of irregularity on account both of design divergence among the original 1920s structures and later additions to them in the 1950s and 1960s (FIG. 15). For example, some structures had not been completed to their intended heights, while others had been extended vertically with a modern body or attic unsympathetic to the rest of the building. The streetwall controls devised for the whole area as part of the conservation plan addressed this issue in a number of ways, allowing for existing structures to be upgraded to their original design, for new infill development to match the neighboring structures, and for the overall street profiles to read as a harmonious entity (FIG. 16).<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the role of streetwall controls was extended beyond the conservation area itself to serve as a means of integration and visual connection between this area and the rest of the central district.

*Integration with the new waterfront extension.* The designated conservation area had traditionally acted as an interface zone between the port and the city. Historically, it had been a domain of interaction between the two, deeply imprinted by the port's accessibility to the hinterland and by the accessibility of the city to the waterfront. In modern times, however, as the port expanded east onto reclaimed lands and progressively acquired operational autonomy, the relationship of this

FIGURE 12. Beirut Central District, the conservation area. Source: Solidere.

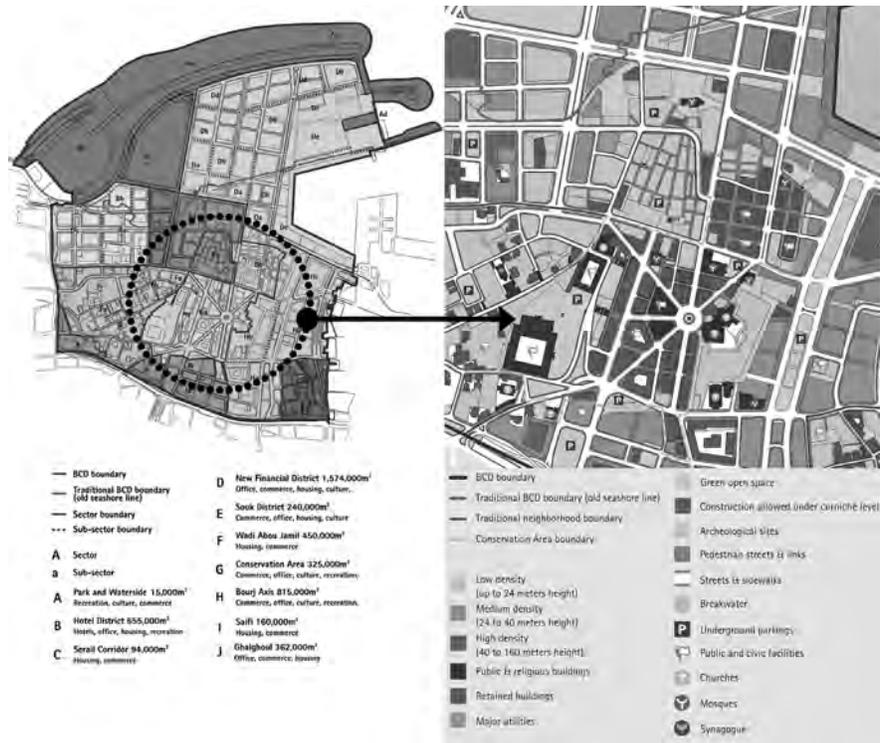


FIGURE 13. Beirut Central District, the conservation area in context. Source: Solidere.



FIGURE 14. (FROM LEFT TO RIGHT) *The eclectic fronts of Foch-Allenby; the neo-Ottoman fronts of Maarad; the early modern fronts of Etoile and Banking street.* Source: Solidere.

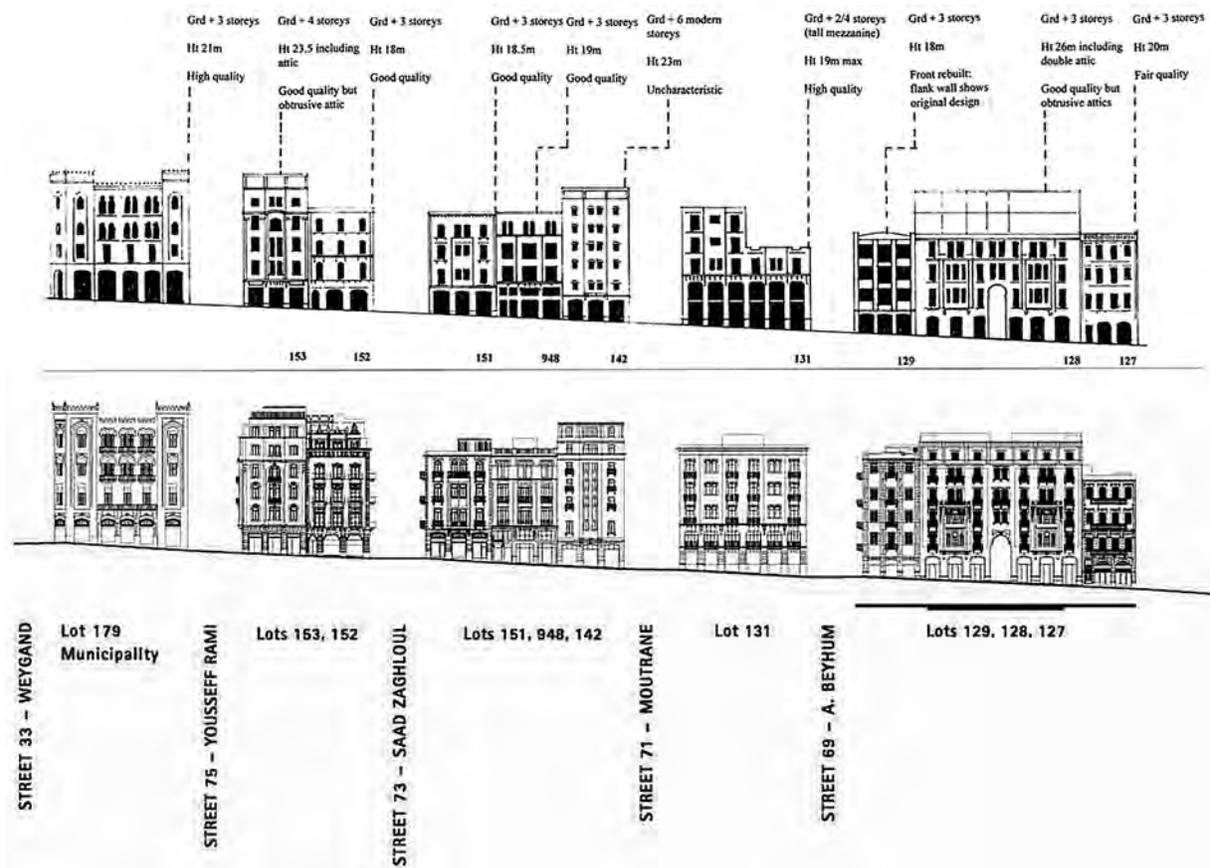


FIGURE 15. TOP: colonial frontages and later additions in the 1950s and 1960s. BOTTOM: new street frontages after renovation. Source: Solidere.

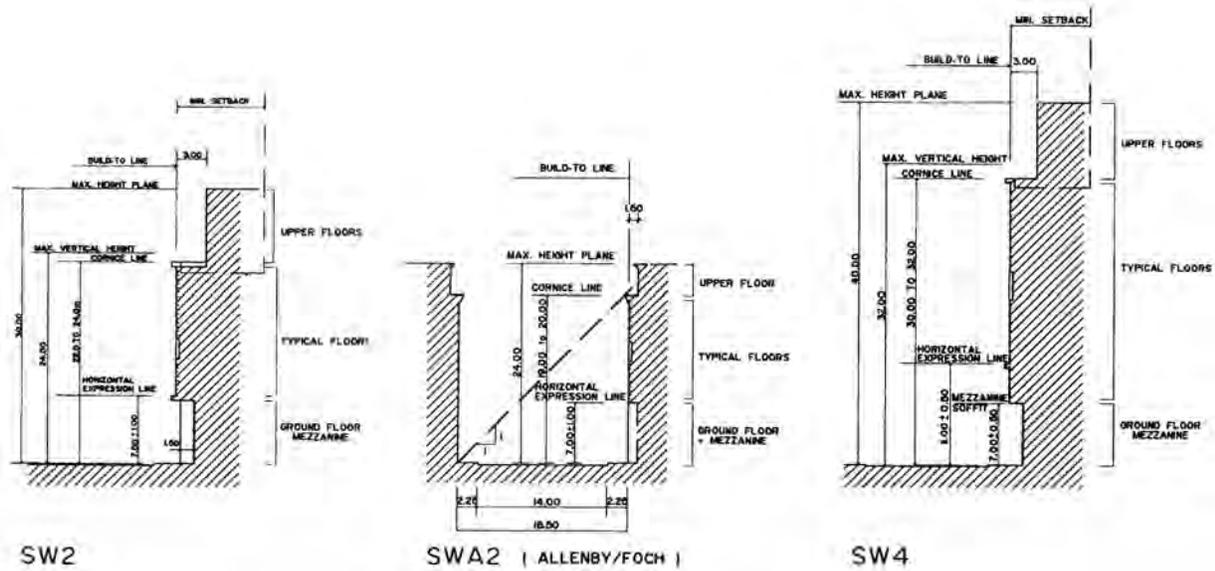


FIGURE 16. Street wall controls by Solidere. Source: Solidere.

area to the seafront was gradually modified. The creation of a new waterfront district to the north as part of the BCD reconstruction has further distanced Foch-Allenby and Etoile from the sea, divorcing it in the process from its ability to call itself a port district.

To address this situation, the new urban structure devised by the BCD Master Plan revolves around the creation

of visual, physical and functional permeability between the historic core, the city center, and the waterfront. It attempts to achieve this by means of the articulation of all BCD sectors around four visual corridors (FIG. 17). These emanate from the conservation area and integrate old and new street patterns: the Serail corridor and the Bourj Square, the Maarad-Allenby and Foch axes.

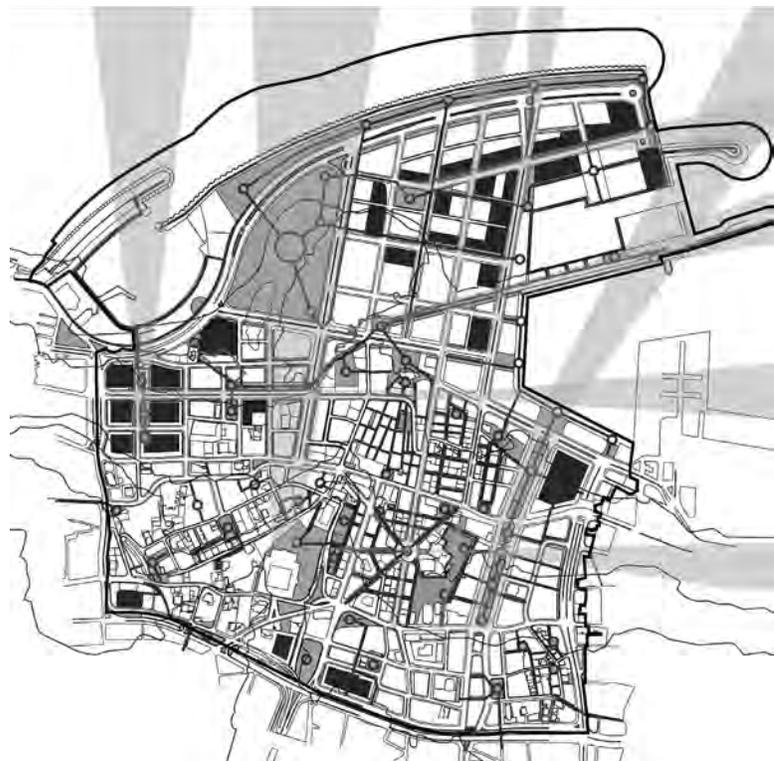


FIGURE 17. Visual corridors as means for integrating old and new central district. Source: Solidere.

The theme of “grand axes,” first implemented during the French Mandate period through the creation of Foch and Maarad-Allenby Avenues, has thus become an integrating feature for the entire BCD, from its southernmost extremity to its new northern waterfront. Accordingly, street alignment and perimeter-block development patterns from the existing portions of Foch and Allenby Avenues have been applied to their extensions. In summary, then, an urban design strategy reminiscent of mid-nineteenth-century Paris, first applied to Beirut in the 1920s, has been brought to its full potential three-quarters of a century later. Colonial modernity has been both “historicized” and “decolonized” through its full semantic and spatial integration as heritage and as a guiding design principle for the present extension of the city center. Once a showcase of early modernity in the Levant, Beirut is now being re-created as a showcase of late modernity — a model that is being exported to other cities in the Arab World.

On the ideological level, what constitutes the specificity of the conservation approach in the BCD is the inescapable intersection of market- and institution-based concerns. As mentioned above, Solidere, a real estate company entrusted with the reconstruction of the civic and business heart of the city, was faced with the dialectical complexity of being both a developer and a custodian of national identity and heritage. This balancing act was not confined to the architectural scale (as is the case in the peripheral districts); it also had to encompass the district scale. In that sense, Solidere was responsible for reinforcing the presence of single structures in the townscape that celebrate the continuity of the state (such as the Grand Serail), and for creating a memorable townscape experience as a reminder of what the pre-civil war central district was, and what it should again be as a signal of civic pride and belief in the city’s future.

The townscape conservation approach adopted by Solidere has triggered a wide range of responses. At one extreme, the design strategy has been severely criticized as producing a neoliberal stage set, and as being an exercise in facadism for tourist consumption.<sup>31</sup> At the other (more related to people’s experience), the refurbished frontages have been regarded as definers of a coherent streetscape, a quality notoriously lacking in an overcrowded city like Beirut, which is characterized by a chronic lack of public amenities and by general visual chaos. However, the way Solidere has framed its own approach is typical of the market-led response, also seen in the pericenter, in which a developer uses the double-edged narrative of preserving the past while accommodating future needs. Hence, Solidere’s Web page defines restoration as combining “authenticity, based on research and high-quality craftsmanship in stonemasonry, with a progressive outlook and regard to the needs of contemporary life and business.”<sup>32</sup> As such, Solidere justifies its role as both the custodian of downtown heritage and the agent of its postwar economic revitalization — hence, its motto: “Beirut, an ancient city for the future.”

## NEGOTIATING THE VALUE OF HERITAGE

In reference to Sabine Marschall’s statement that “heritage is commonly understood as a process of conscious, purposeful remembrance for the political, cultural or economic needs of those in the present,” it is possible to detect three current readings of early modern heritage in Beirut.<sup>33</sup>

The first reading is *opportunistic*. In this sense, the value of heritage is negotiated between the designer and the developer and determined by the economic and programmatic necessities of the project and the legislative constraints placed on a site. Heritage conservation here becomes a marketing device, legitimized through the double narrative of the developer as a promoter of heritage and a trendsetter appealing to contemporary consumer lifestyles. The accompanying architectural strategy normally involves the reuse of existing facades or buildings and their vertical juxtaposition or extension to optimize site utilization.

Such facadism may be justified in two ways: either because the retention of a building’s elevation is needed to preserve street character, or because the strategic positioning of the new structure foregrounds the historic building as the “star” or “*image de marque*” of the project. This later argument was, for example, used by Ziad Akl, the architect of the Residences Ibrahim Sursock, a tower residence built in a prestigious historic quarter of the pericenter (FIG. 18).<sup>34</sup>



FIGURE 18. Residences Ibrahim Sursock. Architect: Ziad Akl and Associates. Photo by author.

A second reading of heritage is *normative*. This view is typically advanced by academicians, architectural historians, and conservation specialists, who consider themselves to be authorities when it comes to setting standards for urban conservation. Their claims are legitimized by their historical and technical knowledge, as well as by their presumed lack of a profit motivation. This reading, however, vacillates between two extreme positions. At one end, the purists endorse the rational integration between the exterior and the interior of buildings (classical and modernist ideals), and condemn facadism as a dishonest, eclectic and debased practice, qualified with such derogatory terms as “facadomy.” At the other extreme, the postmodernists advocate eclecticism, historicism, and the validity of “complexity and contradiction.” Architectural form is here accepted as both pluralist and fragmentary, following Robert Venturi’s assertion that “it must embody the difficult unity of inclusion rather than the easy unity of exclusion.”<sup>35</sup> By conceptually separating the exterior and the interior of buildings, this view of facadism allows architects to creatively reinterpret the past while engaging in a visual discourse about the global and the local. According to this argument, the separation of external form from internal function also opens new opportunities for historic buildings, helping to ensure their continued relevance and survival within an ever changing physical and socioeconomic context.<sup>36</sup>

The problem with postmodern arguments is that they can easily be distorted by developers to become self-serving rationalizations that use historic preservation to cover up real estate marketing strategies. The same arguments can be used by architects to justify and equate elementary facadist solutions (such as vertical juxtaposition and smart siting) with more sophisticated design interpretations based on a complex and original understanding of the post-civil war environment, as is the case with the Centrale restaurant.

Accordingly, it may be necessary to have recourse to a third reading, an *empirical* one, based on how people perceive through their actual townscape experience the validity of these otherwise diverse views. The central questions to be investigated here include the following. Is the retention of early modern elevations perceived by people as an act of successful integration or just a way of screening the intrusion of highrise structures in historic districts? And are replica elevations with modernized interiors perceived by people as an act derogatory to authenticity or as a successful strategy for securing the future presence of landmark buildings in the townscape? (The Grand Serrail and College Hall are the most obvious cases of the latter.)

While no systematic surveys have been conducted to flesh out such an empiricist reading, preliminary observations suggest that people react to facade retention with new structures behind as an act of visual intrusion, irrespective of market-based rationalizations by designers and developers. The same negative attitude prevails regarding the siting of residential towers to frame old structures. On the other

hand, the rebuilding of historic facades with modern interiors is accepted as a necessary townscape strategy for the longevity of historic landmarks, irrespective of the strict perspective of architectural historians and conservation specialists.

The three alternative readings above testify to some of the ways that defining, perceiving and dealing with heritage are contingent on socioeconomic and cultural circumstances and needs. Post-civil war reconstruction in Beirut has acted as a powerful catalyst for dynamically engaging and coming to terms with early modern heritage, irrespective of the diversity of approaches — market-based, institution-based, or concept-based. This reflects Dell Upton’s view that “the rhetoric of heritage, identity, and authenticity . . . [is] typically evoked in times of great political and economic changes.”<sup>37</sup>

Beirut’s early modern heritage has already been assimilated as part of the national patrimony through the designation of a conservation area and its central role in the post-civil war development of the central district. Concurrently, the symbols of Ottoman and French Mandate colonialism have been re-created through their investment with present administrative and cultural uses; in the process their status as visual signifiers has been reinforced as an enduring part of the contemporary townscape. And colonial modernity has been seized upon as a historic asset to be used in real estate promotion in both Beirut’s central and peripheral districts.

This last process in particular is a reflection, in an ex-colonial context, of the same neoliberal trends that have emerged in the last several decades in Western capitals. What was during the early decades of the twentieth century a movement for “beautifying cities” (the Neoclassical/Hausmannian tradition in Europe and the City Beautiful in the U.S.) evolved during the last decades of the century into a movement of “marketing cities.” These two models, which represent a major paradigm shift at the conceptual level, nevertheless accord similar importance to the primacy of a city’s central district, and to the realization that public improvements can be profitable for business and real estate promotion. However, they differ in terms of their attitudes toward conservation. Thus, according to Anne Van Loo, the “culture of the facade” in early modernism has been translated into “facadism” in postmodernism.<sup>38</sup>

Taking the prototypical example of Brussels, G.G. Simeone has identified three successive approaches to conservation in the central districts of European cities: 1) the Neoclassical tradition, where the “cult of the facade” was aimed at framing formal new public spaces (to the extent of erecting provisional facades behind which actual buildings could be built later); 2) the post-World War II reconstruction of cities, which aimed to preserve memory by rebuilding damaged structures exactly as they were, but to house new functions and as part of new city plans; and 3) post-1970s facadism, which has expressed “the contrast between the growing interest in the protection of cultural heritage, and the ever greater contingencies of property speculation.”<sup>39</sup> In the case of Bei-

rut, the same trends prevail, with the main difference being that post-civil war reconstruction has corresponded with the advent of neoliberalism as a predominant economic force, transforming the city center into an arena for corporate real estate speculation. The resulting design strategies are the same, however, in Western and non-Western contexts, “where historical depth is reduced to the dreary flattening of two-dimensionality.”<sup>40</sup>

From a regional perspective, other cities in the Arab World, notably Cairo, have recently exhibited a renewal of interest in their early modern architectural heritage that is similar to post-civil war Beirut, even if it has not produced the same catalytic effect. In their article “Belle-Époque Cairo: The Politics of Refurbishing the Downtown Business District,” Galila El Kadi and Dalila Elkerdany speculated, “It may seem surprising the degree to which a proudly nationalistic Arab state like Egypt takes interest in and dedicates scarce resources to architectural and urban legacies inside its territory which date to an era of foreign hegemony of British

colonialism and Turko-Circassian monarchy.”<sup>41</sup> The answer given by the two authors to the implied question “Why?” may also apply to Beirut:

*Egypt's belle époque, a remarkable phase of innovation, struggle, and creativity, was not 'rediscovered' by European architectural historians or international institutions. Rather, new awareness evolved as the fruit of local initiatives led by Egyptians, reviving our national pride, remembering the birth of our own kind of urban modernity, and commemorating a time of flourishing liberal, revolutionary, cosmopolitan urban life.*<sup>42</sup>

The question remains, however: Are such arguments an outcome of a new heritage consciousness, the “decolonization of the mind” referred to by Marschall, whereby the colonial has been reinterpreted, reframed and reassimilated as an integral part of contemporary national identity in the Arab World?

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11. Saliba, *Beyrouth Architectures*, pp.58–65.
12. Saliba, *Beirut City Center Recovery*, pp.122–23.
13. The notion of “late modernity” is here linked to the “neoliberal urbanism” movement of the last two decades in terms of its impact on Third World cities. In the Middle Eastern context, earlier stages of modernity in urbanism are usually referred to as “colonial urbanism” (pertaining to the late nineteenth century and to the early decades of the twentieth century), and “modernist planning” (pertaining to the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s). Late modernity is illustrated by two extreme cases: the global hub and the postwar city — the first exemplified by Dubai and the second by Beirut. Both cities followed the model of the “entrepreneurial city,” with their emerging downtowns shaped as speculative townscapes financed and implemented by joint public-private partnerships and packaged for tourism development and elite consumption practices. Beirut's Central District reconstruction model was further exported to Amman in the form of the Al-Abdali Urban Regeneration Project. Compared to the Western context, conservation is taking shape less as a regenerative tool for the restoration of historic cores than in terms of large-scale development projects that strongly contrast with former colonial-period notions of preservation as a museum-related phenomenon. Writing on neoliberal urbanism in Lebanon and Jordan includes R. Daher, “Swift Urban Heritage Donor Recipes and Neoliberal Restructuring: Jordan and Lebanon as Case Studies,” in M. Fawaz, ed., *Urban Heritage and the Politics of the Present: Perspectives from the Middle East* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 2006), p.48–62; and D. Summer, “Neo-liberalizing the City: Transitional Investment Networks and the Circulation of Urban Images in Beirut and Amman,” MA thesis (Urban Planning) American University of Beirut, 2005. For a regional overview, see M. al-Asad, “The Contemporary Built Environment in the Middle East,” *The Middle East Institute* (2008), pp.26–28, available at www.mideasti.org.

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19. M. Bell and S.T. Leong, "Introduction," in M. Bell and S.T. Leong, eds., *Slow Space* (New York: Monacelli, 1998), as referred to in Schwarzer, "The Contemporary City in Four Movements," p.136.
20. Built in 1853 as the "Imperial Barracks" to symbolize Ottoman state power in a provincial capital, it underwent several semantic switches, first by being converted into a "governmental palace" (*serail*), then into the headquarters of the French governor during the Mandate period, and finally to the presidential and the prime minister's headquarters following independence.
21. Built between 1869 and 1873, College Hall was the first building of the campus, and was particularly famous for its landmark clock tower. Originally, College Hall was a multifunctional structure, including housing, classrooms, the library, a chapel, a faculty lounge, and dormitories. College Hall was the ultimate symbol of the university. College Hall was blown up in an explosion on November 8, 1991.
22. J. Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut: The Making of an Ottoman Provincial Capital* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp.241–47.
23. <http://www.solidere.com/business/grserail.html>
24. From the College Hall Reconstruction Campaign booklet, Beirut, AUB archives.
25. Ibid.
26. The Venice Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, Article 7.
27. <http://www.an-architecture.com/2010/09/preservation-facadism.html>
28. F. Loyer and C. Schmuckle-Mollard, eds., *Façadisme et identité urbaine [Facadism and Urban Identity]* (Paris: Edition du Patrimoine, 2001).
29. For a detailed analysis, see Saliba, *Beirut City Center Recovery*, Ch.5: "From Khan to Office Building," and Ch.6: "Evolving Frontages."
30. Accordingly, a set of streetwall controls was articulated to ensure continuity between the existing historic context and new development. Building height was confined to 24 meters with a horizontal expression line between 6 and 8 meters delimiting the base of the building, and a cornice line between 19 and 20 meters delimiting the body of the building. A colonnade was a required feature on the Maarad axis, while a setback or a jetty of 1.7 meters was allowed for the remaining streets.
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37. Upton, "Authentic Anxieties," p.303.
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42. Ibid., p.370.