

Paper I

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***Past Places / Future Spaces: Recovering
Downtown Beirut***

*Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville
Change plus vite, hélas! Que le Coeur d'un mortel);*

(The old Paris is no more,
the shape of a city changes faster,
alas, than a human heart.)

*... Paris change! Mais rien dans ma mélancolie
N'a bougé! Palais neufs échafaudages, blocs,
Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie,
Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des*

rocs.

(Paris changes! But nothing in my melancholy has
moved!

New palaces, scaffolding, blocks, old, settled districts,
everything for me becomes an allegory
and my dear memories are heavier than boulders.)

Excerpt from Charles Baudelaire's *Le Cygne*

(The Swan)

This essay is an ethnographic fragment¹ depicting a place and the alterities it nurtures when contoured around a spatial imagination. The place is called Saifi, a neighborhood in Beirut, the capital city of Lebanon. Framed in the context of post war reconstruction, the spatial imagination that maps

Saifi has two interlocutors - first is the imagination embodied in a Master Plan that blueprints a rationally produced vision of reconstruction in a war scarred cityscape. The second is an embodied lived experience of a place as it evolves from a benign past, followed by violent turbulence, to an ambiguous present of transformed geographies which will eventually develop into a future environment. In both, I have tried to fathom the sense and contingency of the present, one that is fleeting and transitory, in a rapidly shifting and changing spatio – temporal urban landscape.

Saifi is situated at the South – East corner of downtown Beirut – the city's erstwhile core. Saifi practically straddles the Green Line, the main war time dividing boundary/interface that runs through downtown Beirut, between Christian East Beirut and Moslem West Beirut, however, Saifi's position on the eastern side of the line makes it a part of Christian East Beirut. Although actual warfare in downtown Beirut petered down to occasional

shelling and rampant sniping after the first two years of the 15 year Lebanese Civil Wars, the Green Line continued to be a principle territorial marker of a divided city. Since 1989, when a formal cease fire declaration bought an ostensible end to the cycle of violence (without any particular resolution of the underlying hostilities) enveloping the entire country, this division is not protected or maintained by armed means. What has remained, nonetheless, is the habit forming remembrance of hostile boundaries in a city space which no longer have ostensible barriers but have been engraved in experience by mappings of fear, suspicion and alienation.

By the time the cease fire was declared, the built environment in downtown Beirut echoed the landscape common to all visuals of a war scarred cityscape – abandoned, burnt, shelled buildings, dense undergrowth; frequent sights of squatter inhabitation in some ramshackle buildings. As a part of downtown Beirut, Saifi bore the same

scarring, yet, through the war years a few tenacious people, whether by choice or compulsion continued to occupy, sometimes intermittently, their homes and businesses here.

Pictures (Saifi – pre/post war)

Apart from Saifi's positioning within a divided and devastated city center, its location interacts with the ongoing (since 1994) formal reconstruction of downtown Beirut – a mammoth project considered the largest of its kind to be undertaken by a private real estate company(REC). Downtown Beirut, an area roughly a square mile in size, is now owned, rebuilt, restored and developed by SOLIDERE (the REC), an effort that has unleashed a spatial imagination of the site as a controversial icon of political, economic and social rejuvenation for the city and eventually, the nation. Reconstruction here is an imagination that the planners conceive and implement as an appropriate bridging of a destructive past with an emerging future in a built environment, a bridging that will blend in a

traditional landscape to a state of the art city center. Saifi's place in this plan has been that it was 'chosen' to represent, in the Master Plan that blueprints the future city center, a 'traditional urban village', thereby earning the attention accorded to a 'Special Conservation Area'. The criteria behind this selection was ostensibly Saifi's continued existence as a coherent neighborhood throughout the war years as well as its architectural language. The architectural texture in Saifi was considered consistent with a traditional vernacular style of building – the quaint red tile roof, triple arch windows and wrought iron balcony balustrades and so on which made up a streetscape rhythm and an intimate pedestrian atmosphere that the developers found appropriate to cull out and preserve as part of the authentic flavor in the new city center. Apart from the conservation of this traditional environment, the Master Plan also proposes to transform Saifi into a Housing Project area whereby new apartment blocks will be built, matching the surrounding architecture - homes which will be

aimed at young urbane professionals who will presumably be professionally involved in the new city center or around. All in all, Saifi is to be showcased as a picturesque urban village, combining modern apartment facilities ensconced in a traditional Mediterranean environment. The SOLIDERE Information Office displays a miniature model (the *maquette*) of Saifi with an exact reproduction of the buildings, the colors that will be used on the facades, the parks and its benches, squares and walkways that will be laid down and so forth.

PIC – SAIFI MAQUETTE

Michel de Certeau² talks about the 'voyeur- gods' – i.e. the planners and technocrats whose projected inscriptions on a citiscape are a function of their aloofness, their distance and separation from those whose daily intertwinings with the same spaces map out altered trajectories of city spaces. In Downtown Beirut, if the Saifi maquette images a planner voyeur's vision, the people of Saifi articulate a

experience refracted through modes of intimacy that open up a different spatial and temporal cartography, one which is radically different than those of the planners'. I present below a few of these impressions. They are responses to our³ queries placed within the context of divided socialities produced by war or planned agendas of reconstruction, embedded in a 'present' landscape constituted by a surrealist assemblage of buildings continuing to bear marks of war damage, interspersed by gaps where structures have been torn down or construction sites and scaffolding as well as a few brightly painted facades of restored buildings.

PICS - SAIFI RECON

Q: How do you remember the area before the war? How was Saifi before? What are the images and impressions that you still carry from then?

George Antoine⁴: I wish that things would go back to the way they used to be - it was the alive center. It was like the Champs Elysee - here was a whole world in this small spot. Small shops, patisserie- taxi

stands, buses, everything was there in the center – It was the foyer, everything was here in the beginning - the meeting point of everything. That does not exist now.

Rania⁵: There used to much more people then - services (local taxis) used to come and go. Our house here used to be like station -people we knew used to stop by for a drink - wait here if the have to go somewhere else - have a coffee - go shopping during breaks. (It was)*ahlan wa sahlan* and *maa al salame* (welcome and goodbye).

Farzy⁶: Here it was full of life - you couldn't say day from night- all categories of people were here. All nationalities - if you are walking on the street - you brushed shoulders with the passers by you would get all languages - now things have really changed. Life was really nice here. At 3 A.M., we would go and have breakfast- we would find shops open - people would be walking on the streets. There were people from all religions in this building and they used to inter -marry. As for today, they would have to calculate before doing that.

Almost every response to this query has been a common intonation - for those living in this spot, it resonated a sense of a core, the node, the heart from which the city and its life emanated. A word like

foyer would suggest the hearth, the fireplace in the homestead and as a symbolic description of a city space, it would suggest that place in the city which served as locus from where everyday life would begin and move on. Many have referred to the taxi terminal as an analogue of being connected as well as being the nodal point of the city's network of mobility and movement. This clearly instilled the sense of being at the core of a city. There was the bustling, busy ambience, the crowds and incessant movement – all of which leading to an atmosphere which is most obvious by its absence after the war. In addition, the isolation that the Green Line imposed on the area sharpened the contrast by rendering what used to be a core to an inaccessible island bounded off by hostile territorialization. The remembrance of a surrounding, and an ambience and its subsequent loss also carries with it a retrospective reflection of the quality of community and urban life.

Flowing through many of the comments is the experience of an urban core which easily conflates into the notion of a shared space. For most, the sharing of a core also meant subversion of any separating identities leading to the idea that a conglomeration of diverse identities across a shared place captured a national spirit, one that reflected the authentic Lebanese disposition.

Q: How do you feel about the present. What are your feelings about your surroundings. How do you see your work and life now especially with reference to SOLIDERE ?

George Antoine: With the creation of Solidere we have to see what it will give us - we have to wait - but I hope it will be the way it used to be before. Like it used to be in the past - the meeting point of all Lebanese. About their plan ...some flavor from the past and some modern ideas for the future. We will never have the old Beirut. The spirit is lost. Now Beirut is a new city. Even though we are trying to make it look like the way it was with the restoration , it is becoming a new modern city. An extra modern city. They are building a new city while still considering it as an old one. For me things have changed. And I don't think we will ever go back to

the old way. There are many reasons for that -it will still remain the center - but this time it is going to be the business center - it won't be the *centre de rencontre* (centre for meeting) for the Lebanese. Whether we like it or not...

Abu Farid⁷: It was breathtaking here. What can I tell you, it was very, very nice - everything has changed here now - I don't know where is where. ...They were planning to wipe it all out. But there was a big protest about it. You know, SOLIDERE was trying to take advantage of the situation and trying to destroy everything...., we stayed here when the destruction started. We were used to the shelling. So when they were blowing down the buildings that was nothing new for us - the same sounds. There is no future for me here, I am getting old. I do not care even if they build it in gold. 25 years of my life vanished, gone. I used to be young and now I am old, whatever they do I will not benefit. We have spent all our time in this place – what use it is for us. No, for me, before, life used to be nicer, what can I say - we were happier.

Mrs. Nabti: After they (SOLIDERE) finished the demolition we went down to look around and I stood there in front of the past and all I could see was the image even though it was empty. You know how one can be shocked, I was shocked.

While there are a variety of ways in which SOLIDERE or the processes of reconstruction permeate 'experience' in Saifi, Antoine's impression of the rebuilt new city center as one which cannot replace or substitute the old one is an opinion which is echoed by most. He makes an incisive observation when he says that they are making a *new* city while considering it as an old one. His perceptions are clearly linked with the *sociality* that the area provided, something which has disappeared with the destruction and which a newly built environment cannot really achieve.

When SOLIDERE and reconstruction is a focal point of reference, one of the issues that Antoine does not mention but implies when he talks about the loss of the old city is the destruction that is attributed not only to the wars , but to the reconstruction operations themselves. Some have been persuaded by our queries to trace a memory map in Saifi and its surroundings and they have tried to locate buildings which were once there but

seem to have disappeared. But, once again, the memory map that sustains the remembrance is a spatial temperament – the intangible sensation of a built environment that does not always get identified by the structures themselves but rather an overall image of a space which has been embraced and nurtured by a remembrance. It is this sensation that appears to inform the experience of disappearance and loss. It is interesting to note how the wars, commonly understood as the vehicle of destruction, has to share the blame with a new contender – the reconstruction operations themselves on the level of lived ordinary experience. In the occasion where violence in the past was blamed for desertion, abandonment and isolation, rebuilding in the present appears to be effecting the same.

The destruction by SOLIDERE appears to have generated the impression of an erasure of the old downtown Beirut, one that appears to be more vivid and complete than the war time devastation. It is

expressed as a disappearance which has often resulted in a seeming lack of orientation, a sense of losing one's bearings in an unfamiliar place. However, it is the loss of one's bearing in the *familiar* that sharpens the feeling of disorientation into estrangement. The disappearance and estrangement does not seem to be consoled by the possibility of a retrieval of familiarity with the reconstruction of the old neighborhoods and surroundings, even when the knowledge of reconstruction seems to suggest that. This irrevocability articulates another concern which is the realization for most of the older residents of Saifi that their time has passed, and if there is going to be a rebirth of downtown Beirut, it will be too far in the future, beyond their own lifetime.

Abu Farid: For us, now, the older generation who grew up together, no matter what will happen to the center now we don't care. What we care for are the years that were gone from our lives - and then, now, After the war we look back and we realize that all the places we remember are no longer there - they are desert land now.

Mrs. Jabber⁸: During the war, I was alone in the apartment, alone, no food no water and no nothing and the Kata'ib⁹ also used to live here and they helped me a lot- they got me water , food, meat, butter everything. They were very nice and I started cooking for them. Now there is no one left in the neighborhood. I am alone in the apartment, I am lost. I don't like it now, but they say it will be the best area. They have built this building here and all the surrounding houses here were demolished. We were happy earlier because we had neighbors. Sixty years with very nice neighbors – some of them left, some died, there is no one here anymore.

Simultaneously, the remembrance of a pristine, benign neighborhood before the war provides a further contrast to the present. The disappearance of the environment, of a spatial familiarity and security is strongly connected to the loss of a neighborhood quality that the environment is believed to have nurtured, in other words, a community life. The militias, for Mrs. Jabber, in spite of their disruptive influence had gained a sense of inclusion, perhaps on account of their long presence in the confines of a familiar neighborhood as well as their role in

protecting the area. Mirium once said –‘It was war, but we were safe’ - an important statement that compares even the travails of war as ‘safer’ than the incursions of the present. Familiarity, predictability of one’s environment – socially and materially create the foundations of Saifi’s remembrances even through the war, which in retrospective instances, provide a sharper sense of the present disappearances and losses.

Q: What does the future hold? How do you think about it?

Antoine: For me this was the center of the country. And I hope it will become better but I don't think so with this new system we are following. It is going to be center for a rich majority. People who will pass by will be transient, curious just to look -it won't be the city that existed before –rich - poor, ministers – non - ministers, big, small, the medium -it was a mixture. Everybody used to come here. The whole city was a pedestrian area. Now we don't rely on the pedestrian traffic anymore. There will be cars e cars there but each will park outside the city. Earlier, they used to do the whole round of the city on foot. Everywhere we used to go on foot.

Farzy: The future that is put on the maquette is very good and organized and would be developed but is this development reflected in the people?...It is no longer for the popular class - the surrounding of SOLIDERE and SOLIDERE itself is not for the middle class. So they tell me you need a million dollars to live here. Or get out. It says it all. ...If the cloning of people is successful and if they want to get people here after they own the palaces, ... it will be another world, a different world than ours.

Andre¹⁰: This street with the funeral parlors will close down, you see, SOLIDERE is appropriating. Have you seen the maquette? Is it possible that such a nice and elegant maquette will have coffin makers in this street. One should be reasonable - they won't keep this kind of business here. They come and they create obstructions for us so that you say you want to leave. For example - if a property owner wants to come and recuperate - SOLIDERE says that you have to pay this and that.....

When the frame of temporal reference is the future, experience enters the realm of the potential, the possible - the eventual, yet unknown but metonymically connected to experience so far. Antoine's observations here maintain the tone that

he had expressed earlier when he talked about his impressions of SOLIDERE and the manner in which SOLIDERE was shaping the 'present'. He phrased the rebuilding of the city center as the construction of a new Beirut, one in which the most prominent quality of the older city center - its ability to nurture a meeting place for citizens without any social barriers, will be missing. He expresses a similar opinion here, but the interesting twist is his representation of this quality in a strongly spatial anchor - the pedestrian quality. He equates walking to a simple notion of spatial accessibility to represent the quality of familiarity and openness. It is as if walking is an intimate mode of negotiating with a space and with those who participate in that space, such that its lack indicates an alienation and a distancing not only from the space itself but also from those with whom the walk brings into contact. This distancing then lends itself to the idea of an exclusivity - downtown Beirut becomes the Beirut Central District, a new, inaccessible domain which will not encourage

intimate ‘walking’ contact but will allow only fleeting curiosity. The insular mode of approaching the city center with cars cannot substitute for the physical contact of walking. The exclusive locale then invites only a few who are no longer the participants of a popular place but who are part of the exclusive ambience of a transformed space. Antoine calls them the ‘rich’ – those who have been able to retain their rights to the center either by financial might or by qualifying as new participants of an exclusive business/social environment.

Farzy adds a category of outsiders to the rich as the favored new denizens of downtown Beirut. Interestingly, his definition of the new users suggests that SOLIDERE has not only imposed a transformed, alienating and distanced space of a new Beirut Central District on to the domesticated, familiar and intimate downtown Beirut; it has also effected an ‘othering’ of this space by rupturing the link between a place and its genuine participants. It will no longer be the city center of the Lebanese, it will be the business district for outsiders, most

likely, foreigners. Clearly, the intentions of the planners’ to evoke a pedestrian quality of intimate urban living in Saifi does not find resonance in these impressions – the new, potential pedestrians lack authentic belonging.

Farzy however, goes on to add another dimension when he talks, somewhat in jest, about the ‘cloning’ of people. It is perhaps a hint, a metaphoric verbal gesture which lies at the tip of a submerged consciousness about the artificiality and lack of authenticity that the reconstruction seems to evoke. For some of the older users of downtown Beirut, the potential of the new Beirut Central District is not interpreted without a sense of incredulity – its proportions of grandeur in technology, design, planning, the suggestions of superior business environments, the immaculate landscaping - are all elements of places which are ‘somewhere else’ but not ‘our own’. A sense of disassociation, for those who look upon the newness as alienating, is inevitable – a point which is well emphasized by

referring to the maquette or the architectural scale model which the SOLIDERE Information Services use to display a ‘virtual’ image of the future Saifi. In its potentiality to trigger a visualization of the future, this model is a significant prop with which to embody a speculation about the future. The miniature Saifi that the maquette represents is indeed an immaculate model. It is a medium of representation that has a completed image and an evolved vision to portray – in a sense it is an imaged ideal. In this portrayal there is no place for any artifact that does not fit, that does not work to add to the ideal. In Andre’s interpretation of this ideal image that has been suggested to him by the model, he does not see a place for the artifact of a funeral parlor. His fear of erasure in the present has a visual prop –the maquette. In a purely tactile sense, it is a metaphor for a future which is ‘clear’ in what it represents and what it does not. His sense of impending disappearance has achieved a sort of a deification in the ‘sculpture’ (the model), in so much that he is an absence in its creation.

Life in Saifi in the present is about a dismantled neighborhood. The sense of a disappearing sociality is intertwined with the apprehension of a new and imposed material surrounding. The nostalgic angst in Saifi is acute, not only because of a rapidly transforming environment but also because the future environment is uncannily close and visible. On one hand there is a sensual remembrance that maps out an experienced environment, on the other, there is a rationally composed spatial imagination that compiles an iconographic landscape in which Saifi stands as a contributing element. Both representations are mutual alterities. Their simultaneous presence marks the heterogeneity and multiplicity that a facet of my understanding of recovery seeks to undertake.

¹ This essay has been extracted from a larger project of studying post war reconstruction/recovery, which involves several ethnographic sites, documentation of narratives, their context and relevant theoretical anchorings. The fieldwork was conducted over 1997 and 1998. My attempt here is to

present a sketch which suggests an impression, and thus, not a resolute articulation of the given issues.

² Michel de Certeau, 1984, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Tr. Steven Rendall, Berkeley: University of California Press.

³ These conversations were conducted with the help of Zeina Misk, who at the time, was a graduate student at the American University of Beirut.

⁴ This and subsequent names have been changed. George Antoine owns a Library/ Publishing house, he is in his mid fifties and appears to be comfortably off. Antoine has been living in Saifi since 1965-66, but he was not in residence during the war. However, his work and office remained operational throughout, except for a month or two when the frontline fighting had been intense. He had contemplated withdrawing his business from Saifi but with his offices and stocks still trapped in the building, he abandoned the idea. The comparatively modern building built in the style of the 60's, in which his offices are located, looked recently renovated.

⁵ Rania and her mother, Mrs. Nabti lives in another recently renovated apartment in an adjacent building. Mrs. Nabti is 74 and her daughter Rania, is about 50. Mrs. Nabti has been living in Saifi for over 50 years, ever since she was married. Rania had a job in a nearby office. Both mother and daughter said they had lived in their apartment throughout the war, except for brief 'escapes', especially when the fighting was intense, but never for more than two months.

⁶ Farzy runs a boarding facility located in a now ramshackle building. He was forced to leave his hotel in 1975, when it was taken over by militants and his hotel had served as their base ever since. He came back in 1994 to reclaim his tenancy and continues to run the hotel, although now, it has become more popular as a temporary home for the construction workers, a large number of which stay and work within the Beirut Central District.

⁷ Abu Farid and Mirium are an elderly couple we met frequently in our visits to Saifi. Farid runs a makeshift shop in the stair well of the dilapidated building in which he lives, selling bread, candy, cigarettes etc. for the construction workers that frequent the area. Before the war, he had a

flourishing business as proprietor of a photography studio in downtown Beirut. Without adequate resources, they could not move out of Saifi, neither during the war or later when living conditions in their building came to very difficult.

⁸ Mrs. Jabber, the oldest resident we talked to in Saifi was a frail lady well into her eighties, living with a housemaid, in an apartment located in another recently renovated building.

⁹ The Kata'ib were one of the principle Christian militia groups involved in the wars. They had been a significant presence in protecting the eastern flank of the Green Line—Saifi appeared to have been under their protection and surveillance at the time.

¹⁰ Andre, an elderly gentleman looks after a funeral parlor located off Said Akl Street, in an alley whose ground level is mostly occupied by funeral parlors which have now been closed down. Andre never lived in Saifi but he continues to come into the shop regularly, alone, awaiting no apparent business. The owners were negotiating with SOLIDERE and will soon give up the property.