The Reconstruction of Downtown Beirut in the Context of Political Geography

Heiko Schmid

*Department of Geography, University of Heidelber, Berliner Strasse 48, D-69120
Heidelberg Germany*

*Downtown Beirut was partly destroyed in the
Lebanese civil war from 1975 to 1990. The "green
line," the demarcation line between Christian
East and Muslim West Beirut, runs right through
downtown. After the end of the war about 80% of
the buildings in the downtown area were quickly
demolished to make room for a new (post-)mod-
ern reconstruction. Naturally, this creation of a
tabula rasa in the city centre of Beirut was strong-
ly criticized by the former tenants and owners, as
well as by architects, city planners, and academ-
ics. Several interest groups were formed and tried
to influence the further planning of Beirut's down-
town. Finally, however, the main initiator and
driving force behind the process of reconstruc-
tion, the Lebanese businessman and later prime
minister, Rafiq al-Hariri, was able to gain accept-
ance and to establish a monopoly over decisions.
The following article investigates from a politi-
cal–geographical point of view the role of the dif-
ferent participants in the conflict surrounding
Beirut's reconstruction. The focus is particularly
on the various interests, action strategies, and
visions of the protagonists involved. In addition,
the public application of the geographical imagi-
nations of the future downtown area, which were
decisive factors for the decision-making process,
is analysed.*

*Key words: Political geography, theory of
Structuration, Reconstruction of Beirut, Lebanon*

*Le centre de Beyrouth a été partiellement détruit
durant la guerre civile libanaise de 1975 à 1990.
La 'ligne verte', la ligne de démarcation entre
Beyrouth-Est, chrétien, et Beyrouth-Ouest
musulman, traverse le centre-ville. Après la fin de
la guerre, près de 80% des bâtiments du centre
ville ont été rapidement démolis pour faire place
à une reconstruction nouvelle (post-)moderne.
Naturellement, cette tabula rasa imposée sur le
centre-ville de Beyrouth a été vivement critiquée
par des locataires délogés et des propriétaires
dépossédés, de même que par des architectes, des
urbanistes et des universitaires. Plusieurs
groupes de pression se sont constitués pour tenter
d'influencer la planification future du centre ville
de Beyrouth. En fin de compte, cependant, le
principal initiateur et moteur derrière le
processus de reconstruction, l'homme d'affaires
libanais puis Premier Ministre, Rafiq al-Hariri, a
pu faire accepter le projet et par la suite
monopoliser les processus décisionnels.
Cet article analyse le rôle des différents
participants du conflit autour de la
reconstruction de Beyrouth, sous l'angle de la
géographie politique. Il focalise plus
particulièrement sur les enjeux les stratégies
d'action et les visions des différents
protagonistes. En outre, l'instrumentalisation des
imaginations géographiques du centre-ville futur
par le public, qui fut un facteur décisif dans le
processus décisionnel, est analysée.*

*Mots clés: Géographie politique, théorie de
structuration, reconstruction de Beyrouth, Liban*

Introduction to and Background of the Reconstruction of Downtown Beirut

Sixteen years of civil war left little of the once-pulsating Lebanese capital. The battles gradually brought any economic activity in the city centre to a standstill. Banks, offices, institutions, and trade moved away. Nearly all the inhabitants left the downtown area, where most of the fighting took place. In order to establish military positions, many vacant

buildings were barricaded. For the people of Beirut, the town was bordered by large sand and stone walls, blocking off the former main access roads to the city centre (Hanf 1993). After 16 years of war, the younger generation had no idea of what the city centre had looked like before; just like the "other side" of town, it was largely *terra incognita* for both East and West Beirut (Saliba 1991; Khalaf 1993).

Since the war the process of shaping Beirut's centre has been the focus of great expectations on the part of its population. After all, the Lebanese capital symbolizes both the peaceful coexistence of the various denominational groups in the pre-war period and the massive destruction and battles of the civil war. Thus its reconstruction has a considerable significance, not only for the economic future of the country, but also for its domestic policy.

In 1991 a first plan for the reconstruction of the city centre, which had been pre-financed by the foundation of the Lebanese businessman Rafiq al-Hariri, was revealed. This proposal provided for preservation of barely 20% of the original fabric. In addition, it recommended the reconstruction of the entire city centre with a modern "global architecture" adapted from Western models (Figure 1). Moreover, the total area of the city centre was to be extended by one third and the total floor space tripled through new development and further deposits onto the already existing seaside landfill. For the successful implementation of the reconstruction it was suggested that a private real estate company should be established, functioning as a trustee for the required dispossessions. The claims of the previous owners and tenants were to be settled by giving them shares in the new company. On top of that the sale of further shares to interested investors was planned in order to finance the actual reconstruction (Solidere 1993; 2002).

This planning of what its initiator himself called the "Hong Kong of the Mediterranean" triggered a very controversial public debate, described as "the first

public debate since the beginning of the war, and the first on urban matters in Lebanon's history" (Beyhum 1992, 50). Opposition and action groups arose, representing predominantly the former owners and tenants of the city centre, of course, but also intellectuals and town planners.

Despite this criticism, the final reconstruction plan, passed by a decree of the Council of Ministers in 1994, closely resembled these original ideas. Very little of the architectural criticism was adapted, while the concept of a real estate company and extensive expropriation was adhered to. As planned, the joint-stock company Solidere (Société Libanaise pour le développement et la reconstruction du centre-ville de Beyrouth) was founded in 1994 to carry out the works.

Theoretical and Methodological Background

The reconstruction of Beirut's city centre represented to some extent an "urban development under stress" (Nutz 1998, 25–26). Expectations exerted considerable pressure on the commercially organized project, which demanded swift planning and implementation of the reconstruction works by those in charge. Conflicts of interest were not solved in a long process but were suppressed by a speedy decision making that depended on the different influences and power of the protagonists involved.

For the current study, the conflicts resulting from the process of reconstruction were the subject of an action-oriented political geographical analysis that particularly tried to re- and deconstruct the different perspectives of the protagonists. A reflexive and constructivist approach, as well as an action approach based on the "Theory of Structuration" by Anthony Giddens (1984) and the "Social Geography of Everyday Regionalization" by Benno Werlen (1995; 1997) were part of the analysis. Combining these with a constructivist theory of action, a normative, middle-range concept was created to make possible

FIGURE 1
"Hong Kong of the Mediterranean"—Illustrations from the first master plan
Source: Gavin and Maluf 1996, 54

the analysis of conflicts and the deconstruction of the disputes about the reconstruction of Beirut's city centre (cf. Reuber 1999).

Based on a history of the conflict, the main topics and the key protagonists were established, and the individual goals and motivations of those involved were also determined. The analyses of the structural components, which—according to Giddens (1984)—represent the medium and the outcome of practices they recursively organize (duality of structure), were carried out by clarifying the rules and resources of the process of reconstruction. Here, the authoritative and allocative resources, in particular, were made the focus, in order to examine the potentials for power of the different protagonists that, as structural components, not only regulate but also enable particular action. On the basis of the structural components, this was followed by an investigation of the different strategies of action. Through a comparison of the different perspectives of the protagonists, a hermeneutic re-interpretation of the individual patterns and strategies of action could be achieved. Different meanings and interests that lay behind superficial arguments and "strategic truths" could thereby be analyzed. When decoding these strategic truths on a theoretical basis, according to Jacques Derrida (1995), it is necessary to establish a reflexive level, based on a permanent change in perspectives, in order to enable an intersubjective hermeneutic re-interpretation. This was particularly important for the deconstruction of the strategic visions of reconstruction used as action strategies by the protagonists to achieve their goals.

This reflexive approach also ensured the application of Western research methods in the cultural context of the Middle East, although this was a minor problem in Western-oriented Beirut. The methodical implementation of the theoretical background was done by qualitative and—to a lesser extent—quantitative methods (for the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods, see e.g., Miles and Huberman 1994; Tashakkori and Teddlie 2002). Fifty-five semi-structured, qualitative interviews were carried out with representatives of all the groups involved: owners and tenants, planning professionals, intellectuals, religious foundations, refugee families, political parties (including Hezbollah and Amal), advisers and confidants of al-Hariri, ministries, planning agencies, and Solidere. The interviews were organized in different sessions, so that some of the representatives were questioned several times. Items such as newspaper articles and other information material were presented to the protagonists, but a dialectical confrontation with statements of the other protagonists was also organized to obtain further information and

statements. For the interpretation of the interviews, the material was first transcribed, paraphrased, and categorized. In the context of a qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000), this was followed by an explication with additional material and a structuring of all interviews. The postulated change in perspective was integrated into the interpretation of the different levels of meaning, by comparing and contrasting the opinions and views of the different protagonists and groups.

In addition, a quantitative survey was carried out with 400 persons in Beirut, in order to investigate public opinion and the influence of the media regarding the Solidere project, as well as the efficiency of the strategic visions used by the protagonists. This survey was undertaken by means of a questionnaire in all the districts of Beirut, taking into account Muslim–Christian distribution, as well as other demographic characteristics. The analysis of the quantitative data was mainly accomplished by uni- and bivariate statistics. The results were also integrated as impulses into the qualitative interviews (cf. Schmid 2002).

Interests and Potentials for Power of the Different Protagonists

Which interests underlay this very drastic concept of reconstruction? Who were the protagonists and what roles did they play? By answering these questions it was possible to determine the key protagonists, their main goals and motivations, as well as their resources and potentials for power as structural components of the process of reconstruction.

Without doubt, the driving force and main protagonist of the process of reconstruction has been the Lebanese multi-billionaire Rafiq al-Hariri, who exerted substantial influence as prime minister from 1992 until 1998. He influenced the most crucial institutions in the process of reconstruction, the state-run Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR), and above all, the private real estate

company Solidere. In 1991 Parliament and the government of Rashid al-Solh were still involved in the legal establishment of the process of reconstruction, yet their actions increasingly revealed a transfer of power in favour of al-Hariri. Because the state was weak and financially overtaxed, with an inefficient administration, his planning proposals were convenient at that time.

At first, an economic interest might be suspected, bearing in mind that al-Hariri is a building contractor and businessman. However, this economic motive is clearly outweighed by power motives, as well as by the wish to go down in the annals of history as the "man of reconstruction." One should not overlook a certain degree of patriotism and idealism, because al-Hariri's financial participation in the reconstruction was only to the benefit of his charitable al-Hariri-Foundation (K. Oussama, opposition writer, 16 June 1998; S. Marwan, opposition architect, 11 May 1999; S. Nabil, advisor of al-Hariri, 19 May 1998).

Substantial authoritative and allocative resources were at al-Hariri's disposal and were used by him to extend his power considerably. By his strong commitment to the reconstruction of Beirut—emphasized already during the Lebanese civil war by his private company Oger-Liban and by his successful efforts to achieve the peace agreement of Taef—al-Hariri was able to establish himself as a new political leader and was already considered a (potential) prime minister by the end of 1991. He was able to occupy the top position in the important state-run CDR with one of his employees. It was, therefore, possible to implement the beginning of the reconstruction according to his plans. Later, as prime minister, he put his people into all relevant state institutions for the reconstruction and established an actual decision monopoly (Eddé 1997). The ownership and shareholding of various media enterprises represented further allocative resources of al-Hariri. In a sense, these enterprises were the mouthpiece and mediator for al-Hariri's

visions and were used by him as a vehicle for public relations measures.

Several protagonists opposed al-Hariri: different action groups of the expropriated owners and tenants, a group of academics and planning professionals, an organization for the protection of historical monuments, independent politicians and opposition splinter parties, and in addition intellectuals, writers, and artists. The different religious foundations and institutions represented in the city centre, as well as the Shi'ite parties Hezbollah and Amal, were also actively involved as representatives of the mainly Shi'ite refugee families who had found accommodation in the deserted city centre. Since the presentation of the first reconstruction plan in June 1991, these groups had tried to influence the further planning of Beirut's downtown. But the interests and potential for power of the protagonists involved proved to be decisive.

In face of an impending expropriation, the main interest of the Christian and Muslim foundations was to maintain a symbolic representation of their religion in the city centre of Beirut, in addition to the mosques and church buildings. From an economic point of view, the religious foundations were interested in optimizing the rental incomes of their properties, which so far had been used to support charitable institutions. As a result of the inflation induced by the war and a restrictive rental law, these revenues had been drastically reduced, so that the religious foundations had an interest in terminating the old tenancy agreements (e.g., R. Saad, Greek Orthodox foundation, 25 June 1998). Due to their considerable potential for power, the interests of the Christian and Muslim foundations could hardly be ignored in the process of reconstruction, as they could rely on strong sociopolitical support. Furthermore, the land owned by the foundations was considered, at least for the Muslims, to be inalienable, meaning it was an eminent taboo for the planners. With regard to the reorganization of Beirut's city centre during its reconstruction, the far-scattered and fragmented estates of the

Sunni Awqaf Islamia and Maqassad, the Maronite, Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic foundations formed a rather restrictive and persistent obstacle (Figure 2). As allocative resources, the land owned by the foundations created a favourable condition and a considerable power of veto for the religious foundations in the process of reconstruction.

During the civil war many Shi'ite refugees from South Lebanon and the eastern parts of Beirut had already found accommodation, mainly in the Western, "Muslim" part of the city centre. After the ceasefire more buildings close to the demarcation line, some of them damaged, were taken into possession by this group. Being mainly supported by the Shi'ite parties Hezbollah and Amal, these refugees represented a very powerful group in the sensitive domestic climate of post-war Lebanon. The Shi'ite parties, for their part, were very popular in the Muslim and Christian community because of their struggle against the Israeli occupation in South Lebanon. Furthermore, Hezbollah was supported by Iran and politically backed by the Syrian government. Therefore, the Shi'ite parties and the refugees could have blocked the project of reconstruction. They thus had tremendous potential for power and a large scope for action at their disposal.

The most important goal of the refugees facing evacuation was to gain alternative housing space or sufficient financial compensation. The Shi'ite parties, however, were mainly interested in mobilizing future voters and in working as an effective opposition to al-Hariri and his government (Z. Ali, Political Office Hezbollah, 22 June 1998; K. Ghalib, MP Amal, 14 October 1998).

The expropriated owners and tenants in the city centre formed the most motivated group of critics and protagonists. Their number had risen to over 120 000 property-right holders, due to the fact that the deaths of many owners had led to their estates' being divided up among their heirs. Although not all of the expropriated people opposed the
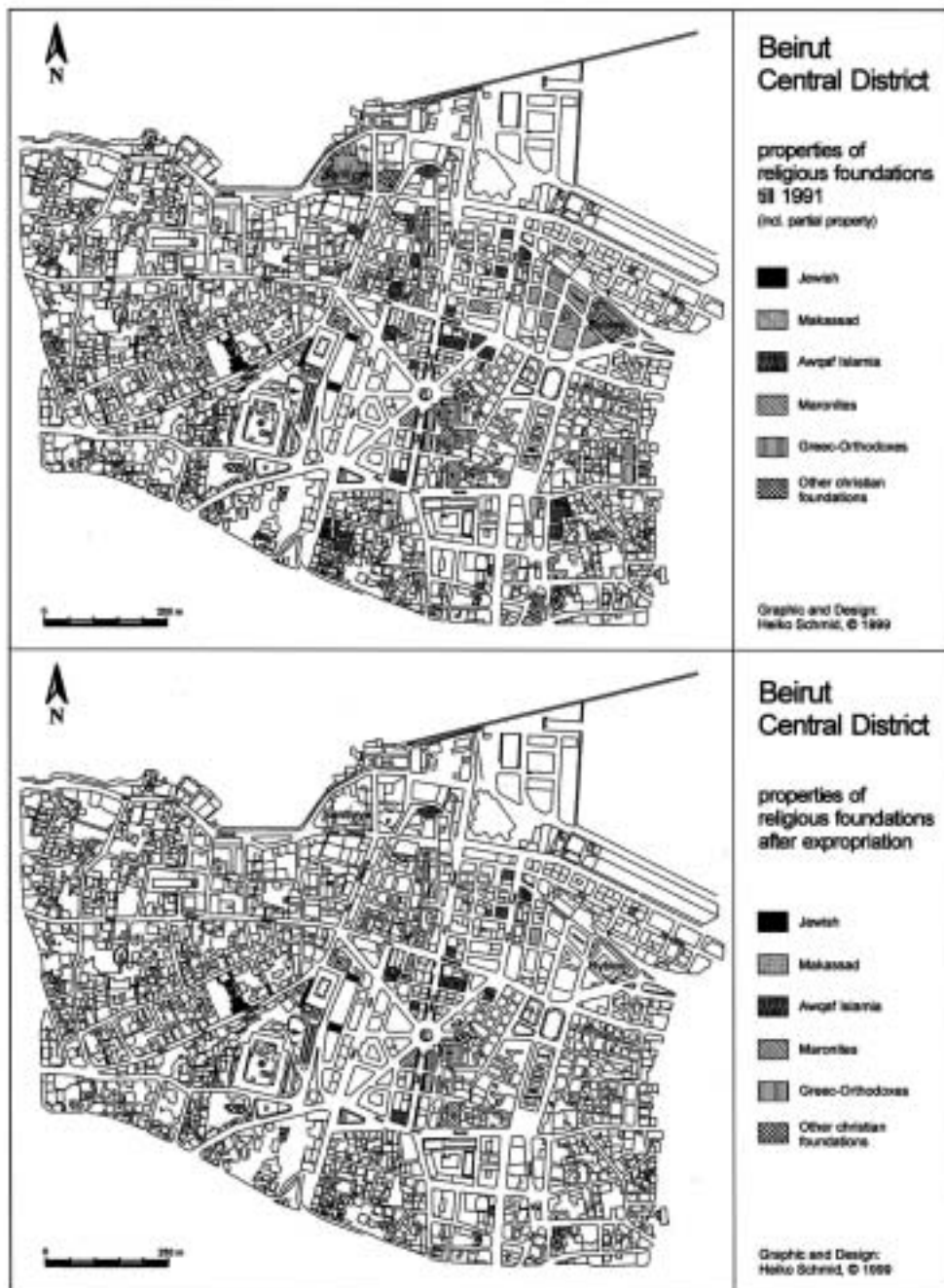
FIGURE 2
Properties of religious foundations before and after the expropriation

Solidere project, a large number joined together in different committees. Mostly split into groups of tenants, owners, or shopkeepers from the different areas, these committees had organized themselves in an umbrella organization called the Beirut Commercial District Property-Right Owners Association. A part from the categorical rejection of the project of reconstruction, the main goal of this organization was the retraction of the expropriations or at least an improvement to the inadequate compensation.

But the attempts of these expropriated groups to fight the project in the courts mainly failed, because of an affinity of the judiciary with the government. The success in influencing public opinion was also rather limited, as the committees of the expropriated found it hard to work, with their limited budgets, against the financially well-off real estate company and its public relations department. The scope for action of those expropriated was considerably limited, due to the restricted potentials for power and the lack of influence of this group.

A more objective and idealistic stand was adopted by the group of academics and planners and also by some artists and intellectuals, as well as by the organization for the protection of historical monuments, APSAD. Their concern was to ensure the preservation of the historic buildings and to revive the city centre as a place for communication among and co-existence of the different religions and social classes. This group gained influence and power mainly by the effective presentation of their ideas in the media, but not by a direct influence on the public decision makers.

Action Strategies and Decision Making

Conflicts between the protagonists of a "modern" reconstruction and the critics and opposition groups ignited at the points "expropriation of the former owners and tenants," "expropriation of the religious foundations," "evacuation of the civil war refugees," and "moderation of the conflict

with the intellectual and professional critics of the Lebanese civil society." In all cases, al-Hariri proved to be a clever strategist and superior tactician, understanding how to use his resources and power to resolve the conflict in his way. The following points of view, action strategies, and decisions are significant here:

Creation of the Legal Background

Passing the law on reconstruction in Parliament and getting the Council of Ministers to adopt a valid master plan ensured that two of the most important decisions for reconstruction were made in favour of al-Hariri even before he became prime minister in 1992. The appointment of employees and confidants of al-Hariri to important decision-making positions, for example at the national CDR, was a strategic decision, as well as a creation of influence and power. By offering to carry out the reconstruction through a private company and without any means from the state, al-Hariri achieved an indirect transfer of power from a state that was bankrupt and hardly capable of acting. The opponents of the project could not counterbalance this strategic takeover of public decision-making positions. They were too late in organizing their resistance—at a time when al-Hariri's influence and position were already established.

Settlement of the Claims of Religious Foundations

Following the establishment of a real estate company, the new planning concept, and the extensive expropriations, the religious foundations were supposed to give up their possessions in the city centre as well. The foundations defended themselves to different extents: While the Sunni Awqaf Islamia declined an expropriation for religious reasons, the Christian foundations were against an expropriation because they supported some Christian leaders in their general opposition to the project.

In order to overcome this resistance, al-Hariri recruited supporters among the respective religious foundations or within the denominational communities. Representatives who, as building contractors, were interested in the reconstruction were found primarily within the big, influential Greek-Orthodox and Maronite clan families. They had a strong influence on the religious decision makers of their denominations and were able to break up the resistance, so that al-Hariri's imbedding strategy was successful. Later some of the supporters were elected to the board of directors of the real estate company or privileged by the placing of construction orders.

Far better compensation was unofficially granted to the religious foundations than to normal owners, anyway. Simultaneously, the areas around the places of worship were generously restored, in order to emphasize symbolically the role of the foundations in the city centre. On top of that, some buildings were given back to the foundations. Through these privileges, agreements with the Christian foundations and with the Sunni Makassed were made. The resistance of the Sunni Awqaf Islamia, however, could not be broken as easily, because of continuing religious considerations. Al-Hariri tried to intervene again through intermediaries but could not overcome the religious misgivings. To solve the problem, instead of an expropriation, a "reallocation of land" was carried out, that is, by combining several shares in different properties into one new property (K. Nasser, Awqaf Islamia, 16 June 1998; S. Mohammad, advisor of al-Hariri, 7 May 1999). The way for a radical reorganization of the city centre was free after the number of properties of the religious foundations had been dramatically reduced (Figure 2).

Evacuation of Civil War Refugees

Finding a solution for the problem of the refugees was not as simple. The real estate company had to give up initial attempts to force an evacuation by cutting off supply lines, employing noise disturbance, or actually causing damage to buildings, following pressure from the Shi'ite parties Hezbollah and Amal.

Since the real estate company and al-Hariri had proposed a fast reconstruction, which was now blocked by the refugee families, they were in a difficult position. The resistance was finally broken only by very high financial compensation, in which the Shi'ite parties Hezbollah and Amal, as negotiators for the refugees, played a central role.

The official rate for the compensation of refugee families was fixed at US$8 000 and $12 000 by the state, but for the city centre, these rates were hopelessly inadequate. Bargaining about the payments between Solidere, which had to pay for the compensation in the city centre, and the Shi'ite parties quickly developed. The refugees used the opportunity to achieve higher payments from the financially well-off real estate company. The clearing measures progressed building by building and lasted more than two years, primarily in the western part of the town centre, because of the difficult and long negotiations. Since the remaining refugees adapted their demands to the sums already paid for compensation, the payments increased continuously with the progress of the clearing, and at some locations climbed to $100 000 per refugee family.

The handling of evacuation and payment was usually organized by self-appointed brokers, who partly came from the Shi'ite parties. For the official balance of the compensation payments, which on average were about four times the original amount, the brokers simply organized further identity cards for other refugee families from outside the city centre. By this informal system, Solidere officially had to raise compensation for over 21 000 refugee families, although only 5 000 to 6 000 families had found accommodation in the city centre. Thus, altogether, the real estate company paid more than $300 million for the relocation of the

refugees, almost half of its cash capital (A. Mohammad, Political Office Hezbollah, 5 June 1998; K. Ghalib, MP Amal, 14 October 1998; F. Samir, Solidere, 15 October 1998).

In the end, Solidere virtually bought the city centre empty, in order to start the demolition of the buildings after the evacuation. Any other strategy was inconceivable, in view of the politically explosive nature of the refugee topic—particularly since a return of the refugees, who often came from the areas in South Lebanon occupied at that time by Israel, was not possible.

Like the question of the expropriation of the religious foundations, the refugee topic was so delicate that neither Solidere, the Shi'ite parties, nor the state-run National Fund for Displaced People at first wanted to make any official statements or give answers to my questions. Only through several, alternating informal interviews and through a dialectical confrontation with the statements of the other protagonists—a methodical implementation of a (permanent) change in perspectives, so to speak —was the analysis of the different levels of meaning and the interpretation of the individual patterns and strategies of action possible. In the end, all the protagonists gave informal insights into their points of view and patterns of action.

## The Marginalized Interests of the Expropriated Tenants and Owners

The expropriated owners and tenants organized themselves in different committees and tried to prevent the reconstruction project by innumerable court proceedings and a continuous presence in the media. Meetings, demonstrations, leaflet campaigns, discussions with political and religious leaders, as well as press conferences were organized (Figure 3). For their ideas, the expropriated people—as a strategy of action—skilfully adopted the views of the opposition academics and planners and demanded the preservation of the old Beirut, although they were not completely opposed to a financially lucrative

new development of the city centre.

The committees of the expropriated people could only mobilize a small fraction of the more than 120 000 former owners and tenants of the city centre, so that their public actions failed to take the masses to the streets. They had neither access to the public decision-making positions nor the backing of any strong political or religious power, so their position was quite weak.

In the end, the committees of the expropriated people were defeated by the superior strategies of Solidere, despite all their activities. In contrast to the case of the refugees, the real estate company was able to evacuate the few tenants and owners still remaining in the city centre by force (Figure 4). Moreover, some of the tenants were even successfully "bought out" from the committees, with the result that some committees dissolved completely. Beside this, some spokespersons for the committees were threatened, for example, with an investigation for suspected tax evasion. After that, single committee members no longer spoke publicly against the reconstruction project. In addition, Solidere staged the foundation of a counter-committee of former owners and tenants, which had close links to Solidere. Maher Daouk, the cousin of Omar Daouk—the president of the opposition committee of the expropriated people—was the heavily symbolic chairman of this counter-committee and later member of the board of directors of Solidere. Through all these strategies, Solidere skilfully marginalized the position of the opposition committees more and more, so that they were hardly able to influence the decision making.

Many of the court proceedings initiated by the opposition committees were either immediately refused or delayed for years. Al-Hariri was also accused of bribery and of exercising a strong influence on the special courts, which were set up for Solidere matters. The validity of the reproaches became apparent when, after the change of government in 1998, some of the frozen proceedings were suddenly reopened (K.
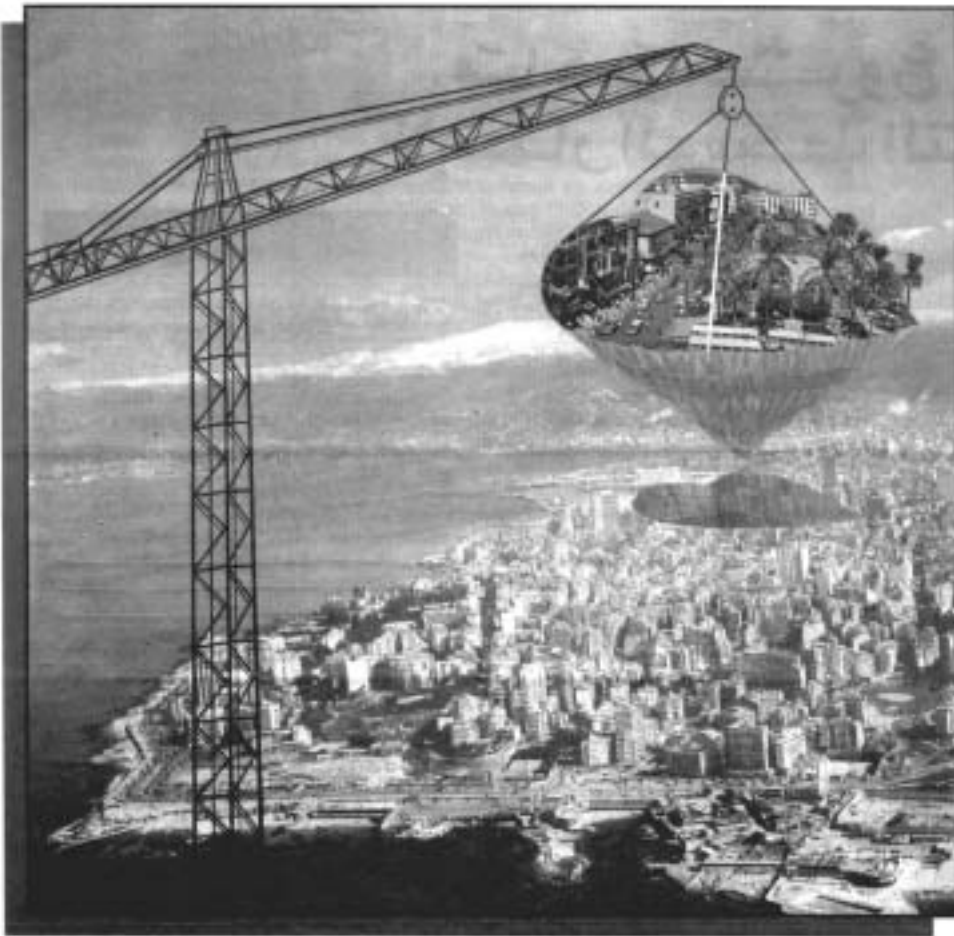
FIGURE 3
"Solidere destroys the old city centre"
—Leaflet of the Beirut Commercial District Property-Right Owners Association

FIGURE 4
Violent clearing of a building occupied by tenants and owners
Source: An-Nahar 16 July 1998

Elias, opposition committees, 4 May 1999; M. Maher, opposition committees, 15 May 1998).

The Isolated Group of Academics, Architects, Planners and Artists

The group of approximately 15 academics and planners were viewed by the public as credible and independent experts. After the presentation of the first reconstruction plan, they succeeded in starting a broad public debate about the goals and contents of the reconstruction. The first thing the experts criticized was the drastic redesign of the old city centre, together with the scope of extensive demolition (Figure 5). Secondly, they attacked the "island character" of the planning, which disregarded an adequate structural and functional imbedding of the surrounding quarters (Davie 1996). In lectures, meetings, book publications, and appearances on television talk shows, the group of academics and planners demanded a

modification of the Solidere project. One result of the short-lived public indignation was a revision of the first master plan, which brought a number of amendments to some of the exaggerated planning. The revised plan was widely announced by al-Hariri as an inclusion of the criticism by eminent people. Moreover, the opposition academics and planners were offered—again a typical "imbedding strategy"—participation in the project of reconstruction. Most experts declined this corrupting co-operation, but nevertheless, two high-profile architects were won over and their attitude was proclaimed as approval of the project by the opposition (L. Robert, Solidere, 18 February 1999; B. Charbel, opposition academic, 18 February 1999).

The criticism of APSAD, the organization for the protection of historical monuments, was skilfully deflected by Solidere. After the extensive demolition of buildings in the city centre, all alternative planning for a preservative reconstruction became obsolete.

In this situation, the APSAD organization was entrusted with a preservation study in the areas around the city centre. With this intelligent imbedding, the attention of the APSAD organization and public awareness were directed away from the controversial reconstruction of the city centre (L. Robert, Solidere, 18 February 1999; C. Zainab, APSAD, 1 June 1998). Al-Hariri and Solidere were able to limit the public criticism of the opposition professionals and of APSAD by a strategy of superficial integration. This was done by publicly adopting some of the criticism, or by distracting critics with other controversial topics, rather than by convincing them.

"Hong Kong of the Mediterranean" or "Paris of the Middle East"? Geographical Imaginations and the Media Confrontation

The struggle over the reconstruction of downtown Beirut was negotiated in large part through the media. During this process the different protagonists tried to convince the public by strategic visions and geographical imaginations (cf. Gregory 1994; 1995). To deconstruct the visions used by the protagonists as action strategies, it was important to analyse the different levels of meaning and the interests that lay behind these visions, as well as the influence certain protagonists exerted on the media landscape.

Al-Hariri skilfully marketed his idea of an ultramodern city centre as the "Hong Kong of the Mediterranean"—Beirut as the new, blossoming, international centre of finance and commerce (Figure 1). With this slogan, al-Hariri, therefore, not only legitimized the extensive expropriations and demolitions but also targeted the accumulated desire for modernization and renewal in Lebanese society after 16 years of war. He thus created a successful economic model with a promising future, which could hardly be criticized by the opposition.

The opposition, for their part, tried to promote alternative ideas for the reconstruction, by using Beirut's traditional image as the "Paris of the Middle East." Thus the opposition referred skilfully to an already established image, by symbolizing peaceful coexistence and economic prosperity in pre-war Beirut. The expropriated people were able to effectively combine their demands for preservation and recuperation in the shimmering image of pre-war Beirut and simultaneously tried to produce an association between expropriation, destruction, and the reconstruction carried out by Solidere. They wanted the reconstruction to be stigmatized as an eradication of Beirut's history.

The struggle between al-Hariri and the opposition often led to a strong confrontation of the strategic visions promulgated in the media. To convince the public of the validity of their respective ideas, the different protagonists tried to publicize their strategic geographical imaginations through the media. The public-relations measures were largely intended to put pressure on the opposite side by inciting the Lebanese public.

Solidere designed impressive illustrations of the future city centre, for example, with far lower densities than planned and also organized a powerful media campaign including TV, radio, cinema, and newspaper advertising. The protagonists of the opposition could hardly counter this expensive advertising campaign of Solidere because of their restricted financial situation. Nevertheless, they managed to organize ongoing public-relations activities, such as press conferences, newspaper articles, and leaflets. The criticism of the opposition thus triggered a very controversial public debate, which was mainly carried out by a multi-layered reporting in the print media and the many emerging private TV and radio stations.

Gradually, Solidere and al-Hariri succeeded in exerting political and economic pressure on the formerly open and multi-layered media landscape. Newspapers and TV stations that reported critically about Solidere were threatened with the withdrawal
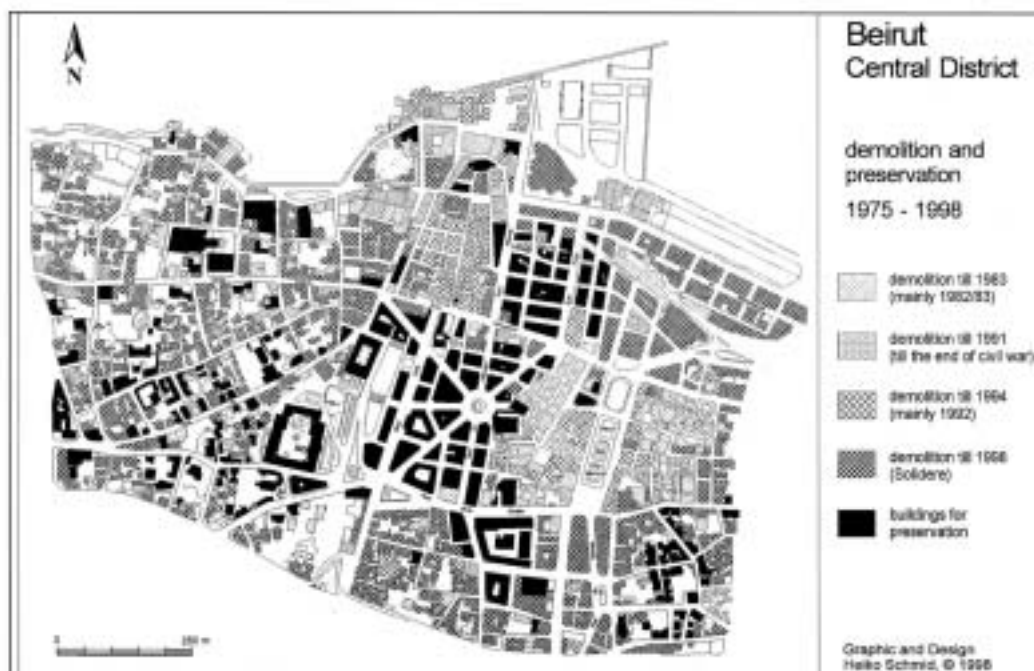
FIGURE 5
Demolition and preservation in downtown Beirut 1975–98

of advertisements. Finally, the audiovisual law of 1996, which drastically reduced the number of TV stations in Lebanon, played a key role because it prevented the opposition from gaining access to the reporting. Three TV stations with a critical attitude towards Solidere had to close. The result was that the most important media became less free and independent in their reporting (K. Elias, opposition committees, 1 June 1998; S. Marwan, opposition architect, 11 May 1999; D. Fares, Solidere, 10 May 1999; Dajani 2001; Denoeux and Springborg 1998).

The popularity of the Hong Kong image in the public discourse was due to the financial resources of Solidere and the increasingly (governmentally) controlled media, as well as to the high acceptance of this image within post-war Lebanese society. After 16 years of civil war, with its social and economic consequences, society was open for such a euphoric and dramatic concept. In addition, there was the fragmentation and lack of orientation of

the different opposition groups regarding coordinated public relations and a strategic implementation of their geographical imagination.

Within the population, the reconstruction project was widely praised, despite the criticism of the opposition. In a quantitative survey carried out by the author with 400 persons in Beirut in 1998, almost two thirds of the people interviewed supported the Solidere project. Statistically, there were no significant differences throughout most categories of age and religion (Figure 6). This astonishingly positive result must be explained by the fact that the media presentation was far more important than the religious or demographic factors and that Solidere and al-Hariri were a lot more successful in promoting their concept than their opponents. In the fragmented Lebanese post-war society, all other factors were suppressed by the hope of an economic upturn initiated by the reconstruction. Al-Hariri used this need for

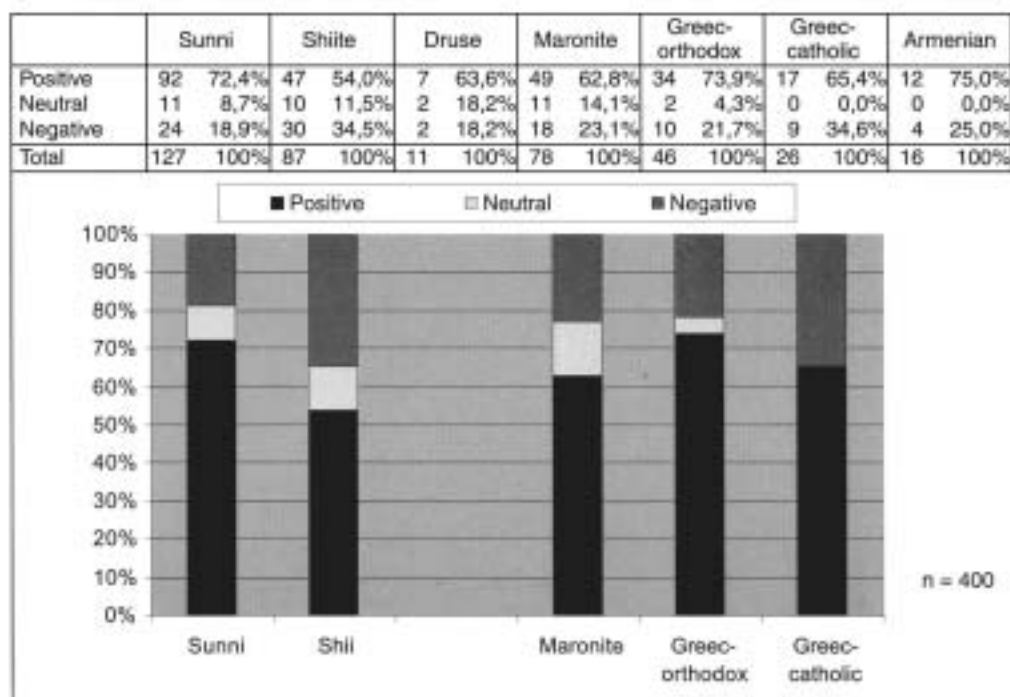|	Sunni		Shiite		Druse		Maronite		Greec-orthodox		Greec-catholic		Armenian	
Positive	92	72,4%	47	54,0%	7	63,6%	49	62,8%	34	73,9%	17	65,4%	12	75,0%
Neutral	11	8,7%	10	11,5%	2	18,2%	11	14,1%	2	4,3%	0	0,0%	0	0,0%
Negative	24	18,9%	30	34,5%	2	18,2%	18	23,1%	10	21,7%	9	34,6%	4	25,0%
Total	127	100%	87	100%	11	100%	78	100%	46	100%	26	100%	16	100%

FIGURE 6

Religion's opinion of Solidere

Note: Like other relations between demographic factors and the opinion about Solidere the minor differences between the religions are not significant and not based on considered statistical dependences. The considerable support for Solidere was therefore not significantly affected by socio-economic or demographic factors. The Druse and Armenian (Catholic and Orthodox denomination) results were not considered in the graphic because of the low number of cases.   Source: own survey in 1998

prosperity as a strategy of action and created his strategic vision of a Lebanese Hong Kong.

Decision Making in the Process of Reconstruction

Until 1998 al-Hariri was able to take, directly or indirectly, all the important decisions regarding the reconstruction of Beirut's city centre. With the implementation of the real estate company Solidere, the expropriation of tenants and owners, and the far-reaching demolition of old buildings, the process of reconstruction became irreversible. Moreover, in the struggle between the strategic concepts for the future, the vision of a "Hong Kong of the Mediterranean" still had the upper hand. Public opinion was affected not only by friendly reporting of the project, but also by a euphoric vision of economic prosperity.

Al-Hariri was finally able to gain acceptance for several reasons. Unlike most other protagonists, he had a number of powerful resources at his disposal, including the political influence of his employees and confidants in public decision-making positions, as well as economic and financial power through his several companies (e.g., construction companies and media enterprises). Al-Hariri's most essential and, in the end, most successful strategy of action was, nevertheless, the imbedding of the interests of other protagonists. Through the compensation of refugees and religious foundations, the two most

powerful groups were neutralized as a possible barrier to the project. Due to contrary interests, the opposition to the project was too fragmented in its power and action.

Even the election of a new Lebanese president and a new prime minister in the fall of 1998 could not stop Solidere's project. Yet some things changed: Various confidants of al-Hariri were removed from public institutions and some of the lawsuits against Solidere that had been frozen were reopened after the change of government (Haddad 1998). The new minister of finance, Georges Corm, one of the former critics of the group of academics and planners, required a positive image of the reconstruction project in order to attract foreign investors, since the failure of the project would be a catastrophe for economically unstable Lebanon.

But the project had already lost some of its impetus. Construction permits were given out more restrictively than in the past and the overall unfavourable economic conditions in the Middle East and in the global economy had a negative influence on the project. Politically, the slow progress of the negotiations in the peace process was a hindrance, too; furthermore, the economic crisis in Asia in the summer of 1998 led to the withdrawal of some Far Eastern investors from the project (Harvey 1998). In 1999 a new and difficult phase seemed to be imminent: The cost-intensive infrastructure works came to an end but had used up most of the investment, which had to be raised again through land sales.

Another change of government and the reappointment of al-Hariri as prime minister after he won the election in the summer of 2000 brought an end at least to the domestic difficulties of Solidere. However, the reconstruction of Beirut still continued to be an international project that had committed itself consistently to the recruitment of foreign investors from the Middle and Far East, but also from Europe and the United States. From an economic point of view, this led to a long-lasting dependency, which was further increased by the failed Middle East peace process. The realization of Beirut's future role as a regional centre for finance and commerce is, therefore, further away than ever.

Summary

In reflecting on the conflict about the reconstruction of downtown Beirut, the main points that have been considered are the analysis of the resources, the potentials for power, and the patterns of action used by the different protagonists. The method of deconstruction served as a suitable starting-point for exposing mechanisms of strategic constructions in the form of strategic truths, geographical imaginations, and strategic visions. This approach not only can be used for understanding and analyzing the original conflict but can also be applied to other conflicts with similar patterns of action. In the face of a postulated permanent change in perspectives, the reader not only can reflect the perspective of this specific research but at the same time can analyze, deconstruct, and expose strategic components in future disputes and conflicts. A constructivist theory of action can, therefore, be used as a normative, middle-range concept, especially for the analysis of different conflict situations. Furthermore, different strategies for de-escalation and moderation of a conflict can be presented. In a city like Beirut, where conflicts were engaged in with weapons for 16 years, the fact that all the protagonists involved agreed to a medial confrontation and, therefore, to a debate about the reconstruction that was predominately democratic and peaceful signified remarkable progress.

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date of the interview.

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