PUBLIC SPACE AS A MEANS OF REGENERATION: THE CASE OF MARTYRS' SQUARE, BEIRUT

Supervised Research Project

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Figure 1. A recent image of the Martyrs' Square with "Revolution before corona" written in Arabic.

Abstract

Public space can refer to a physical place or to an abstract notion of space. Both definitions are relevant to understanding Beirut's Martyrs' Square as a physical and symbolic space for history, politics, and social life in a post-conflict city. This supervised research project traces the evolution of the square, exploring its role in the social and spatial dynamics of Beirut, a city that has experienced significant social and political transformations since the civil war of 1975.

The report, firstly, reviews literature to articulate the importance physical public spaces have in shaping the landscape and social dynamics of conflict rife cities. Secondly, it documents how individuals living in the city perceive and experience the impact of this public space on their everyday lives through a series of interviews with professionals in urban planning, design, and architecture. By understanding their perspectives, the research sheds light on the lived realities and challenges faced by people affected by conflict. The findings are analyzed against writings on the role of public space in war-torn areas; the analysis points to Martyr's Square significance as a symbolic space and erasure as a place for contemporary social or political activity. Finally, current plans for the square, alongside some visions for its future, are examined. The potential of public spaces such as Martyrs' Square to facilitate social cohesion is the focus of concluding recommendations.

L'espace public peut se référer à un lieu physique ou à une notion abstraite de l'espace. Ces deux définitions sont pertinentes pour comprendre la Place des Martyrs de

Beyrouth en tant qu'espace physique et symbolique pour l'histoire, la politique et la vie sociale dans une ville post-conflit. Ce projet de recherche encadré retrace l'évolution de la place, en explorant son rôle dans la dynamique sociale et spatiale de Beyrouth, une ville qui a connu d'importantes transformations sociales et politiques depuis la guerre civile de 1975

Le rapport passe d'abord en revue la littérature afin d'articuler l'importance des espaces publics physiques dans le façonnement du paysage et de la dynamique sociale des villes en proie à des conflits. Ensuite, il documente la manière dont les habitants de la ville perçoivent et vivent l'impact de cet espace public sur leur vie quotidienne à travers une série d'entretiens avec des professionnels de l'urbanisme, de la conception et de l'architecture. En comprenant leurs perspectives, le document met en lumière les réalités vécues et les défis auxquels sont confrontées les personnes touchées par le conflit. Il met également en lumière le potentiel d'espaces publics tels que la Place des Martyrs pour faciliter la cohésion sociale, ce qui fait l'objet des recommandations finales. L'analyse des résultats par rapport aux écrits sur le rôle de l'espace public dans les régions déchirées par la guerre met en évidence l'importance de la Place des Martyrs en tant qu'espace symbolique et son effacement en tant que lieu d'activité sociale ou politique contemporaine. Le rapport se termine par un examen des projets actuels pour la place des Martyrs, ainsi que par quelques visions pour l'avenir de la place.

1. Introduction

Setting the Scene

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a golden glow over the bustling city of Beirut, anticipation was in the air. It was October 2019 and the Lebanese people had reached their breaking point. In a nation marred by a web of corruption woven by a political oligarchy, and with painful memories of a long, brutal civil war etched in the people's collective consciousness, discontent was voiced.

From every corner of the nation, a shared restlessness spread like wildfire, transcending political affiliations and sectarian divisions. A collective yearning for change was evident in the rallying cry of "thawra"—a call to revolution—that reverberated through the streets.

In the heart of Beirut, within the confines of Martyrs' Square, the uprising found its epicenter. The square has long stood as a solemn testament to the nation's turbulent history and present. It was a place where the voices of the people would unite, where their demands would reverberate, and where their determination would take shape. In the midst of the fervent gathering of October 2019, a symbol emerged: a towering cutout, six meters high, proudly displayed a clenched fist emblazoned with the word "Thawra." It became the visual embodiment of the people's aspirations, a powerful emblem that spoke volumes without uttering a word.

Yet, the road to change would not be easy. Forces of resistance and counter-protest emerged, seeking to vanquish the hopes of the protesters. The symbol was set ablaze, its once-bold colors fading into ashes. But the spirit of the revolution refused to be extinguished. From the smoldering remnants, a collective resolve emerged. They rebuilt the symbol, this time taller, stronger, and forged from unyielding metal. It stood as a testament to their resilience, a beacon of unwavering determination in the face of adversity.

-- Beirut 2019, a personal reflection

The paragraphs above were drawn from news coverage, social media, and countless posted videos, stories, and conversations with people who were there during the 2019 October revolution. The October uprisings are pivotal in the history of the Martyrs' square as it had a significant impact on Lebanon's political landscape and led to the resignation of PM Saad Hariri. The Martyrs' square became a place where people put aside their sectarian differences to protest a corrupt political system that has left the country in stagnation and misery for over 35 years (Atallah, 2019).

Public spaces—understood as areas accessible to all members of a community—play a role in shaping urban landscapes. They can, and often do, foster social cohesion by providing platforms for shared experiences, interactions, and connections among diverse groups of people. In post-conflict cities like Beirut, understanding the significance of public spaces in fostering various activities, forms of community engagement, and even healing and reconciliation processes is of paramount importance.
The overarching goal of this research was to examine the experiences and accounts of users of a public space, Martyrs' Square, with a specific focus on the potential removal or reinforcement of existing social-spatial divides. The study aimed to document current uses of the space; the square's role in social dynamics and urban regeneration; and ways the Square could, potentially, catalyze urban revitalization within the city.

The general approach taken was to research and analyze changing physical configurations, use patterns and understandings of Martyrs' Square's over time with projections, albeit tentative, into the future. The data collection can be broken down into three main categories: first, historical and contemporary information detailing the city and the square's evolution; second, insights gleaned from interviews with key informants; and third, an examination of current plans by different stakeholders, and visions outlining the square's future development.

This interview phase of the research used a targeted data collection approach to gain insights from industry professionals in urban planning, urban design, and architecture.

Approximately 12 semi-structured audio-recorded interviews were conducted in 2023. These are primary sources of information. The recruitment process began with a targeted search on LinkedIn and government websites, aiming to identify individuals with personal or professional familiarity with the Martyrs' square or Beirut public planning. Further participants were recruited through snowball sampling, expanding the diversity of perspectives.
The interview questions focused on understanding the perceptions, experiences, and suggestions related to Martyrs Square in Beirut. The questions sought to uncover participants' interactions with the square, their emotional associations, the day-to-day activities observed, and the perceived significance of the square in the context of Beirut.
To gain understanding of the square's historical evolution, respondents above the age of 40 were asked about their observations of the square and any connections to significant historical events or legacies. These insights aimed to provide a broader context for the square's development over time.
The interviewees probed about possible consensus among professionals regarding the square's functions and future. They were also asked to identify any significant improvements made to the square in recent years and to identify priorities for further enhancing the square's design or use.

Lastly, participants were given the opportunity to envision their ideal public space, allowing them to provide their own creative input and share their personal vision for the future of Martyrs' Square. Respondents could do so orally as part of the audio-

recorded interviews. In addition, the participants were invited to visually express their vision of the Square through sketching. Though only a few participants chose to do so, this approach provided a unique means to capture their conceptions of what the space should be. Given that many of them had strong design skills, the option of drawing was another lens into their visions for the square.

Data analysis entailed examining the experiences and accounts of space users, their narratives, and their sketches. On this basis, individual perceptions (of the space, its use, and its meaning) emerged and common themes were identified, including implications of the square for social dynamics and for future urban regeneration. Comments and sketches were also examined to explore strategies for maximizing the Square's potential as a public space within the city.

The consolidation of the diverse accounts and perspectives provided a multifaceted understanding of the Square, its significance, and its potential role in promoting social cohesion and urban regeneration. By exploring how the space is currently being used and envisioning how it could function better or differently, this research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on the design and activation of public spaces for the benefit of the community and the overall urban landscape.

The report consists of six chapters. The first chapter serves as an introduction, while the second delves into the historical progression of Martyrs’ Square, exploring its physical, social, and symbolic significance. Chapter three examines essential concepts related to public spaces in cities affected by conflict, drawing insights from existing literature. The fourth chapter presents the interview findings and analysis, while the fifth chapter discusses current plans, projects, and potential visions for the square. The final chapter, six, offers a summary and conclusion based on the findings.

2. The Evolution of Martyrs' Square

The evolution of Martyrs' Square encompasses a complex history that, for the scope of this research, is segmented into three distinct phases: the Pre-War Era (1943 - 1975), the Solidere Era and the Post-Civil War Reconstruction Period (1990 onwards), and the Martyrs's square today. Each of these periods plays a crucial role in shaping the square's identity and significance within the broader context of Beirut's narrative. For each era, this study delves into the key developments, transformations, and dynamics that have defined Martyrs' Square and its role as a focal point of the city's evolution.

Pre-War Era

Beirut is often described as an Arab metropolis. Its status as a divided city has been proclaimed in several studies concerning post-conflict urban development (Nagle, 2000; Karizat, 2019; Della Porta & Tufaro, 2022; Nagle, 2018; Silver, 2010). This labelling can be traced back to the Modern Lebanon's formation by the French in 1920 to ensure a majority of Christians over Muslim sects. The state incorporated new territories containing a large Sunni population, which in contrast to professing loyalty to this new state, wished instead for unification with co-ethnics in neighboring Syria. Political and economic resources were directed in favor of Christians (Picard, 2002) and Beirut became the center of their power, despite the city containing many Muslims. In 1943, Lebanon gained independence and the respective Christian and Muslim elites forged the National Pact (Picard, 2002) to share power in the new state. This change along with an influx of thousands of Palestinians in 1948 and 1967 contributed to the shift of Lebanon's demography in favor of the Muslim population (Picard, 2002). All in all, the next 30 years saw changing demographics trends, inter-religious strife, and proximity to even more tumultuous regions rife with conflict that eventually came together in the Lebanese Civil War (Picard, 2002; Ladina et al., 2009).

Figure 2. Evolution of the Martyrs' Square. Source: The Medium (2020).

Since its conception in the Ottoman Era, the Martyrs' square has changed drastically in both form and name. During the Ottoman period, the square was known as Canon square (Saad, 2020). On the 6th of May 1916, 16 Lebanese journalists, merchants and political figures were hanged in the square for opposing the Ottoman rule and demanding the independence of Lebanon (Picard, 2002). After the Ottoman period ended, the name was changed to Martyrs' Square to commemorate those killed.

During the prosperous era of the 50s and 60s, Martyrs' Square flourished alongside the Lebanese economy. Symbolizing the entirety of Lebanon's economic, social, cultural, and political life, the square garnered the new name "al-Balad" (translated as "the country"), encapsulating the essence of an entire nation (Saad, 2020). It functioned as a significant cultural and economic hub in the city. Tramways served the city center and businesses, and people flocked to the area.

The 1950s saw the dawn of a more Westernized Beirut, that included a highly car-dominated culture (see Fig 3). The increasing demand for parking spaces and expanded roadways led to significant changes in the square. The once spacious sidewalk was narrowed to accommodate more parking spots, leaving only enough space for two to three individuals to pass through (Madiski,1997). In 1963, the tramway system ceased its operations; its network was converted into paved roads for cars. To alleviate traffic congestion, the *petit serial*, an historic administrative building dating back to the Ottoman period, was demolished during the 1950s to make room for parking lots (Madiski, 1997; Saad, 2020).

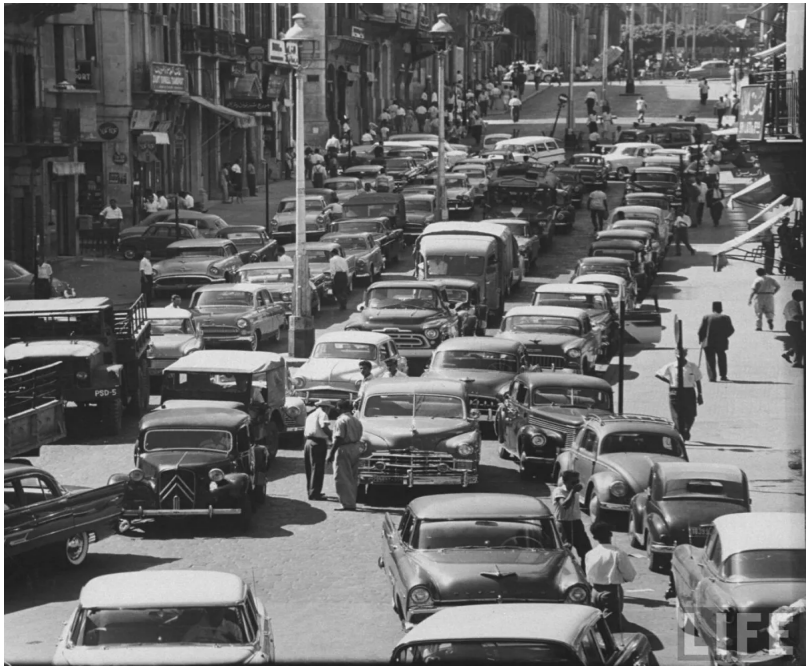

Figure 3. Cars trundling along an old Beirut Street.

Figure 4. Evolution of the Martyrs' Square pre- and post-war era. Source: The Medium (2020).

In place of the *serail*, a modern cinema, the Rivoli, was constructed on the square's northern edge, slightly set back from the former serail to create a small parking area (see Fig. 4). Adjacent to this parking space, a flower clock was erected, which also served as a prominent landmark (Saad, 2020). The clock chimed every hour, conveying the time in Arabic, English, and French to those passing by.

Figure 5. The Rivoli, and flower clock. Source: The Medium (2020).

These changes turned the square into a bustling transportation hub, teeming with parking spaces, taxis, and buses that connected all corners of Lebanon. It became a vibrant and lively center of movement and connections (see Fig. 6).

Figure 6. Martyrs' Square during the 1960s: A bustling square. Source: The Guardian (2015).

The Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) changed the city and, within it, Martyrs' Square. The square, a symbol that once represented Lebanese unity, transformed into a stark emblem of division. Martyrs' Square became the starting point of the green line, which cleaved Beirut into two distinct entities: Christian West Beirut and Muslim East Beirut (Nagle, 2002).

Figure 7. Beirut in ruins post-Civil War. Source: Rare Historical Photos.

The square became a battleground, witnessing intense fighting that ravaged the urban landscape. The once vibrant setting was reduced to ruins (see Figs. 6 and 7). The statue that once stood tall became a canvas for countless bullet marks, a poignant testament to the violence that had consumed the city (Karizat, 2019).

Figure 8. The remains of the Martyrs' Square post-war with the Rivoli cinema in the background. Source: Rare Historical Photos.

Solidere and the Reconstruction of Downtown Beirut

While the year 1990 brought an end to the Civil War, it left behind a devastated urban landscape and a deeply fractured society.

Prime Minister Rafik Hariri came up with a plan to reconstruct the Beirut downtown area; re-creation of downtown as a regional hub oriented towards finance, business, culture, and tourism was to help revive the area and the wider city (Schmid 2006; Ragab 2010). The strategy was pitched as a vast urban renewal project and entrusted to a private land and real-estate firm: Solidere.

Figure 9. Artist impression of the new Solidere plan. Source: Makdisi (1997).

Solidere is the Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut Central District and was founded in May 1994 under the authority of the Council of Development and Reconstruction, following the vision of then-Prime Minister Rafik Hariri (Barrington, 2017). Solidere was granted expropriation rights over the Beirut Central District area, a space of approximately 150 hectares that included Martyrs' Square (Mango, 2004, p.1).

According to the company website, Solidere's role is manifold; it operates as a developer, a real estate developer, a property owner, and a property and services manager and operator

(Barrington, 2017). Solidere's introduction to Beirut began with the globally renowned Lebanese singer, Fayrouz, being invited to host a concert at Martyrs' Square to commemorate a new era of peace (Marchi, 1995; Saad 2020). Solidere's developers opted for a political and economic model of reconstruction that favored private investment, inspired to a certain extent by the model used in major urban regeneration operations in many Western cities: market-led urbanism (Marot &Yazigi, 2012). The revival of Lebanon would rely on the energy of services like finance, business, culture, and tourism in downtown Beirut, aiming to transform it into a hub for the region (Schmidt 2006; Ragab 2010).

This approach led to the radical transformation of central Beirut, in particular the demolition of numerous residential buildings. The goal behind the razing of these buildings was to develop the country's economic, physical, and social infrastructure to stimulate the growth of an efficient private sector that would help reestablish Beirut as the Middle East's major business center (Marot & Yazigi, 2012). The idea here was that these buildings could be redeveloped to raise about $60 billion US. Such earnings were estimated to generate a 6 - 8% rate of growth in the Lebanese Gross Domestic Product to reach a per capita income equivalent to the pre-Lebanese civil war 1974 levels (Saliba, 2000).

However, numerous studies have shown that the number of buildings demolished for the project greatly exceeded the number that were destroyed by the 15 years of civil war, corresponding to an overall destruction rate of up to 80% of the original urban fabric (Saliba, 2000) The reconstruction and development boom in post-war Beirut brought about significant changes in land-use patterns: there was a proliferation of high-rise condominium towers and luxury stores to "regenerate" the Beirut downtown district; and communities were displaced and redistributed throughout Lebanon (Marot & Yazigi, 2012; Karizat 2019). Even the suburban neighborhoods on the periphery of downtown, such as Zokak el-Blat, faced massive changes. Due to the nearness of this neighborhood to the rebuilt city center, developers soon became motivated to construct luxury apartments to draw in a wealthier population. This further upset the balance of local land and the real estate market in Beirut (Marot & Yazigi, 2012).

Solidere had successfully emptied the downtown of inhabitants, expropriating landowners by giving them shares in the company. In doing so, Solidere's intervention led to the displacement of approximately two-thirds of the country's population and, according to observers, the creation of more homogenous and exclusive spaces (Saliba, 2000; Karizat 2019).

Cities like Beirut witnessed a significant sectarian redistribution, exemplified by the Muslim population in East Beirut declining from 40 percent to merely five percent (Nagle, 2000). Renowned sociologist, Samir Khalaf (2002), contends that while this redistribution may have facilitated certain groups' survival during the war, it now poses challenges as communities grapple with options for reorganizing and sharing common spaces to foster unified national identities.

As the real estate market in Lebanon experienced rapid growth, fueled by both local and international investment, the value of land skyrocketed, creating intense pressure for

profitable land use. This economic pressure, combined with the demand for private, exclusive spaces, has resulted in a diminishing emphasis on public spaces as the competition for valuable land and the prioritization of profit-driven development have limited the availability and accessibility of public spaces. The downtown was stripped of its traditional role as a center where people of various socio-economic configurations could interact with one another; instead, it began to boast luxurious apartments and trendy cafes, meticulously restored Ottoman-era buildings, and high-end boutiques from renowned brands like Versace. This, in turn, exacerbated social divisions by hindering opportunities for social interaction and community engagement. Martyrs' Square was one seeming victim of this change in downtown vocation.

Martyrs' Square Today

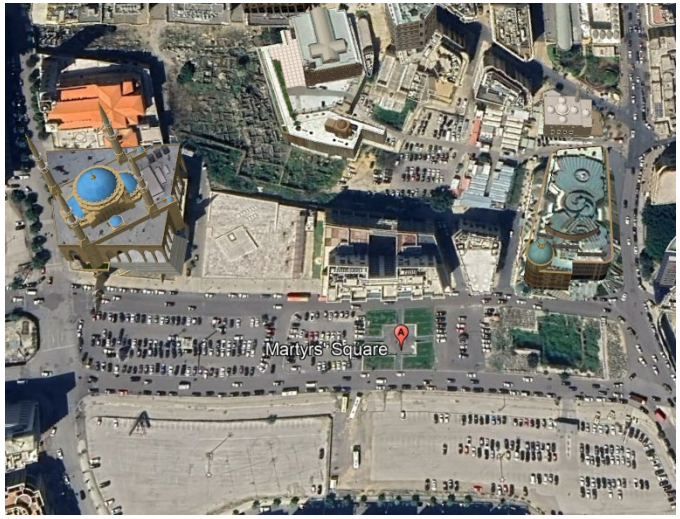

Figure 10. Aerial view of the Martyrs' Square from Google Earth.

Martyrs' Square today is very different from in the pre-war era. Previously, the square was used as one of many venues for cultural events, concerts, and performances, which added to its vibrant atmosphere. Solidere's transformation of this space had removed all previous programming like the Rivoli cinema and the Flower Clock, in addition to the removal of most of the greenery and street furniture. This was done, according to Solidere plans, to create a "visual link to the sea" (Saliba, 2000). Following a donation by the late Prime Minister Hariri, the Mohamad al Amine Mosque was built on the periphery of the square near the church of Saint Georges (Karizat, 2019). Despite these interventions, the removal of cultural and economic links, along with the reconstruction of the downtown area led to a once vibrant public square being turned into a glorified parking lot. Due to Solidere's privatization of public spaces, Martyrs' Square remains a public space in name only.

3. Public Space: Concepts and Illustrative Cases

This chapter introduces key definitions and concepts around public space. After a brief overview of public spaces and their possible benefits, four tensions relevant to public space in divided societies are discussed, namely: i. privatization and commercialization of space; ii. memory, forgetting, and branding in urban commemoration of past events; iii. the potential peacebuilding effects of placemaking; and iv. tourism as an opportunity for commemoration and/or spectacle. Discussion, largely drawn from literature, of these themes is followed by two illustrative cases. The first, on Beirut's urban development, explores the first two themes of privatization and forgetting; the second, on Mostar Bridge in Bosnia and Herzegovina addresses the latter three themes.

A Brief History of Public Spaces

The term "public space" has several meanings in the fields of planning and urban design. In spatial terms, public space refers to the areas owned and managed by the public administration, distinct from the private sphere that encompasses individual ownership, familial spaces, and personal privacy (Pumain, Paquot, & Kleinschmager, 2006). This definition is the one commonly used by most urban planners and designers today (Shaftoe, 2012). Some say that public spaces are the "publicly owned empty bits between buildings" (Shaftoe, 2012). And some authors see public spaces as anything in the public sphere, from public squares to parks to statues (Simpson 2011). Others bring a normative lens to the field, focusing on rights of access and arguing that, ideally, public spaces should be accessible to all citizens (Shaftoe, 2008; Light and Smith, 1998). And still others question if public land ownership is the pertinent definitional element; as Hajer (2001) highlights, the boundary between private and public realms is often blurred, with private elements permeating public spaces or functioning as "public" gathering spots.

Regardless of the precise definition, there is no shortage of literature that demonstrates that public spaces are considered a vital element in urban environment, places of encounter where public life unfolds, where social relationships take place, and where egalitarian democratic discussion happens (Tyndall, 2010). Public spaces, their use, and their social significance have been the subject of extensive analysis by numerous authors, who have examined concrete cases from various regions across the globe (see, for instance, Garcia-Ramon, Ortiz, and Prats, 2004). Important roles and functions of public spaces, spanning time and geography, are as places to meet, talk, sit, relax, and feel part of a collective (Fyfe 2006; Mitchell 1996). The Greek Agora and the Roman Forums are examples of public spaces taking on a political dimension and use as venues for discussion. Public spaces were places for commerce and, equally important, for social engagement, expression, and protest (Barlas et al., 2006).

The UN-Habitat considers public spaces "a vital ingredient of successful cities"; they are the places in a city that build a sense of community, culture, social capital, and community revitalization (UN Habitat, 2015). Public spaces have been

shown to play a vital role in establishing safe, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable cities, as cited under target 11 of the Sustainable Development Goals (UN Habitat, 2015).

Of key importance is the work by the Project for Public Space, which outlines elements of successful public spaces (PPS, 2017). Attributes of well-functioning public spaces are divided, in the PPS schema, into: uses and activities: comfort and image: access and linkages: and sociability. Each attribute is then further broken down into intangible categories such as the walkability or convenience of a place that can be estimated through different measures and data sources e.g., crime statistics or environmental data. This approach allows structured assessment of specific places against a wide range of criteria; the framework is employed in Chapter 4 to assess the functioning of Martyrs' Square.

Henri Lefebvre's work has sparked numerous debates concerning public space. For the purposes of this research, I investigate four dimensions of public space that relate directly to the case of the Martyrs' Square: privatization and commercialization; nationalism, memory and branding of public spaces; peacebuilding and placemaking; and the spectacle of public spaces.

Privatization and Commercialization

From public squares to shared gardens, public spaces have been shown to serve as places of healing, cultural exchange, and a source of stability for many people. At a glance, the privatization of these spaces should not inherently take away these roles. However, in studying privatization of public spaces, researchers pose two questions as a starting point: what the ideal public space should be, and how this ideal can be reached (Nemeth & Schmidt 2011).

Given the differing definitions outlined above, these authors suggest a focus on the "publicness" of public space. In this context, ownership, accessibility, management, and inclusiveness should be explored. Ownership refers to whether a space is public or not in the legal sense; accessibility refers to both the physical and psychological access to a public space; management refers to the mechanisms applied to a public space; and inclusiveness refers to a public space's ability to accommodate diverse users and behaviors (Nemeth and Schmidt, 2011, p.6)

Changes in the urban development process throughout the last century have contributed to the privatization of space (Kohn, 2004). The role, impact, and size of development companies have grown tenfold (Kohn, 2004). Globalization meant that development companies were linked with broader markets which created a significant dissonance and dysfunction between the priorities of development companies and local governing bodies.

Space began to be treated as another commodity. It is this facet that underpins the criticisms of the privatization of public spaces. By acting as a commodity these spaces no longer serve their purpose as the privatization leads to the diminishment of the "publicness" of public space by restricting social interaction, constraining individual liberties, and excluding undesirable populations (Nemeth & Schmidt, 2011).

Memory, Nationalism, and the Branding of Public Spaces

Lefebvre (1996) famously argued that the city reflects the society on the ground and is an arena for its social reproduction. The design of the city, the look of its buildings, and especially its public spaces all show how power and order work; they also tell us about what the country believes in and how people see themselves as a group (source, pages). Buildings and public spaces are some of the key modes of representation of national identity, whether they construct inclusive civic or exclusive ethnic identities (Ristic, 2018).

Studies have shown that traumatic events have transformative powers in reshaping historic meanings, especially in contested public spaces (Walkowitz and Knauer, 2004). The memory enshrined in the site becomes central to understanding of an event and, thereby, these spaces help shape the everyday memory of a nation (Bakshi, 2014). Ristic and Ristic (2018, 33) call the attribution of national meanings onto public spaces a form of urban branding; these spaces bring together different historical, social and cultural aspects of place to produce desired “images of place” that can be promoted through media to attract the targeted audience.

Branding is not a new concept as urban design. Public spaces have often been used and manipulated to convey certain messages throughout history. Vale (2008) argues that political regimes, governments, and leaders have manipulated architecture and urban space as tools for disseminating political authority and national ideologies. As an example, Hitler extensively exploited this power, using buildings as tools for political propaganda (Balfour 1990; Vale, 2008); his vision was to reshape Berlin into a global epicenter, where structures embodied the core principles of Nazi ideology. More broadly, many regimes have structured the layout of the city to mirror understanding of the physical construction of the world (sources). In such cases, the city itself integrates wider understanding of the world (e.g., cosmological, religious, imperial, nationalistic) into the tapestry of everyday life (Dovey, 2014).

The deliberate construction of spaces to embody national ideologies demonstrates how the built environment can serve as a vessel for memory, allowing societal values and historical narratives to become embedded within the very fabric of cities (Till, 2005). The significance of this dynamic is even more pivotal in divided cities, where spatial practices take on an intensified role in shaping and contesting narratives (Bakshi, 2014). In these cities, the deliberate manipulation of public spaces can exacerbate divisions or provide opportunities for shared memory and reconciliation, influencing the path toward a more harmonious coexistence (Till, 2005). The power of spatial practices to negotiate memory and shape identity becomes especially pronounced in these complex urban landscapes (Bakshi, 2014), where each street corner and plaza carries the weight of history and the potential for transformative change (Ristic, 2018).

Several concepts within the extensive literature on the dynamics between memory and public space are particularly important to the study of Beirut. The destruction of memory, or memoricide, is understood as the deliberate erasure of

memory; memoricide can be seen in the destruction of cultural heritage within urban landscapes (Ristic, 2018). Nostalgia is also of import. John Nagle (2017, p.3), who has written extensively on the dynamics of memory in divided societies, showcases how the reconstruction process of divided societies can have two sides: on the one hand, as part of peace processes, the State often promotes a forgetting, or amnesia towards, a painful past in order to promote political transition and stability; on the other hand, ethnic groups often engage in commemorative practices that validate their experiences and understandings of past events. These dual forces of amnesia and ethnicized memory can also influence post-conflict urban reconstruction, especially in the city centers of municipal capitals; elite-driven branding strategies are employed to create new narratives of city centers that both wipe away the memory of conflict and idealize the city as a symbol of a new order (Nagle, 2017). As a result of rebranding efforts, cities are often labeled with titles like the "city of love" or the "innovative city" (Vanolo, 2017), or in the case of Beirut, “the new Paris” (Kozlova, 2023).

Peacebuilding and Placemaking

Urban theorists recognize that the design and management of public spaces can act as powerful urban policy tools (Hill, 2000; Low and Smith, 2006). Due to increased urbanization and densification, the importance of optimal use of public space in society has only increased (Duivenvoorden et al, 2021). Such observations have general import and specific implications for planning in divided societies.

Public space is a strategic urban asset in the landscape of global competition (source). Public spaces have come to be seen as catalysts for urban renewal, as arenas for community revitalization and participatory local democracy, and as, in their traditional roles, of providers of amenities and connections between the private spaces of a city (Fainstein and Gladstone,1997; Hill, 2000; Low and Smith, 2006;). In the general literature on public space, benefits are seen in relation to social cohesion and their battle for collective wellbeing; urban green spaces are highlighted as especially beneficial in these regards (Kazmierczak, 2010; Kuo and Sullivan, 2001; Austin et al., 2016; Smyth, 1994; Nail and Erazo, 2018).

The literature on public space in post-war contexts pays particular attention to the potential of placemaking in reconstruction. Nail and Erazo (2018) define placemaking as the endowment of public spaces with value, identity, and the potential to foster a sense of belonging. The PPS argues that due to the collaborative nature of placemaking, it encourages the strengthening of “the connection between people and the place they share” (PPS, 2018). The process of place-making involves both physical transformations, like tearing down old buildings and designing inviting sidewalks, and economic enhancements, such as introducing shops, restaurants, and entertainment venues (Hazbu, 2018, p.5). However, facilitating placemaking and community cohesion through the re-appropriation of public spaces in post-conflict societies relies on urban policies and their implementation (Nail and Erazo, 2018).

One of the most famous writers advocating on the importance of public spaces for peacebuilding is Scott A Bollens. In his

research, he has argued that public spaces in post-war reconstructions are not nearly sufficient but “are necessary democracy in the city” (Bollens, 2009, p.87). Throughout his work, Bollens has highlighted that in places where there is significant societal conflict or trauma (as experienced in the Bosnian war and the Civil War in Lebanon), it is pivotal for a country to examine the inter-group divisions that led to, or were intensified by, such trauma. He further argues (2009) that urban planners should renew and enhance public spaces to become spaces for everyone, where people from different backgrounds can interact and connect; in that way, public spaces are pivotal to create a shared citizenship across ethnic lines particularily within war-torn societies where unity and fairness, supporting activities that help create a sense of shared citizenship across ethnic lines.

His research suggests that local governance, including urban planning, needs to be reoriented towards bridging ethnic divisions and promote inclusivity, conversation, and cooperation (Bollens, 2009). This reorientation entails creating a unified public sphere at the local level that is part of larger societal efforts towards peace (Bollens, 2009, p.88). Bollens observes that crafting a cohesive public sphere is not as straightforward, which may result in the appearance of superficial attempts at peacebuilding.

Post-War Tourism: The Spectacle of Public Spaces

Tourism is another force affecting public spaces, including those of post-war cities. Tourism has become one of the world's most rapidly expanding sectors; projections indicate that, globally, the number of international tourists will reach 1.8 billion within a decade, with nearly half of these travelers engaging in cultural journeys (UNWTO, 2020). The allure of history, the desire for commemoration, and a curiosity about human experiences are driving factors that contribute to the popularity of national and international visits to sites with historical significance, especially war-related locations (Lischer, 2019).

Amidst this growing fascination for culture-based tourism, the concept of war tourism has taken a prominent position. First coined by Foley & Lennon (1996), war tourism refers to visiting places that somehow connect to events linked to death (Akyurt Kurnaz et al., 2013, p.58). This form of travel has expanded since the mid-1990s (Light, 2017) adding a new dimension to cultural tourism. When tourists visit these locations, they come face-to-face with death either directly or in a symbolic sense, connecting themselves with the historical event (Light, 2017).

Bollens goes further as he delves deeply into the politics, social interactions, and spatial changes of cities marked by historical conflicts and post-war territorial disputes (2007). These aspects intertwine with or have an impact on tourism. His work includes various destinations throughout the world such as Jerusalem, Nicosia, Belfast, Barcelona, Johannesburg and most relevant to this research, the city of Mostar.

Currently, there exists substantial documentation regarding the positive implications of post-war tourism and the efforts governments, international funders, and consultants have made to memorialize these events. Typically, memorialization

entails specific use of public spaces (e.g., Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, the pockmarked walls of Sarajevo, the Killing fields and Choeung Ek memorial in Cambodia, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial and Park in Japan, and countless statues and public art installations in other places torn by war. However, recent literature has shown that these memorials can, in promoting ideas of peace and unity in war-torn societies and making sites of past trauma more attractive and welcoming to tourists, inadvertently marginalize the concerns of local communities (Lischer 2019).

The story or memory of a heritage site, memorial or can vary dramatically depending on choices made as to whether to commemorate, where to place memorials, what objects to show, and what information is provided. All constitute a narrative about both the past and future (Lischer, 2019). According to Williams (2007), the location of a memorial relates to how much importance is given to a certain group of people; no memorial, or very little care given to it, suggests that the victimized group has little power or influence. The choice of where a memorial should be located – either at the actual site of the tragedy or in a new space built elsewhere – also carries import. Creating a new space can show that the government cares and is willing to invest in remembering. However, using the actual site typically has the advantage of making a stronger emotional impact and affirming what has happened, even to skeptics. Lischer (2019, p.6) observes that when you can see the bullet holes, bloodstains, and even bones of a genocide, it is hard to deny that it happened. In the case of the Martyrs' Square, bullet holes were intentionally left on the statue of the Martyr.

There is thus, according to researchers, an uncomfortable relationship between tourism and the politics of memory (Lischer, 2019; Williams, 2007; Bollens, 2007). As described above, public spaces such as memorials serve as a vessel for memory, allowing societal values and historical narratives to become embedded within the very fabric of cities, but, in turning these sites into a spectacle, it can also be detrimental to local communities. Lischer (2019) further notes that while the help of international organizations is crucial in creating these places of memory, they tend to impose Western frameworks and ideologies.

Commercialization and Privatization in Beirut

With the foundation of the literature review in place, attention turns to their relevance to the case of Beirut.

The global trend of commodification of public spaces is apparent in post-war Lebanon, particularly in Beirut, where public spaces underwent deterioration due to shifting priorities influenced by the booming real estate market (Marot and Yazigi, 2012). Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's goal to make Beirut a leading tourist destination and to appeal to global investors also led to the destruction of century old streets and homes (Karizat, 2019).

Beirut's souqs, which were a melting pot of all classes and religions, became a mall, an example of the marginalization of public places if they get in the way of profit. These now-private

malls became exclusive, with security visibly present. The Beirut Souk of today is a luxurious shopping centre that is heavily monitored by security personnel (Karizat, 2019; Lakrouf, 2020). These guards have the authority to approach individuals who might appear suspicious and can even deny entry if deemed necessary. Furthermore, the presence of vendors and beggars is prohibited to maintain a controlled, organized, and clean environment (Lakrouf, 2020). These regulations collectively create an urban setting that aligns with a 'classy cosmopolitan' aesthetic, effectively admitting only those who conform to a specific image. Unfortunately, this surveillance effectively marginalizes and excludes individuals who do not fit this image, often based on factors like their religious affiliation or income level (Harb, 2013).

In recent years, the zoning laws, and regulations in place left Beirut's coastline subject to real estate development (Sawalha, 2010; Hall, 2017; Tadamun, 2017; Karizat, 2019). The absence of a functioning state authority during the civil war (1975 to 1990) provided developers with an opportunity to construct an array of resorts along the shoreline. These developments were in direct violation of 1925 legislation to protect the coastal zone (Hall, 2019). The 1925 law, formulated at a time when Lebanon was in the process of shaping its legal framework, had distinctly delineated that the area encompassing the "seashore till the farthest distance that the wave could reach in winter and sand shores and pebbles" was for public use (Makhlouf, 2018; Hall, 2019). However, the integrity of this legislation was diminished by a series of decrees, adopted over the years, that incrementally permitted construction on coastal lands (Hall, 2019). At present, a mere 20 percent of the coast remains open for public enjoyment (Karizat, 2019).

The Daliyeh, a rocky waterfront area, is illustrative of the commodification of public spaces in Beirut. Despite being walled in by glass luxury towers and stores, the rocky peninsula remained one of the city's last natural outcrops up until 2014. Even during the post-Civil War reconstruction frenzy along the coast, the Daliyeh served as an inclusive place where working-class families could picnic and swim. However, in 2014, the area was completely closed off with barbed wire to make way for development projects (Battah, 2015). Battah (2015) and Hall (2017, 2019) are among the observers who documented how city residents responded with shock, given widespread belief that the rocky outcrop and surrounding lands, as an official protected natural reserve, were untouchable. Daliyeh also held deep historical significance; several Beirut families had made the land available for farming and fishing since the Ottoman times…until the Hariri dynasty came to own it. (Battah, 2015; Hall, 2017; Hall, 2019)

By creating prohibited access to once thriving public spaces, sectarian divisions were even more evident and spaces for interaction and unity were no longer accessible. In a recent article by the Middle East Eye, Tala Aleddine, a research coordinator at the Public Works Studio urban research center, observed that "the majority of Lebanese are now convinced that private property is sacred, and land is there to generate money" (Pernot, P. and Nsonde, F., 2013). She continues by noting that the sanctity of historical landmarks as places to preserve, based on their communal and cultural significance,

was being set aside in favor of economic interests. She claimed that most of Lebanese society does not consider “land as having a social value” (Pernot, P. and Nsonde, F., 2013). Such comments suggest that the privatization and commodification of public spaces has changed the way people in Lebanon think about public space. This altered perception of public space and land in Lebanon, characterized by a shift towards viewing them primarily as vehicles for financial gain of Lebanon's cherished heritage sites.

Mostar Bridge, Bosnia and Herzegovina: An Illustrative Case

The next case underscores how intricate and conflicting the process of building a heritage site can be, influencing whether it diminishes or enriches a local peacebuilding narrative. The case is the restoration of the Old Mostar Bridge in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H), much like Lebanon, is known for its multi-ethnic structure and historical tensions among Bosniacs (Bosnian Muslims), Croats (Bosnian Catholics), and Serbs (Bosnian Orthodox). Despite the war in B&H ending over twenty-five years ago, much of the country's infrastructure and built environment still require repair and rebuilding.

As previously mentioned, a noticeable trend in recent years has been the use of public spaces in rebuilding in contested areas. Davison & Tesan (2021) see a missing link in reconstructing Mostar as a neglect of public spaces. They believe that public spaces in B&H can be used as a vehicle for conflict transformation among seemingly hostile ethnicities and incompatible cultures.

To explore this idea, Davison and Tesan conducted interviews with individuals who were involved in the reconstruction of the Old Bridge (2021). The researchers sought to understand who was involved in construction decisions and how the outcome affected people’s beliefs and relationships.

They found that the original 16th century Ottoman-built bridge held great significance as a source of cultural and civic identity and pride, serving as a place of connection and social interaction for the local people. The importance of the bridge was heightened in the years following 1992; during the first war of Mostar, in 1992, much of the city’s cultural heritage was deliberately destroyed in just two months with all bridges were demolished except for the Old Bridge. Interviewees conveyed that inhabitants found it more and more difficult to recognize the city engraved in their memory in the city’s fabric (Davison & Tesan, 2021, p.9). As mentioned in their paper, “the new Old Bridge in Mostar represents a break with the memories of the people” (2021, p.9). The bridge was described as “the beating heart of the city” (Mackic, 2014) much like descriptions of Beirut’s Martyrs’ Square.”

In contrast to this powerful expressions of value and loss about the historic Old Bridge, interviewees described the ‘restored’ bridge as far too crowded with global tourists for local people to meet, share coffee, and care for one another. and the bridge (Davison & Tesan, 2021, p.9). Based on the interviews, Davison and Tesan concluded that missing from attitudes towards the new Mostar bridge are the care the people felt for the Old Bridge as a source of cultural and civic identity and pride. Indeed, the original bridge which spanned the river for more than four centuries was tenderly referred to as the *old* Old Bridge because old people of Mostar cared for it. The Old Bridge served as a place of connection and

sociability among old people, but also between people and the bridge itself.

The contrasts Davison and Tesan found, specifically in how people involved understood the meaning and impacts of the original Old Bridge versus the *new* Old Bridge, indicate that infrastructure and architecture influenced cultural norms and beliefs about a public space. As established above, people can connect their national identity to certain places by giving those places special meanings. These meanings form stories that help people understand their roots and sense of belonging (Mackic, 2014).

While rebuilding the Old Bridge allows for important flows of people and goods, the reconstruction of the Old Bridge did not make Mostar a united city; it still is to this day a divided city. In part, that divide may be because the original meanings of the Bridge have disappeared. This diplomatic re-creation of historical symbol has essentially "misplaced" the city in the eyes of the locals (Davison & Tesan, 2021, p.3)

Summary

Public space can hold significant benefits and importance in urban environments, serving as venues for social interactions, democratic discourse, and cultural representation. This chapter reviewed four tensions around public spaces that are of relevance to an understanding of Beirut's Martyrs' Square:

- The tension of privatization and commercialization, where public spaces risk losing their accessible and inclusive nature.
- The complexity of memory, nationalism, and branding in shaping public spaces, influencing cultural identities and historical narratives.
- The potential for peacebuilding through placemaking, utilizing public spaces as tools to bridge divisions and foster shared citizenship.
- The intricate role of post-war tourism, which can both connect individuals to history and inadvertently marginalize the local's own narrative.

These four concepts will be used to analyze the results of the interviews conducted with key informants in Beirut, which are presented below in Chapter 4.

4. Research Findings and Analysis

In this chapter, the results of interviews with 12 planners, architects, and urban designers are presented and analyzed. The aim is to assess Martyrs Square as it currently exists and evaluate how its elements either enhance or hinder its function as a public space. To ensure a coherent analysis, the Project for Public Space's (PPS) "What makes a Great Place?" is used as an assessment framework (PPS, 2018), as depicted in Figure 11.

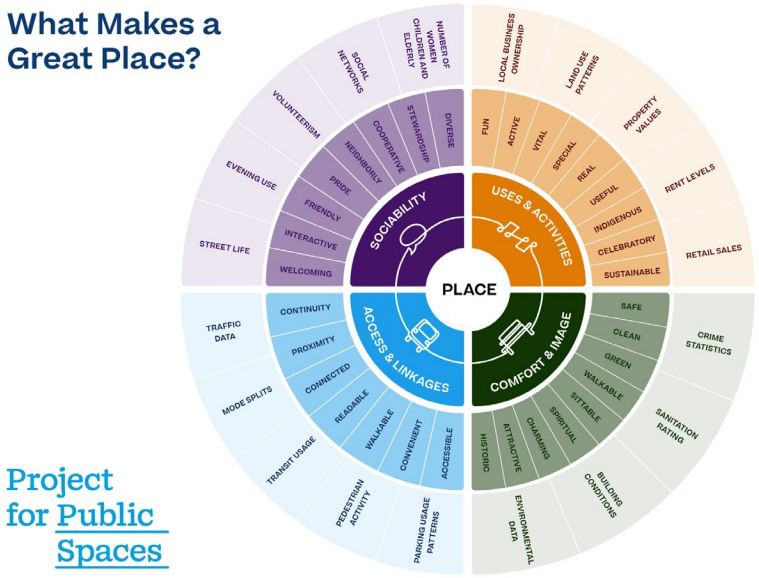

Figure 11. What Makes a Great Place? An Assessment Framework. Source: The PPS (2018).

The PPS approach allows valuable insights into the square's potential to foster social cohesion and urban regeneration. In particular, this section will look at the three categories covered under the PPS: Sociability; Uses and Activities; and Access and Linkages. The last segment of the PPS's framework focuses on Comfort and Image, which is closely intertwined with the central research question of this report; an exploration of this aspect in the second half of this chapter.

Access and Linkages

The accessibility of a place can be evaluated based on its connections to the surrounding environment, both visually and physically. A thriving public space is characterized by its ease of accessibility and navigability, being easily approachable and visible from both a distance and proximity. However, the PPS also makes mention that the design of the space's boundaries is also significant: an active street front with shops and activities is more engaging and safer for pedestrians compared to uninteresting features like blank walls or vacant lots.

On google maps, the Martyrs'' Square periphery certainly boasts a plethora of high-end boutiques that can be entertaining for window-shopping. With the grand Muhammad al-Amin Mosque standing shoulder to shoulder with the Elias Greek Catholica Church, Martyrs' Square is a visible spot and

one that should be accessible to pedestrians on either side. However, from the interviews, that is not the case.

Three of the professionals interviewed said the square is highly inaccessible. Throughout the interviews, it was also noted that the road network and speed of passing cars act as deterrents to visiting the square. The presence and network of roads also took away from density and proximity of important buildings surrounding the square, which should have allowed good connections among historical landmarks. The numerous parking spots surrounding the square further make the square unsafe and unwalkable. Additionally, participants mentioned that the square did not fit into the urban fabric, contributing to a fragmented urban fabric. This fragmented morphology is clear in the aerial view of the square shown in Figure 11.

Figure 7. Aerial image of the Square in relation to the rest of downtown Beirut.

Sociability

An important dimension of a great place is sociability, for example, how people interact and socialize in a space. Other factors that contribute to a vibrant and inclusive urban public space include that the places should be:

- On a small scale (e.g., neighborhood-scale);
- Inhabited (as opposed to shopping centers or blocks of offices)
- Cherished by (most of) its inhabitants, and

- Include the sharing of territory through the existence of gathering spaces, such as public parks, that permit human interactions (Friedmann, 2010).

While this can be broken down into much more complex and precise details, these elements are the basics. Throughout the interview it became clear that these basic elements were not present. A point that was emphasized by each participant, regardless of their personal history with the square, was the square's lack of sociability. There were no people "hanging about" the square and it was not seen as a destination for social interactions. Most respondents saw Solidere as to blame for this lack of sociability; in detaching downtown, and subsequently Martyrs Square, from the rest of Beirut, Solidere had removed the key component of all public spaces: the people. Respondents noted that the square, though surrounded by high-end boutiques and blocks of offices, is in an uninhabited area. The difficulties of access compound the problem of few inhabitants; respondents said visitors find the area treacherous to reach.

Use and Activities

Throughout the interviews, I raised questions about the use of the square and the everyday interactions that shape its character. The answers were straightforward: "It's empty. It's a ghost town". The stark reality is that the square lacks any significant daily activities. Regardless of how the questions were framed, a unanimous sentiment emerged among the participants: Martyrs' Square is not involved in people's urban routines.

Where the square was once a hub of transit and social gathering, it has transformed into a mere junction, a passageway for people on route to their intended destinations. Without any programming or street furniture, the square is not inviting to anyone other than the odd tourist. Aside from its function as one of the larger parking lots in Beirut, it is no longer a place of engagement or significance in terms of usage and activity.

Narratives and Themes

This section analyzes the narratives and themes extracted from the interviews, providing a comprehensive understanding of the Square, its significance, and its potential for promoting social cohesion and urban regeneration. By examining the current use of the space and exploring ideas for improved use, this research contributes to the broader discussion on designing and activating public spaces for the betterment of the community and the overall urban landscape.

Theme 1: A Symbol or Just a Landmark?

A sentiment echoed by each professional interviewed was that, despite the complexities and challenges associated with Martyrs' Square, it undoubtedly stands as a significant landmark that draws the attention of tourists. In fact, the square may hold more excitement for tourists than residents. As described below, several tourist reviews mark the site as a "must see" monument in Beirut. It is true that the square has a deep and complex history that carries an allure for visitors

seeking to understand the dynamic fabric of Beirut. The powerful imagery of the raised fist and the word "Thawra" resonates with individuals from various backgrounds who appreciate the spirit of activism and the fight for justice associated with the square.

The literature (see chapter 3) underscores that sites imbued with a history as intricate as that of Martyrs' Square possess the potential to serve as a means for tourists to forge connections with the local community. At first glance, the square's historical and political significance, its symbolic weight, and its role in the urban fabric of Beirut render it an appealing destination for visitors. A visit to the square should, ideally, offer tourists a chance to immerse themselves in the nation's history, bear witness to ongoing social movements, and engage with the vibrant local milieu. However, as the literature and interviews underscore, in the absence of investment in and awareness of the profound significance these spaces hold in collective memory, there is a risk of transforming these spaces into mere spectacles, attractive primarily to tourists seeking to insert themselves into moments of trauma as it is just a snapshot of a long and intricate history that tourists may not appreciate.

An analysis of online reviews of TripAdvisor show that the Martyrs' square is one of *the* places to visit on a trip to Beirut. Figure 11 conveys the perspective of a tourist visiting for the first time who sees this restoration as intentionally preserving the marks of carnage of the Civil War,

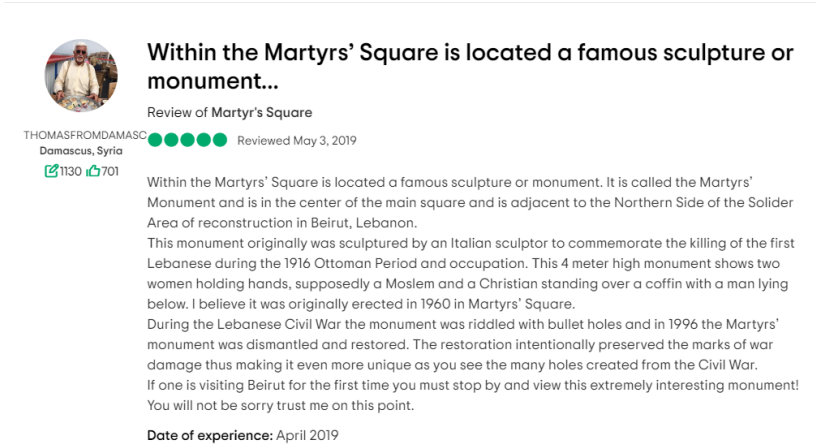

Figure 8. TripAdvisor review of the Martyrs' Square. Source: TripAdvisor

Throughout the interviews, I asked questions such as “How often do you go to Martyrs Square? For what purposes or activities?", "What are a few words or phrases that come to mind when you think about Martyrs Square?", "How would you describe Martyrs Square to someone unfamiliar with it? and "What sort of day-to-day activities do you associate with or see taking place in Martyrs Square? Who is there? What different uses do they make of space?". Through these discussions, the interviews lead to the same core issue: "What value do you see in the Martyrs' square?".

Those interviewed had much more mixed responses to the square’s pertinence than posting online by tourists. Martyrs' Square historically was referred to as the "heart" of Beirut, both literally, in the sense that it is found at the center of Beirut on the demarcation line, and symbolically. The interviews revealed that the symbolism behind the square was not understood in a straightforward manner.

Most of the professionals agreed that they do not interact with Martyrs' Square often, they differed as to their desire to do so. For some planners, Martyrs' Square was the most important public space in Beirut and should be a priority in planning. They saw this space serving as a symbol for the people of Beirut; they said that having it function, essentially, as a parking lot in a ghost town worsens the contentious divides in Beirut. Some saw the square as a showcase of the resilience and spirit of activism of Lebanese society and history, the meeting point for demonstrations and recent social movements.

The significance of having this space on the green line was a point that repeatedly came up in these discussions. Several respondents pointed out that Martyrs' Square is situated between neighborhoods and acts as a unifying factor for all of them. The space just "screams thawra", said one participant, a comment that likely resonates with all Beirut's residents, no matter their ethnic or religious group. Several planners emphasized how, since the October revolution in 2019, Martyrs' Square has been associated with its role in political activism, the de facto place for political protests and movements. They observed that these protests created palpable excitement and a sense of future possibility, one that constituted an incredibly rare opportunity to unite the Lebanese people beyond religious or political divides. They noted that the Square, prior to 2020, was the only recognized place where the collective frustration stemming from the long-standing failure of the state to fulfill its basic obligations as the could be voiced and where changed could happen.

However, having the square's main character as a manifestation for protests is a double-edged sword. For some respondents, the question was not how or when it should be revived, but if it even should be. One planner mentioned that they had a "love and hate relationship" with the square and on a larger level Lebanon too. The place had become associated with wider, mixed emotions towards Lebanon. One interviewee mentioned that if they could, they "would have erased the events that took place there from their head", a sentiment echoed in various ways by the younger generation of planners interviewed; it seemed a common feeling. Rather than hope, the Martyrs square stood as just another failure of the state rather than a beacon of hope. As one person opined, "Planners have given up on Martyrs' Square. Planners have given up on Lebanon". Such comments point to the complexity of urban professionals' attitudes towards the square.

For some, Martyrs' Square represented the face of political resistance against marginalization, discrimination, and exclusion; a catalyst for democracy and social justice; and a testament to Lebanese heritage. It even had the bullet holes to prove it! However, the change to the urban landscape of the square under Solidere was, for many of those interviewed, akin to the erasure of Lebanese history or memoricide; several interviewees mentioned how the destruction of this space is thought by locals to be a deliberate move by the political authorities and Solidere to squash the spirit and heart of Beirut. As suggested by John Nagle, such suspicions align with historical practice; urban design has been used historically by authorities to shape narratives of nationhood, identity, separatism, and the like. In this case, the configuration and vacancy of this public space sends a clear

message about who is deemed valuable by those making decisions regarding the built environment; as suggested by analysis of the urban form and the interview, it is not the people who are deemed of importance.

Theme 2: Generational Dissonance: Amnesia or Nostalgia?

The square has different meanings for different generations of residents. In interviews, this notion of a generational dissonance concerning the Martyrs' square arose several times. Due to the methodology, most of my interview subjects were professionals in industry aged 25 to about 40. This meant that the interview subjects had not experienced the pre-Civil War Martyrs' Square. Three of the younger professionals made a point of stressing that their parents did not share their views. As recounted by the respondents, their parents spoke of a Martyrs' Square that was full of life, activity, and programs for the public.

Those interviewed had a vastly different experience of the place. As young people during the war, they were in the square regularly; they described getting tear bombed, running away from police, getting shot at. In addition to the square being on the demarcation line, the square, for the respondents, was associated with violence and political suppression. With no positive associations to be made, they have very little reason to believe in the potential of Martyrs' Square to facilitate social cohesion.

John Nagle's theory of the twin forces of ethnicized memory and purposeful amnesia are useful in this regard. He contends that ethnic groups in societies in conflict try to use memory to claim land and show they were victims. During peace, the government might opt to forget the past, for example to change politics. Meanwhile, different ethnic groups fight over which and how memories should be valued. This forgetting and remembering also affects how cities are rebuilt after wars. This web of forgetting and remembering also helps create the intergenerational discord that was observed throughout the interviews.

Theme 3: The Future of Martyrs' Square: A Puzzle of Uncertainty

One consistent theme that emerged from my interviews was the prevailing uncertainty surrounding the future of Martyrs' Square. It became evident that most professionals, even those involved in the planning committees that had meticulously devised concepts for reinvigorating downtown Beirut, including the square, lacked insights into its current trajectory.

As the interviews progressed, I steered the conversation toward envisioning what lies ahead for Martyrs' Square. This turned out to be a topic of intriguing divergence, with participants expressing differing viewpoints on whether any alterations should be pursued. Interestingly, individuals who held personal connections to the square or had played roles in enhancing other public spaces in Beirut seemed hesitant to speculate on its future. Some even expanded their thoughts to encompass the broader context of public spaces in the city.

Their perspective rested on the belief that channeling efforts into public spaces might not effectively address the substantial political and financial challenges faced by the country. One participant even mentioned that there was no hope that “Old Beirut would [will] come back”.

However, a standout perspective emerged when one participant eagerly discussed the role of Martyrs' Square and on a larger scale, public spaces in Beirut. This participant asserted that revitalizing Martyrs' Square was integral to Beirut's recovery. Drawing an analogy to the central role of a family room or living room within a household, this individual emphasized the importance of communal spaces. “A vacant family room often signals underlying issues within the home, a lack of unity and dialogue.” “The same principle,” they contended, “applies to a city's public spaces. Without these spaces, there is a void in which meaningful discourse and dialogue cannot thrive, leaving no foundation upon which solutions can be constructed.” Their perspective conveyed a hope that Martyrs' Square could play an instrumental role in both preserving history and fostering the unity essential for Beirut's resurgence.

When asked about their visions for the square's future, respondents found it more straightforward to discuss what they wish to avoid rather than what they desire to see. Among the 12 conducted interviews, four professionals expressed worries about what lies ahead for Martyrs' Square. As previously mentioned, the square's current condition is largely characterized by parking lots. A participant highlighted that this trend is prevalent in Beirut, where public spaces, particularly those used for protests, are temporarily transformed into parking lots before being replaced with tall buildings by external investors. Many interviewees shared concerns that a similar fate could unfold for Martyrs' Square, potentially erasing the square's positive attributes, such as its role as a venue for protests and uprisings.

5. Visions and Plans for Martyrs' Square

This chapter provides insights into various visions of Martyrs' Square. A 2004 competition for redevelopment plans is the departure point, providing insight into possible alternatives to what was done to the square over the past two decades. Official plans and informal ideas, drawn from the webpages and advertisements of developers, government plans, and the interviews with professionals, then are explored.

Figure 9. Martyrs' Square with a billboard depicting high-rise tower developments.

An alternative past: the winning concept in the 2004 competition

In 2004, Solidere organized an international design competition for Martyrs' Square and the Grand Axis of Beirut in conformity with the Union of International Architects regulations. (Solidere, 2005). The design call was for projects "to reconnect and reposition the city in it's national and regional emerging role in a forward-looking post-war era" (Solidere, 2005) The competition garnered 122 designs from forty countries, which were showcased, as in a science fair, at the Beirut City Center Complex.

Solidere design guidelines, according to at least one researcher, resulted in many submissions that prioritized high-rises and finance over commemoration of the square's political and historical significance; the guidelines seemed to steer competition entries toward transforming the square into a reflection of Dubai's towering cityscape (Karizat, 2019). One entry, for example, suggested erecting a "Burj Square," with a colossal skyscraper superimposed on the Martyrs' Square (Solidere, 2005). Amidst the array of proposals, one design team emerged victorious: Atonis Noukakis and Partners

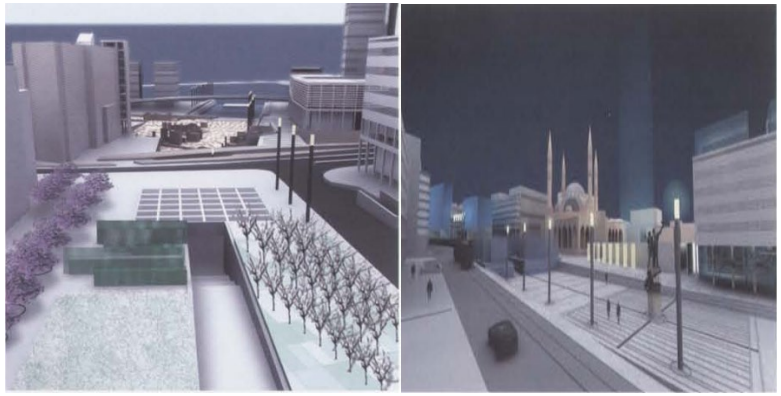

Figure 10. Winning demonstration; perspective and axonometric views.

As described on Solidere's webpage, the winning scheme delineated four distinct sections to the area, organizing them along a symbolically significant axis. It envisaged a fusion of commercial, retail, residential, and civic structures, woven together into a cohesive urban fabric around the square; a strong link to the waterfront, with the harbor incorporated in the site; and redirection of traffic was to one side of the square, allowing the rest of the square to integrate seamlessly into the surrounding urban environment. These elements were seen as fostering social engagement and public interactions, outcomes desired by the proposal's designers (Solidere, 2005). The proposal further defined the axis around the Martyrs' statue while allowing flexibility for larger events and the respectful inclusion of Rafic Hariri's burial grounds (Solidere, 2005).

Figure 11. Sea of parking lots surrounding the square with Hariri mosque in the background.

Although Solidere's webpage acknowledges the winning competition, and implies that it is part of plans for the area, development has not included any of the proposed design elements. As shown in Figures 13 and 14, the contrast between the proposed central axis and the design implemented by Solidere is striking. Solidere, as sole owner of the land, has retained exclusive authority over its design, choosing what and how to approach redevelopment.

Current alternatives

Other entities have recently put forward competing visions and plans for the square and its surroundings. For example, TPHD studio, a local design company in Beirut, collaborated with the "Beirut Urban Lab" and several Lebanese non-governmental organizations to develop a proposal for the rehabilitation of Beirut's port, railways, and northern coast (TPHD Studio, 2022). This project came about two years after the Beirut Port

explosion of August 4, 2020, which destroyed many of the city's neighborhoods. Working closely with urban archaeological expert Hadi Choueiry and other local heritage management professionals, the goal was to connect previously excavated sites to the creation of public and open spaces. The strategy was holistic, historical, and advocacy-oriented; it drew on historic data and input from diverse stakeholders, focused on restoring and enhancing neglected sites, and aimed to include such sites in newly-created public and open spaces. The area would thus form a direct connection to the "reclaimed" and redesigned first basin of the port (see Fig. 15). Importantly, the plan centered on a people-centered, place-specific, and heritage-led recovery as the key element in their regeneration project. However, like the 2004 winning design, plans led nowhere, and the project ultimately was scrapped.

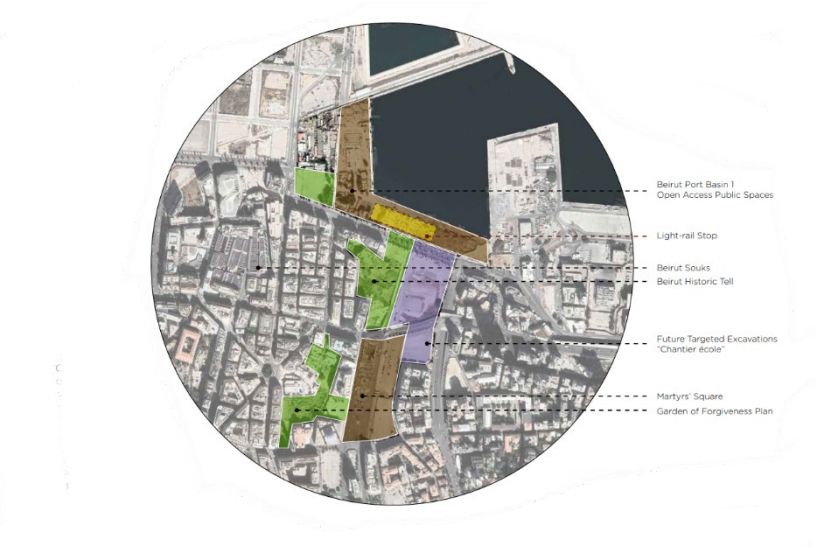

Figure 12. Concept plan highlighting Martyrs' Square, TPHD Studio

Current Developments and Plans

When asked about any enhancements undertaken by the city government or planners for the square, the response was unanimous: "The Martyrs' Square? Enhancements? None."

In fact, at present, there are no ongoing initiatives to improve the Martyrs' Square beyond the information available on Solidere's website. The square has its own allocated segment in Solidere's comprehensive urban plan for Beirut's city center and is known as Sector H, the Martyrs' Square Axis. The website states that the "mixed-use district extending along the highly symbolic civic space, aims to reconnect the city and enhance its relation with the New Waterfront."

While it does acknowledge the winning design of urban design competition, very little is mentioned as what exactly would be done to

the square to “reconnect the city”. Strikingly, parking facilities are mentioned as a key factor in the development as a car park under the property of the Martyrs’ square is planned as a project.

Participants’ visions

Participants in the interviews also had opportunities to articulate their visions for alternative designs and programming of Martyr’s Square. They could do so orally. In addition, I asked participants to draw, if they so wished, their vision for Martyrs' Square and a few sketches were submitted. Below are some of the sketches and demonstrations by participants.

Figure 13. Vision of the Martyrs' Square

When asked about their vision of the ideal Martyrs' Square, one interviewee expressed a captivating idea. They envisioned the square transformed into a new park that serves as a profound commemoration of the recent protests while symbolizing a source of renewed hope for the community. In their words:

“The Martyrs’ square is a gate to northern Beirut. It’s supposed to be busy. We’re not saying to restore exactly as it was, but at least show what it was. It had a very important value to everyone around so why destroy everything?”

This park, thoughtfully designed, would not only pay homage to the sacrifices made but also provide a serene urban oasis for citizens. As one participant mentioned, it is “supposed to be a place where people meet but also where people move”. Expanding upon the existing Martyrs’ Square, the vision included incorporating elements of play, along with well-placed seating areas and carefully crafted landscaping.

A key aspect emphasized was the exclusion of parking spaces, underlining a commitment to prioritizing the square’s purpose as a meaningful public space rather than accommodating vehicles. In addition, the interviewee highlighted the importance of creating seamless connections throughout the site, integrating pedestrian-friendly streets that encourage safe and convenient crossing. This comprehensive vision captures a blend of remembrance, optimism, and community engagement, ultimately reimagining Martyrs’ Square as a space of unity, reflection, and inspiration.

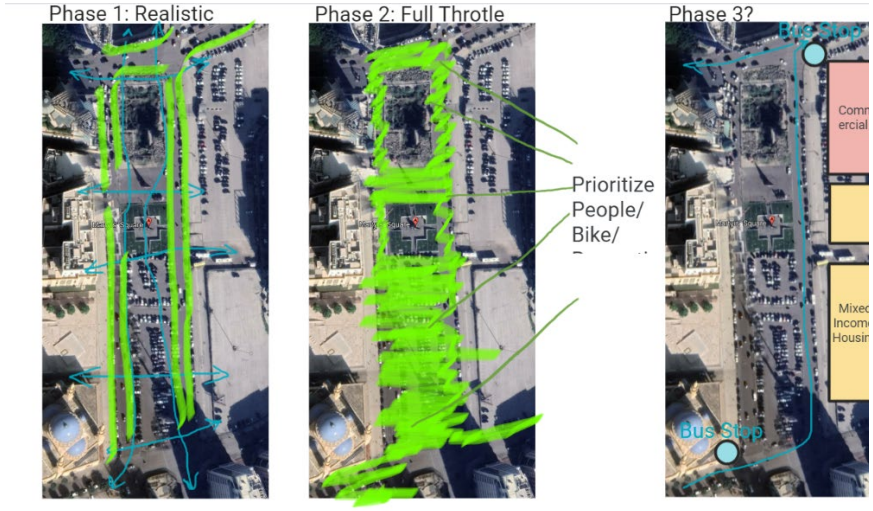

Figure 14. Vision of the square in addition to recommendations to adjacent neighborhoods.

A second vision put forth was the transformation of Martyrs' Square into a bustling transportation hub, a concept that extended beyond the square itself to encompass the revitalization of the surrounding neighborhood. This holistic vision encompassed reconstruction of the square and, intriguingly, complete rejuvenation of its neighboring areas. The proposed neighborhood transformation would involve the creation of a diverse range of housing options, catering to mixed-income groups; it would thereby foster a socially inclusive community, something severely lacking in the downtown Beirut of today.

At the heart of this vision was a dedication to incorporating abundant green spaces within the square itself. Upon further discussion, the participant mentioned that the revitalized square would be adorned with lush gardens, tranquil parks, and verdant pockets, providing residents and visitors alike with serene respites from the urban pace. These green spaces would enhance the aesthetic appeal of the area, offer much-needed breathing room in the midst of city life, and promote environmental sustainability. While not shown in the other sketches, this aspect of greenspace—in addition to broader connections to nature—was touched upon by most of the other participants; for example, some respondents mentioned to attractiveness of a visible connection to the sea, such as that in the plan by the TPHD Studio.

This intricate vision harmonized transportation needs, urban renewal, and socio-economic diversity, painting a picture of a dynamic, integrated urban landscape where Martyrs' Square and its environs serve as a vibrant nucleus of activity and cohesiveness.

Moving from vision to reality

There is no shortage of ideas about how to better design Martyrs' Square and its surroundings. Some of the propositions align closely with the criteria for Great Public Spaces outlined by PPS: places that are sociable, comfortable, aesthetically pleasing, and accessible. Other visions echo the concerns of writers on public spaces in divided societies, highlighting the importance of commemoration, heritage, and hope, or simply the possibilities afforded for diverse groups to interact. What seems missing, as shown above, is, first, an interest at Solidere in pursuing such alternatives. Second, and of equal import, government is largely absent from the process, with little vision, planning, implementation, or oversight.

6. Conclusion/Summary

Key findings from the interviews revealed several challenges of Martyrs' Square as a public space. First, it is inaccessible due to road networks that limit pedestrian movement. Second, its sociability is poor. It is not a destination for social interactions, with very few people observed in the square during the interviews. The absence of daily activities and programming has transformed the square from a hub to a passageway, diminishing its significance in urban life. Third, participants remarked that the square's design does not harmonize with the urban fabric, contributing to a fragmented urban morphology.

In considering Martyrs' Square as a public space in a divided society, three key themes emerge as integral to the discourse surrounding the square's past, present, and potential future.

First, the theme "A Symbol or Just a Landmark?" underscores the intricate balance between historical significance and functional urban space. The interviews highlight the square's dual role as a symbol of both national struggle and everyday urban life. While some participants emphasize the square's pivotal role in history, connecting it to poignant memories of the civil war, others express the desire for the square to transcend its past and cater to contemporary urban needs. This theme brings to the forefront the challenge of maintaining historical memory while adapting spaces to accommodate the evolving demands of the present.

The second theme, "Generational Dissonance: Amnesia or Nostalgia?" delves into the diverse perspectives held by different generations. The interviews reveal a poignant generational divide, with older interviewees often laden with memories of the square's historical importance during periods of conflict, contrasted by younger participants who may view the square more through the lens of a modern urban space. This divergence underscores how history and memory are not static, but rather evolving constructs shaped by personal experiences and generational shifts.

Lastly, the theme "The Future for the Martyrs' Square?" unravels the uncertainties surrounding the square's trajectory. Conversations with professionals highlight the challenge of envisioning a future for the square amidst political and economic turmoil. A recurring concern emerges over potential transformation into commercial developments or parking lots, thereby risking the erasure of the square's historical and communal significance. In the midst of this uncertainty, a poignant perspective emerges, emphasizing the role of public spaces as essential platforms for dialogue and unity in the city's recovery. These themes collectively paint a vivid portrait of Martyrs' Square as a microcosm of broader urban challenges – a space where history, identity, and urban renewal intersect.

Throughout this process, it becomes evident that the square's fate is intrinsically tied to the ongoing dialogue about Beirut's past, present, and future and that any attempts to reinvent the square must have a profound connection to its past. As Bollens famously said "...when building for the future in places like central Beirut, one must also negotiate the past." (Bollens, 2019). The documentation of the square's evolution, interviews, and review of alternative visions serve as a vital

reminder that each space carries within it a complex tapestry of narratives, aspirations, and challenges that require thoughtful consideration and inclusive engagement. In particular, navigating the square’s future is complicated by institutional barriers and shared interests between the state and Solidere that maintain the status quo. The 2004 competition, which showcased a winning vision emphasizing unity and commerce, ultimately diverged from its proposed design due to Solidere's authority over the area. Presently, there's a conspicuous absence of active initiatives to improve the square. The participants' visionary ideas highlight the potential for transformation, yet they confront barriers posed by institutional dynamics and vested interests.

The research has shown that Martyrs’ Square, while not accessible or usable the way a public space should be, is still deeply rooted in the collective memory and everyday lives of communities. Given that, prioritizing investment in public spaces such as the square becomes paramount in nation where sectarian divisions are widespread; such spaces can afford opportunities for interactions that can help alleviate tensions among communities of diverse sectarian backgrounds.

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