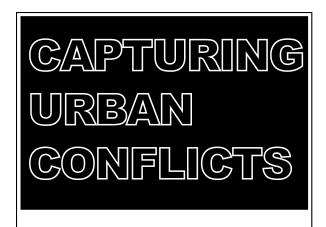


## Competing over Land and Image in Beirut

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CONFLICT IN CITIES AND THE CONTESTED STATE www.conflictincities.org











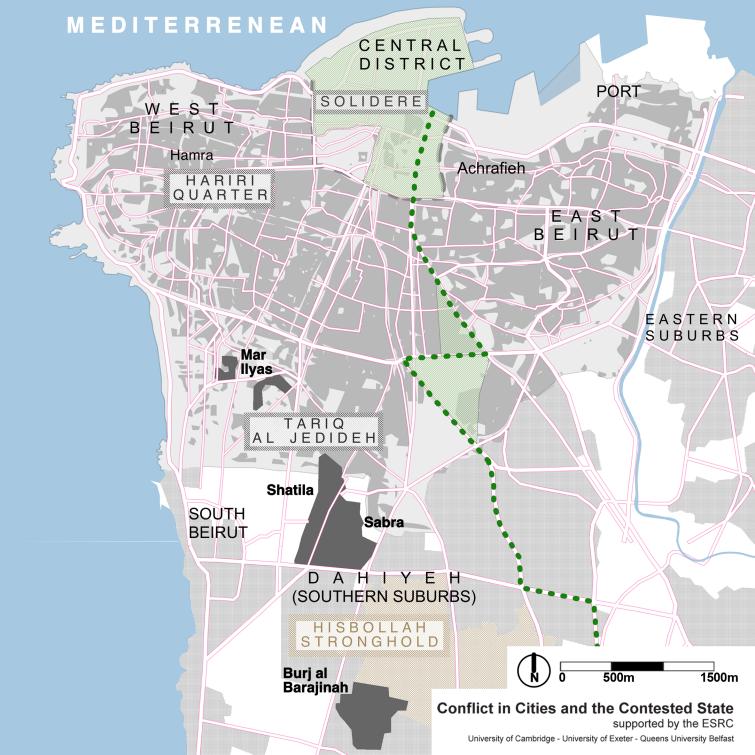


**Conflict in Cities: Europe and the Middle East** 

The large-scale destruction suffered during the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, can scarcely be noticed in 2011. Today, there is a wave of construction and new apartment blocks line the streets in Beirut's southern suburbs ("Dahiyeh"). What has impacted the built fabric most in the past 20 years has been the demolition of houses to make way for rapid real estate development. In the past few years, the rise of oil revenues and the financial crisis hitting European and US markets, has meant that Beirut is trying to absorb unprecedented levels of liquidity, with petrodollars and the diaspora bloating Lebanon's thriving banking sector. In turn, as there is little else the Lebanese economy produces, it is the tourism and real estate sectors that attract investors and buyers from the diaspora and beyond. The city is, now more than ever, a site of competition for land and aggressive speculation. Reminiscent of the years that preceded the 1975-1990 civil war, Beirut, on the one hand, has again become a Middle Eastern holiday resort and, on the other hand, embodies competing images of the city each of which is claiming their spaces. In this photo-essay, I would like to take you through the process of erasure, excavation, imagination, projection, and construction that can be seen in Beirut.

## Beirut KEY

Beirut District Border and Built-up Areas
Selected Main Roads
Former Demarcation Line, 1975-1990
Palestinian Refugee Camps (UNRWA)
Sunni Stronghold
Shia Stronghold
Suburban Built-up Areas
Area under Redevelopment



In the aftermath of the 2006 war with Israel, Hezbollah's leader, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, said that the neighbourhood would be

rebuilt to become 'better than it was before', embodying Hezbollah's

'society of resistance'.



Wa'ad, the 'pledge', is Hezbollah's project for the reconstruction of 245 buildings in Dahiyeh destroyed during the July 2006 war.



all of the buildings have been rebuilt and returned to their previous owners. In some parts, the inhabitants and the *Party of God* (Hezbollah) have reclaimed the streets.

Less than five years after the war, practically



The Cinema Vendôme in Mar Mikhael (East Beirut) being gutted and brought down to make way for a large commercial centre and highend apartments. Har-Properties, the developer, is owned by Fahd Hariri, the youngest son of Rafiq Hariri, the assassinated, former President of Lebanon. The dramatic insertion of new building heights and large footprints are breaking up one of the rare neighbourhoods containing pre-war urban fabric and accelerates the rapid gentrification of the area.



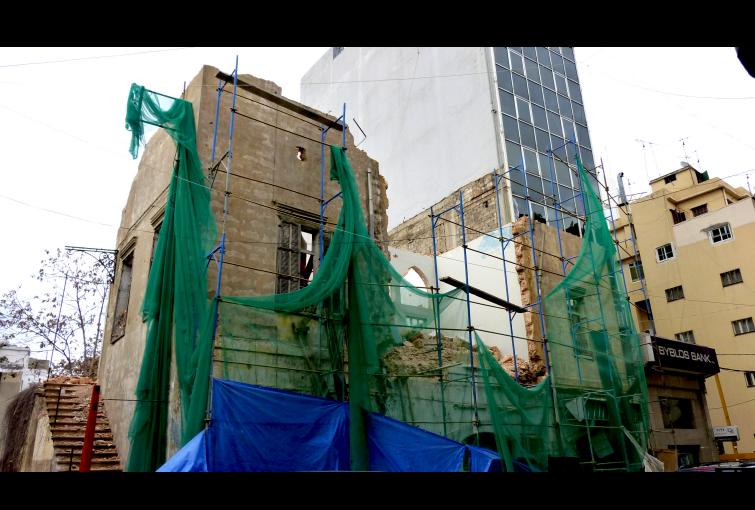
real estate boom and the changing planning rules have turned perfectly good houses, such as this one in Hamra (West Beirut) into obstacles to a quick return on investment.

The pressure of the



'The only listed buildings are those constructed before 1750 – because the law is based on French mandate legislation of 1933. In the United States, for example, there are laws that compensate landowners who are

1933. In the United States, for example, there are laws that compensate landowners who are encouraged to restore beautiful buildings; there are tax-breaks and transferrable heir-rights. Here, it's not in an owner's interest to save a building when he can make a million dollars by tearing it down.' (Maha Yahya, The Independent, 23 June 2001)



'Those construction sites, restricted to the public, made me feel as if I was entering a crime scene. Something had been destroyed, uprooted. I arrived at a particular moment where things seemed to be hanging as

harbingers of something about to happen, something of a rather explosive kind, something that one can not see or expect yet, but that I tried to document' (Rima Maroun, 'A ciel ouvert' <u>Project</u>,

www.rimamaroun.com)



'Own a piece of heaven'.
This is the site where the tallest tower in Beirut,
Sama Beirut, will come to hang over the remnants of a 'quartier à charactère traditionnel', as some parts of the city are called. It is a feeble attempt to promote the preservation of

neighbourhoods.

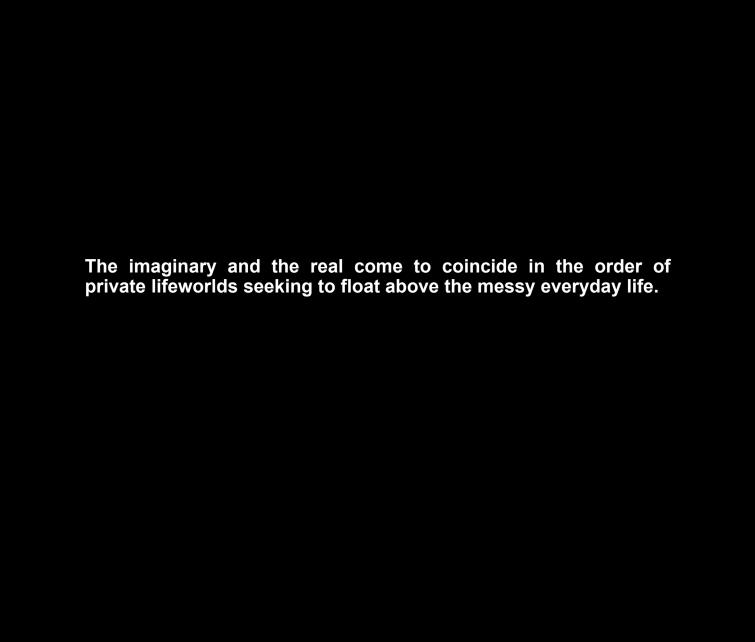
architectural unity of older



Beirut is inundated with advertisements for a city to come. The architectural renderings and graphic design of these projects remove them from the urban context, feeding the illusion of self-contained capsules, safe from harm; s a f e f r o m t h e

unpredictable public.







## GEMMAYZEH VILLAGE



landlords or bought and sold between speculators. Entire portions of Beirut are only seasonally occupied, if at all, hollowing out central

neighbourhoods.

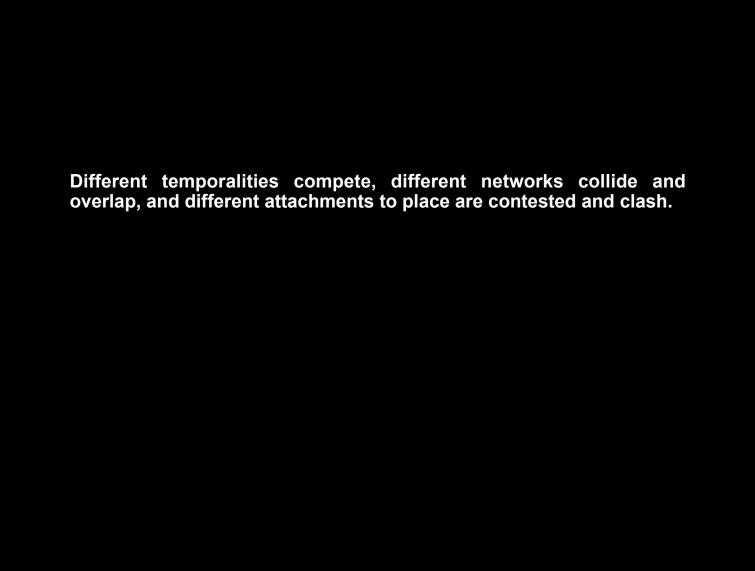
Many of these buildings and apartments are owned by absentee



landmarks, developers have made sure that by placing them in competition with one another they would eventually cancel each other out. By now, they have saturated the market for high-end residential real estate and are experiencing the first signs of a bubble bursting.

In the constant search for







are close up, they make for interference patterns, harder to read or predict. They are more than a city and a

'Where the two cities

city; that is elementary urban arithmetic. (Miéville China, 'The City and The City', 2009)



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