



## **Post-2006 reconstruction in Lebanon: a laboratory for new urban planning practices**

**Éric Verdeil, translated by Eric Rosencrantz**

**A review of:** Al-Harithy, Howayda (dir.). 2010. *Lessons in post-war reconstruction. Case studies from Lebanon in the aftermath of the 2006 war*. London: Routledge. 218 p.

*Modes of urban planning often develop at an accelerated pace during periods of reconstruction. Lebanon in the aftermath of the 2006 war is a case in point. This book is a collection of urban planners' and academics' assessments of their own efforts on the ground in Lebanon, where the government's abdication has allowed Hezbollah to become heavily entrenched locally.*

The past few years have provided a great many examples of urban reconstruction after natural disasters and man-made conflicts. These urban redevelopment operations are always exceptional periods, accelerating the pace of urban planning but also catalyzing major changes in urban forms and social practices – even as planners are obliged to seek ways to preserve existing cultural heritage. These various situations now form a corpus that has been growing since the post-war era, from Tokyo destroyed in 1923 to New Orleans flooded by Katrina and Sendai submerged by the recent tsunami. A new area of urban studies seems to be taking shape, as architectural historian Nezar AlSayyad notes in the book's preface. This decidedly interdisciplinary collection of articles touches on the history of architecture and town and country planning, urban studies, social movements and migration, as well as political analyses of post-war periods and the return to civil peace.

### **Lebanon, a laboratory for the study of reconstruction**

Regrettably, Lebanon looms large in this literature of post-war situations. The reconstruction of central Beirut in the 1990s has been the subject of a great many symposia, books and articles. *Lessons in post-war reconstruction* examines the latest round of rebuilding in the aftermath of the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. The conflict in Lebanon caused close to 1,200 civilian casualties and left a great many wounded and maimed, it destroyed 125,000 homes and very many facilities, and caused serious damage to the economy.

The primary object of the book is to furnish information about the reconstruction policies pursued and the debates they triggered, as well as to take stock of what has been achieved so far, a few years after the latest round of destruction. It is, as far as we know, the only published book that does so to date. Above and beyond this, in seeking to learn some lessons about reconstruction, the book prompts reflection on the evolution of urban planning responses to the destruction caused by war. More generally, it may be read as a critical approach to traditional top-down planning, particularly in largely undemocratic and/or emergency situations (see, for example, Sanyal 2005).

Reconstruction efforts are potentially exemplary (Roy 2009), particularly given the major role played by agents that represent “alternatives” to state agencies and their liberal modernist

certainties. Hezbollah, the leading alternative agent in this case, used reconstruction to pursue its “resistance” to Israel, but also to the Lebanese government, which was dominated at the time by the party’s political opponents.<sup>1</sup> The authorities, in consequence, kept mostly to the sidelines. Besides Hezbollah, the other forces involved in the reconstruction efforts included NGOs and teams of academics and local professionals. Another original aspect of the book, in fact, is that it displays that very diversity, presenting detached academic analyses side by side with engaged on-the-ground observations. The book’s eight chapters present studies of neighborhoods and cities under reconstruction alongside first-hand accounts of the authors’ (volunteer) involvement in the reconstruction effort. For the most part urban planners, architects and landscape architects teaching at the American University of Beirut, the academics pooled their efforts and enlisted their students to form a temporary interdisciplinary “Reconstruction Unit” within the AUB. Working together with local authorities and residents (though in fact sometimes working against them), they put forward cooperative plans and approaches to local reconstruction.

In the final analysis, what was innovative about the urban development approach to these reconstructions? How were they influenced by the involvement of NGOs, academics and professionals? The book does not venture a summary assessment. So we shall endeavor to answer these questions here, while emphasizing the sheer diversity of the case studies covered, both in terms of the prevailing context and the scale of reconstruction necessary, which makes it hard to come up with a single answer to these questions.

### **Three types of reconstruction project**

The case studies present contrasting views of three types of sites. Two chapters, one by Mona Fawaz and Mona Harb and the other by Hala Alamudin, concern the rebuilding of the neighborhood of Haret Hreik, in a southern suburb of Beirut. Home to roughly 30,000 people, but also to most of the Hezbollah institutions, it was massively destroyed by Israeli bombardments, with over 220 buildings razed to the ground. The orientation Hezbollah adopted very early on and imposed on other protagonists, including some of its followers tempted by other planning solutions, was to restore the *status quo ante*. The arguments advanced for this choice were reasons of rapidity and efficiency, as well as to avoid the protracted studies and thorny legal and property issues involved in a large-scale redevelopment project. It was also a matter of preserving the memory of the places in question and rehousing the residents in situ, as opposed to the approach taken by Solidere, the private company in charge of rebuilding central Beirut. The reconstruction of Haret Hreik was entrusted to Wa’ad (“the promise”), a department of the Hezbollah-affiliated Jihad al-Bina’a association.<sup>2</sup> Hezbollah succeeded in enlisting the services of a “consulting committee” made up of professional urban planners of every faith. There is no denying that this process did actually prove efficient: by now, five years after the war, most of the buildings have been rebuilt.

However, Mona Fawaz and Mona Harb stress the limitations of this approach.<sup>3</sup> It brooked no discussion, whether with the public institutions and professional organizations involved, such as the Lebanese Engineering Association, or with the local inhabitants, who were consulted only on matters of interior design. There was no effort to capitalize on the opportunity to improve collective space and alleviate some of the adverse effects of this neighborhood’s extreme density. Lastly, the reconstruction was carried out without any legal or regulatory framework (no building permits or master plan): as a result, the rebuilt homes are on shaky legal ground, which keeps the residents politically dependent on Hezbollah.

The second site studied, through the intersecting perspectives of Howayda Al-Harithy and Habib Debs, is the small town of Bint Jbeil in southern Lebanon. The Israeli army had come up against

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<sup>1</sup> i.e. the March 14<sup>th</sup> Coalition parties, headed by Saad Hariri, the son of the assassinated prime minister.

<sup>2</sup> See this organization’s website and its reconstruction efforts at <http://www.waad-rebuild.com/index.asp?lang=en>.

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion thereof, see Fawaz 2009 and Harb 2010.

unexpected resistance there and, during the last three days of the war, bombed it heavily from the air, severely damaging the historical center of the town in particular. The elected municipal officials, who belong to Hezbollah, initially opted for a *tabula rasa* makeover. They were catering to popular demand for modern, functional homes, and to the interests of the entrepreneurs hired to clear the ruins and paid by volume of rubble removed, as well as to those of residents keen on maximizing their compensation checks from the government (which paid less compensation for partial reconstruction). The academics then stepped in, particularly to preserve the old buildings that could be saved, advancing a twofold argument: the need to preserve the memory of those places for the residents and the idea that a wholesale modern makeover would basically be extending the destruction wrought by the Israelis. By mobilizing residents on a national and local scale and by working to persuade senior national-tier Hezbollah officials, they managed to bring some influence to bear on the guiding principles of reconstruction and to win over foreign investors (in this case Qataris), who are key players in the reconstruction of southern Lebanon. However, this preservation program does, in practice, run counter to the expectations of most locals, who do not share the same values.

The final three chapters of the book deal with the reconstruction mechanisms in two small villages (Aita al-Cha'ab and Qleileh). The outside rebuilders involved – a group of architecture students and young professionals brought together in an NGO – offered their services as technical mediators and facilitators, advising and assisting residents in a context of rampant wheeling and dealing, in which locals have little proficiency. Government action, which consisted in removing the rubble in bulk and allotting compensation in proportion to damage sustained, actually ended up amplifying the damage. The volunteers in these two villages, operating at an infra-urban level, were chiefly involved in housing construction and repairs. A landscape architecture project was also carried out in Qleileh, where the volunteers insisted on preserving the rural dimension of the village, as opposed to a rationale geared towards urbanization. For all intents and purposes, however, that seems to have remained an essentially academic exercise: at any rate, its coordination with the other NGOs on location and its impact on the ground are not clearly assessed in the corresponding chapter.

### **Resurgence of professional planners in the wake of state abdication**

In summary, the post-2006 reconstruction was carried out in a political context marked by heavy tension. The marginalized state confined its efforts to doling out compensation without exhibiting any will to regulate reconstruction operations. Furthermore, the state was circumvented by foreign funders from countries like Qatar (or by various international NGOs and agencies in other localities than those covered here). The abdication of the state, however, did not open up the decision-making processes: Hezbollah filled the vacuum, and with an authoritarian heavy hand at that. Then again, its approach to reconstruction was pragmatic, without any ideological blinkers or even doctrine, for that matter, and actually encouraged various planning orientations. The reconstruction of Haret Hreik, contrary to that of central Beirut in the 1990s, was carried out without recourse to planners in the free market, thanks to substantial subsidies from international funders and from the party itself (also using its own foreign funding circuits<sup>4</sup>). At other sites, however, free-market approaches, fueled by local aspirations to architectural modernity, had far-reaching effects, without any opposition from the party.

One important consequence of the government's disengagement, the political and planning implications of which are scarcely examined, is the suspension of the laws ordinarily governing urban planning, construction and even property. The places and neighborhoods that had been damaged were rebuilt by reference to their prior state, which in many cases was hardly known, unregistered and/or sometimes even illegal. So how will this suspension of the usual legal norms

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<sup>4</sup> Hezbollah's funding is highly opaque. It most probably comes from Iran, the Lebanese diaspora and various trafficking in Africa and Latin America.

affect the rights of residents?<sup>5</sup> Naturally, given the arbitrary, opaque mode of decision-making and a regime of widespread exemptions, the laws governing urban planning, along with those concerning property ownership, often appeared skewed towards the Lebanese elite (Krijnen and Fawaz 2010, Clerc-Huybrechts 2008). Still, the suspension of those laws has produced a precarious state of legal vagueness, first and foremost at municipal level, where urban planning is even less regulated than in the past. The rights of citizens are likely to be flouted by property transactions, but also by changes to their environment. In a country in which real estate constitutes one of the chief sources of enrichment and one of the preferred investments for monetary assets, this situation seems at the very least paradoxical. Doesn't the country need a law to regulate disputes and nascent feuds? It wouldn't be the first such law in Lebanon. Doesn't failing to enact such a law ultimately bolster the sway of Hezbollah, the sole "guarantor" and defender of rights – but at what price for the local population?

Thus, the reconstruction of the towns and villages of southern Lebanon and Haret Hreik can hardly be hailed as the epitome of a democratic, much less participatory, form of urban planning. And yet the assessment by the architects and urban planners from the American University of Beirut provides an interesting illustration of a fundamental change in urban cultures and particularly in that of professional planners, both in Lebanon and in culturally kindred countries. It is indeed remarkable that professionals should come out against a centralized expert approach and take up the role of intermediaries between residents and the authorities. A look at the history of urban planning in Lebanon shows that was not always the case (Verdeil 2010)! Their position is not without ambiguity: their militant efforts to protect the country's architectural heritage, for instance, are not wholly devoid of elitism. Intellectuals have a very hard time admitting the arguments of residents that run contrary to their ideals, such as the desire for a modern home: then again, that is how debate gets started.

The critique of Hezbollah's choices in Haret Hreik – in other words, the fight for a different conception of public spaces and for a truly deliberative approach to urban planning issues – should not obscure the impressive speed at which the buildings were physically rebuilt, permitting a return to a certain degree of urban normality. One wonders whether, paradoxically, this resumption of ordinary life might not enable the locals, now that their residential mobility has been restored, to "vote with their feet" – which would be another way for residents to contest Hezbollah's local political order.

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<sup>5</sup> In April, Lebanon saw a surge in illegal building that in some respects appears to have been a consequence of the vague legal situation that prevailed during post-2006 reconstruction. See Verdeil, Éric. 2011. "Violences et polémiques autour d'une poussée de la construction illégale au Lebanon". April 29, 2011. <http://rumor.hypotheses.org/1590>.

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