Square Four Public Garden acts as a gateway to the Central District of Beirut. Its composition revolves around the framing and highlighting of two ancient ficus trees that ‘have withstood the test of time and witnessed all that has passed before them’. A raised pool, lined with pebbles of marble, introduces a contemplative element, creating a sense of quiet refuge on a small site surrounded by buildings.
Samir Kassir Public Garden
Beirut, Lebanon

Architect
Vladimir Djurovic Landscape Architecture

Client
Solidere

Design
2002

Completed
2004
I. Introduction

Square Four (renamed Samir Kassir Square in 2006) is a small, more or less rectangular, public space that occupies a site of 815 square metres in the heart of the Beirut Central Business District (CBD). It is bordered by buildings on three sides and by a street on the fourth, or eastern, side. The square is defined by two large ficus, which are amongst the few mature trees in the area, and are large enough to shade most of the space.

A reflecting pool with water cascading over its edges marks the border between the street and Square Four. The pool is flanked on the west by a rectangular timber deck that also encircles the two ficus trees. In turn, the platform is bordered on the west by a solid stone bench that is about 20 metres long. The western side is defined by a bermed area that accommodates the downward slope of the site. This bermed area is planted with a ground cover of dwarf Natal plum (carissa macrocarpa), known for its dark evergreen leaves and for its white star-shaped flowers and red berries, which grow throughout the year.

Square Four provides a quiet place of refuge within the busy surrounding urban context. It is marked by the shade of the ficus trees, by the sound of the water cascading from the reflecting pool and by the carefully studied visual balance between three elements: the trees and the ground cover; the reflecting sheet of water, and the hard-scaped surfaces of stone and wood.

II. Contextual Information

A. Historical background

The garden is part of the CBD development project carried out by Solidere, the Lebanese Company for Development and Reconstruction. Solidere, Lebanon’s largest corporation, has been involved since the mid-1990s in developing this central area of Beirut, which was ravaged by the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). The company operates as a land and real-estate developer, as well as a property manager. The Lebanese government granted Solidere powers of eminent domain as well as a level of regulatory authority, subject to government controls such as the approval of the master plan by the relevant authorities, and the granting of construction permits by the Beirut municipality. Subsequently ownership of the vast majority of properties in the CBD was transferred to Solidere, and property owners were compensated with shares in the company. Solidere developed a masterplan for the CBD. It has implemented a number of the building projects in the area, and also has sold parcels of land on the condition that they are developed according to specific building and zoning regulations. New structures have been designed in the CBD by both Lebanese and internationally acclaimed architects (including Ricardo Bofill, Kohn Pedersen Fox, Steven Holl, Rafael Moneo, Jean Nouvel and Christian de Portzamparc).

The masterplan that Solidere developed for the CBD includes a number of public spaces, of which Square Four is one.
B. Climatic conditions

Beirut has a Mediterranean climate. It is relatively mild throughout the year, but tends to be rather cold in the winter and relatively hot and humid in the summer, with rainfall occurring primarily during the winter months and reaching over 800 millimetres per annum.

C. Site and surroundings

Square Four occupies a small plot of land that is framed by buildings on three sides and a street on the fourth. Pedestrian pathways on each side connect the square with the surrounding buildings. To the north is the an-Nahar newspaper and publishing house. To the west is the old Beirut Municipality building, which dates back to the early part of the twentieth century. The building is being rehabilitated and will be reoccupied by the Beirut Municipality upon completion. The building to the south, currently under construction, will serve as the headquarters for the National Bank of Kuwait, and will also include retail spaces as well as coffee shops (facing the square). Another new building, a future hotel, is under construction to the east. In the very near future, the site will therefore be completely surrounded by buildings, which will enhance its role as an open space within a built-up urban fabric.

D. Topography of the site

The site slopes in two directions. It slopes down from north to south, in line with the street, and also from east to west, as one moves away from the street.

III. Programme

A. History of the inception of the project

The programme for this project is a very simple one. As mentioned above, the master plan for the CBD designated this site as an open public space and the client, Solidere, did not have any specific programmatic requirements apart from that. Solidere initially considered cutting down the two large ficus trees because of their invasive root system and extensive shedding of leaves, but the architect dissuaded them. He correctly argued that these trees are amongst the few mature ones to survive in the area: they form the main visual focus of the square, have a powerful inherent sculptural quality, and are also an expression of the history and memory of the site.

B. How were the architects and specialists chosen?

The designer of the project, landscape architect Vladimir Djurovic\(^1\), has established himself as the primary landscape architect in Lebanon, and also has a significant presence outside the country, both regionally and internationally. It is therefore not surprising that Solidere commissioned him to design the space.

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\(^1\) Many people wonder how someone called Vladimir Djurovic could be Lebanese. Djurovic’s mother is Lebanese, his father a Serbian who settled in Lebanon over 40 years ago. Vladimir Djurovic was therefore born and raised in Lebanon, and Lebanon is his country and home.
C. General programme objectives

The objective was simply to create a public open space that would act as a refuge within the urban context that makes up the Beirut CBD.

IV. Description

A. Physical data

The project is anchored by the two large, sculptural ficus trees. Its eastern edge is flanked by the reflecting-cascading pool. The area to the west of the pool, where the two trees are located, is covered with a raised wooden deck made of Burma teak planks. The use of this raised wooden deck serves a number of purposes. It separates the floor from the root system of the ficus, which is aggressive and can break on-grade pavements made of concrete or stone. It also protects the trees. The more usual practice of adding layers of earth to the original ground level to cover the root system and distance it from the pavement carries the risk of suffocating the trees and harming their long-term health. In addition, the use of a raised deck created space underneath for the installation of a mechanical room to house the pumps and filters for the reflecting pool. The mechanical room is accessed through a trap door located in the deck.

In turn, the raised deck is bordered along the west by a 20-metre-long stone bench. From the bench, a berm slopes downwards to connect to the level of the western side of the park. The bermmed area is planted with a ground cover of dwarf Natal plum, which is a water-conserving plant. Also, a thin strip of blue verbena, another water-conserving plant, is located between the pool and the sidewalk along the eastern edge of the site.

B. Landscaping

The designer had to deal with a relatively small plot that slopes down in two directions, from east to west and from north to south. In addition, the site includes two large sculptural trees. He masterfully dealt with these givens. The trees function as a visual and functional anchor for the design. They help define its identity and also provide it with the much-needed element of shade. He also used a planted berm to address the slope of the site. Since the site is relatively small, he emphasised the creation of an intimate and contemplative space, with the reflecting-cascading pool providing an element of separation from the busy street flanking the site from the east. The sound of the water cascading over the pool’s grooved edges provides a soothing auditory ambience. The reflecting water surface of the pool, which covers an area of about 200 square metres, mirrors part of the surroundings, making the site feel larger than its 815 square metres.

C. Structure, materials, technology

Vladimir Djurovic generally is known for his focus on a limited palette of materials in each one of his designs. He emphasises hard-scaping (primarily stone), and accentuates the hard surfaces with plant materials. In the case of Square Four, stone is used for the pool, the bench and the paving of the site. More specifically, local Kour limestone is used for the floor
paving, the steps and the bench. The stone used for the sides of the pool is an imported Italian Bardelio stone, as no local stone could be found with the requisite characteristics of colour and reflectivity. Local basalt pebbles are used for the interior of the pool. As mentioned above, Burma teak planks are used for paving the deck underneath the ficus.

Djurovic’s designs are meticulously worked out. In addition to his concern for issues of visual impact, his detailing emphasises durability. For example, he prefers using solid stone blocks for stairs, rather than a reinforced concrete skeleton sheathed with a layer of paving. This allows the stairs to withstand extensive wear and tear, in contrast to paving layers, where the risers and treads are susceptible to loosening and deterioration as a result of use and erosion. Djurovic rightly argues that his solution, although more expensive in the short term, is more cost-effective in terms of long-term durability.

D. Origin of technology, materials, labour force, professionals

Some materials are imported, including the Burma teak used for the deck and the Bardelio stone used for the pool. The wood was chosen specifically for its durability, the stone for its grey colour and good reflective quality. The rest of the stone used for the project is locally quarried. The main feature of the site, the two ficus trees, have been there for many decades. All of those involved in the realisation of the project are from Lebanon, including the designer, contractor and labour force.

V. Construction schedule and costs

A. History of project design

The project was commissioned and designed in 2002. Construction was initiated during the same year and completed in 2004.

B. Total costs and main source of financing

The project cost USD 322,000, including the design and consulting fees for the various professionals involved, but excluding the cost of the land. All costs were covered by Solidere. This translates to a cost of about USD 395 per square metre.

C. Comparative costs

The work of Vladimir Djurovic is known to be expensive. However, it is meticulously detailed and highly durable. In any case, he was working with a pre-set budget of USD 400 per square metre, which is generous by Lebanon standards.

D. Maintenance costs

Solidere has its own in-house maintenance crew that is responsible for the upkeep of the public spaces of the CBD. Square Four is one of these spaces. Maintenance includes ensuring that the pumps and water filters for the reflecting-cascading pool are functioning properly, and caring for the strip of verbena flowers along the sidewalk (which are grown in Solidere’s
nurseries) and the dwarf Natal plum that covers the bermed area. The garden also has an intricate colour lighting system that creates continuous subtle changes in the illumination of the trees for a period of time after sunset. Such a system of course needs maintenance, which is provided by Solidere’s maintenance crew. Solidere estimates that about USD 900 a month goes into the maintenance and irrigation of the space.

*E. Ongoing costs*

Solidere spends about USD 500 a month for a security guard to monitor the space from the early morning until 1 am, to protect it from vandalism. The CBD has also been the setting for political demonstrations over the past few months, requiring an added level of protection for the site.

VI. Technical Assessment

*A. Functional assessment*

The space seems to be very popular amongst those who work in or visit that part of the CBD. One regularly finds people sitting contemplatively on the long stone bench; many also come to the garden to read or find some peace and quiet. The square is especially popular with the staff of an-Nahar, who are based in the building on its northern edge.

One example of how positively the garden is viewed in Lebanon relates to the June 2005 assassination of the popular intellectual and an-Nahar columnist Samir Kassir. His widow, the television talk-show host Gizelle Khoury, asked that Square Four be renamed after him, since he very much liked the space and used to spend time there. The garden was officially renamed Samir Kassir Square, and subsequently acquired an over-sized statue of Kassir sitting on the stone bench. However, this is going to be removed and replaced with another statue of a more appropriate scale.

In addition, when the former Lebanese Prime Minister and businessman Rafic al-Hariri (who was also the major force behind the establishing of Solidere) was assassinated in 2005, a video celebrating his life was filmed in the square.

When Gebran Tueni, the former editor and publisher of an-Nahar, was also assassinated in December 2005, there were calls to name the square after him, as he too had been very fond of the space. Since the square had already been claimed for Samir Kassir, a new space across the street, in front of the hotel that is currently under construction, will be dedicated to Gebran Tueni.

*B. Climatic performance*

The large ficus trees and the pool create a very pleasant, cool and shaded micro-climate within the centre of Beirut, offsetting the heat of the summer months.
C. **Response to treatment of water and rainfall**

The designs of Vladimir Djurovic are very well detailed and effectively address issues such as water drainage.

D. **Choice of materials, level of technology**

Stone, widely available and widely used in Lebanon, is the main building material for the project. The Burma teak used for the deck is imported, but was chosen for its durability. Most of the plants used for the project are water-conserving. The ficus trees are by now mature and do not require any irrigation.

The project includes the necessary equipment for the reflecting-cascading pool, such as pumps and filters. It also includes a lighting system for the trees, which is programmed to change colour. All these are readily available in the market and relatively easy to maintain.

E. **Ageing and maintenance**

Solidere generally follows up very effectively on the maintenance and upkeep of its properties, and this project is no exception. Also, the use of materials and their detailing does help to ensure a high level of durability. As a result, the project is ageing very well – an accomplishment, considering that it is a public space subjected to high levels of use.

F. **Design features**

The project provides a space of greenery, shade and calm within a busy urban setting. Its effectiveness is becoming increasingly apparent as the buildings around the site are being completed and the square is emerging more as an open space.

G. **Durability and longtime viability of the project**

Regarding the issue of durability, see above. Regarding the issue of viability, having such public open spaces is imperative for the sustainability of cities. City-dwellers need access to spaces that provide a refuge from the pace of urban life. The square is clearly being appreciated by its users, and Solidere is providing the necessary maintenance and upkeep.

VII. **Users**

A. **Description of those who use or benefit from the project**

The space is public, and therefore open to all. It is used by those who work or reside in that part of the Beirut CBD. The Beirut CBD is also a destination for people from other parts of Beirut and Lebanon, as well as foreign tourists, who come to visit its shops and restaurants, or simply to stroll through. Many people therefore pass the site and a good number of them are attracted to go into it.
B. **Response to project by clients, users, community**

It seems to be well received by the architectural community, and Vladimir Djurovic’s work generally is well respected.

C. **What is the popular reaction to the project?**

The project seems to be very popular, attracting people either by its innate allure or by its provision of a calm and contemplative space. Also of importance is its connection with the lives of three important Lebanese public figures after each had been assassinated. In this sense, the space has emerged as a place of national significance. It was renamed after Samir Kassir; a video about the life of Rafic al-Hariri was filmed in it; and there were also calls to name it after Gebran Tueni. Such an appropriation is an indication that it is a positively perceived public space.

VIII. **Project Personnel**

One of course needs to acknowledge the designer, Vladimir Djurovic. The role of the client, Solidere, is also very important. Not only did Solidere commission the project; it also provided a decent budget, listened to Djurovic when he recommended preserving the two figus trees, and gave him considerable freedom in developing his design. It then executed the design in accordance with his specifications and provided the site with the necessary maintenance and upkeep.

IX. **Bibliography**

The work of Vladimir Djurovic is now widely published in design magazines. One example is: Sadik, Mira: ‘*Global Perspective: Vladimir Djurovic Landscape Architecture*’, Hinge 126 (January 2006): 74 -77.

Mohammad Al-Asad
April 2007
Site plan

Eastern elevation
Bird’s-eye view of site from the east.

Street-level view of site from the east.
View of reflecting pool from the northwest.

View of reflecting pool from the north.
View of reflecting pool from the south showing stairs leading to wooden deck area.

Detail of grooved walls of reflecting pool.
View of southern part of site.

View of reflecting pool from the northeast.
View of reflecting pool from the southeast.

View of site from the northwest.
View of site looking south.

View of garden looking north.
Detail of ficus tree trunk surrounded by a strip containing river-run rocks and by wooden deck.

View of garden looking north from stair leading to wooden deck.
Square Four

Weygand Street
Beirut, Lebanon

Architects: Vladimir Djurovic Landscape Architecture
Clients: Solidere

Commission: 2002
Design: 2002 - 2002
Construction: 2002 - 2004
Occupancy: 2004

Site: 815 m²
Ground Floor: n.a.
Total Floor: 815 m²
Costs: US$ 322'170

Programme: Square Four Public Garden acts as a gateway to the Central District of Beirut. Its composition revolves around the framing and highlighting of two ancient ficus trees that ‘have withstood the test of time and witnessed all that has passed before them’. A raised pool, lined with pebbles of marble, introduces a contemplative element, creating a sense of quiet refuge on a small site surrounded by buildings.

Given its location in the recently reconstructed Beirut Central District, Square Four acts as a prominent gateway, welcoming people to the heart of this reborn city. The challenge of this project was to create a quiet refuge on a limited piece of land surrounded by buildings, while addressing the prominent street frontage that it occupies. In essence, to become a small escape dedicated to the city and its people.

Inspired by the existence of historic Ficus trees that have withstood the test of time and witnessed all that has passed before them, the concept begins to unfold. The composition revolves around framing and highlighting these sculptural trees, which embrace and protect this public space. A raised water mirror flanking the street, physically marking and visually expanding the space; a 20-meter solid stone bench facing the water, a long wooden deck encircling the trees and adding warmth, are the main elements of the space.
Endless reflections, soothing sounds of cascading water, subtle lighting and greenery that frame the entire composition, provides people with an intimate space in which, even for a moment, one can be in the middle of it all, yet at the same time escape. A place to sit for a while, reflect, contemplate, and rejuvenate.
9. Cascading water detail 10. The four trees and water mirror mark the entrance to the newly renovated city center
ARCHITECT’S RECORD
2007 AWARD CYCLE

1. IDENTIFICATION

Project Title: Square Four Public Garden
Street Address: Weygard Street
City: Beirut
Country: Lebanon

II. PERSONS RESPONSIBLE:

A. Architect/Planner

Name: Vladimir Djurovic Landscape Architecture
Mailing address: Rizk Plaza
City: Bourj Hammoud
Country: Lebanon
Facsimile: 00 961 4 862 462
Principal Designer: Vladimir Djurovic

B. Client

Name: Solidere (Société Libanaise de Développement et Reconstruction)
Mailing address: P.O. Box 11 9413, Beirut Central District
City: Beirut
Country: Lebanon
Facsimile: 00 961 1 980 651 / 61

C. Project Affiliates/Consultants

Please list those involved in the project and indicate their roles and areas of responsibility (e.g., engineers, contractors, economists, master craftsmen, other architects, clients, etc.). Please cite addresses and telephone numbers separately.

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III. TIMETABLE
(Please specify year and month)

Commission: July 10, 2002

Design Commencement: July 15, 2002
Completion: October 2, 2002

Construction Commencement: November 24, 2002
Completion: May 7, 2004

Occupancy: May 15, 2004

Remarks:

IV. AREAS AND SURFACES
(Please specify in square metres)

Total size area
Ground floor area
Total combined floor area

Remarks:

Total Site: 815m²

V. ECONOMICS
(Please specify the amounts in local currency and provide the equivalent in US dollars. Specify the date and the rate of exchange in US dollars at the time.)

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A. Cost of land

B. Analysis of actual costs

1. Infrastructure: LB 117,545,805.00
   $77,974.00
   1$ = 1,607.50LB
   July 15, 2002

2. Labour: LB 80,521,137.50
   $50,291.00
   1$ = 1,607.50LB
   July 15, 2002

3. Materials: LB 242,335.00
   $149,174.00
   1$ = 1,607.50LB
   Jan 7, 2002

4. Landscaping: LB 25,237,057.50
   $16,341.00
   1$ = 1,607.50LB
   Apr 25, 2002

5. Professional fees: LB 45,225,000.00
   $28,000.00
   1$ = 1,607.50LB
   July 10, 2002

6. Other

Total actual costs (Without land): LB 465,071,275.00
   $292,173.00
   1$ = 1,607.50LB
   May 7, 2004

Actual cost (Per square meter): LB 585,914.60
   $385.30
   1$ = 1,607.50LB
   May 7, 2004

Remarks:
VI. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Given its location in the recently reconstructed Beirut Central District, Square Four acts as a prominent gateway, welcoming people to the heart of this reborn city. The challenge of this project was to create a quiet refuge on a limited piece of land surrounded by buildings, while addressing the prominent street frontage that it occupies. In essence, to become a small escape dedicated to the city and its people.

Inspired by the existence of historic fig trees that have withstood the test of time and witnessed all that has passed before them, the concept begins to unfold. The composition revolves around framing and highlighting these sculptural trees, which embrace and protect this public space. A raised water mirror flanking the street, physically marking and visually expanding the space, a 20-meter solid stone bench facing the water, a long wooden deck encircling the trees and adding warmth, are the main elements of the space.

Endless reflections, soothing sounds of cascading water, subtle lighting and greenery that frame the entire composition, provides people with an intimate space in which, even for a moment, one can be in the middle of it all, yet at the same time escape. A place to sit for a while, reflect, contemplate, and rejuvenate.

Over two years later, the garden has established itself as a landmark in the historic city center. Due to its success and significance, the space is being considered for becoming a memorial garden for Samir Kassir, a recent martyr remembered for his fight for Lebanon’s freedom.

VII. MATERIALS, STRUCTURE AND CONSTRUCTION

Three finishing materials were used throughout the project:

Local stone ‘Kour’ for all flooring and walls
Bardiglio marble and Bardiglio marble pebbles for pool
Teak Burma wood for deck

Concrete was used as structural material
VIII. PROJECT SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPACT

1. Provides a space that allows reflection on its country's history, diversity, and rebirth.

2. Contributes to the city at an urban scale, as well as to the individual at an intimate scale.

3. Provides a valuable refuge in the middle of the city.

4. Shows how simplicity in design and well-crafted execution leave behind a sense of presence.

Please note: The submission of the Record is a prerequisite to candidacy for the Award. All information contained in and submitted with the Record will be kept strictly confidential until announcement of the Award is made. Subsequently, such material may be made available by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture and you hereby grant the Aga Khan Award for Architecture a non-exclusive licence for the duration of the legal term of copyright (and all rights in the nature of copyright) in the Material submitted to reproduce the Material or license the reproduction of the same throughout the world.

Name (please print)    Vladimir Djurovic

Signature

Date    Nov. 12, 08


**Document C**

**MATERIALS IDENTIFICATION FORM**

Provide a full list of all material being submitted

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<td>The stone bench in the shade of the trees</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>As night overcomes the city, the space transforms itself into an ever-changing sequence of light and reflections</td>
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<td>Ficus trees springing from the deck</td>
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<td>Tree edge detail</td>
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<td>Cascading water detail</td>
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