

A LETTER FROM BEIRUT

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Beirut or Berytus of classical times, meaning the city of many wells, has been inhabited probably since 700 B.C when it was a small Phoenician port city.

Living through 2700 years, the city has been demolished and reconstructed several times. The most recent reconstruction is after the end of the 17-year civil war that engulfed the country from 1975 until 1992. The city, as if a symbol of the war that torn up the country, was divided in half: West Beirut, mainly Moslem and East Beirut mainly Christian. The center, a raging battlefield, became a no man's land.

One of the most important and urgent tasks of reconstruction therefore was the rebuilding of this heart of the city where people of all backgrounds met. The city center of Beirut was a main transport and commercial node. Taxi and bus terminals connected the city to the rest of the country. The main souks, where also found there as well as offices and shop. Commerce does not differentiate between sects gender or color

To enable the great task of reconstruction to happen quickly , a private real estate company was set up in partnership with the government, known as Solidere . (Societe Libanise pour le Developpement et la Reconstruction du Center Ville de Beyrouth).

Individual land owners and tenants where given shares in that company according to the proportion of their property. The way this company was setup and the issues of ownership and control raised a lot of controversy. The pros and cons of private company owning the center of the city are many but there is no doubt that the company created control over the largest and most important development and stopped individuals building in a chaotic fashion. However claims of unfair compensation from the owners are rife.

However the main reason given behind this method of reconstructing the city center was speed. We needed to be ready to be ready for when peace came. A lot of beautiful buildings from the early 20th century until the forties.ie from the late Ottoman and French mandate periods when destroyed because renovating them was seen as too slow and costly much to the dismay of local architects and intellectuals who knew the real value and importance of these buildings.

Well, as part of the new master plan, under every new development there must be car parking areas.

When the developers came to excavate the cleared lots, they started finding archeological remains some of which date back to the Phoenician city .

It is a law in Lebanon that whenever archeology is found construction must stop and the department of Antiquity and the UNESCO take over for at least six months to investigate and decide on the importance of the find and hence the procedure to be followed.

Yes, as the private developers were rushing to rebuild the city for maximum gain, ...the city hit back. It is as if «Berytus» rose like a grand lady to say “No... you cannot rush me... I have been here long before you and I shall take my own time”.

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