Sacred Spaces, Shared Healing:Architectual

Restoration

and Community Reconciliation in Lebanon

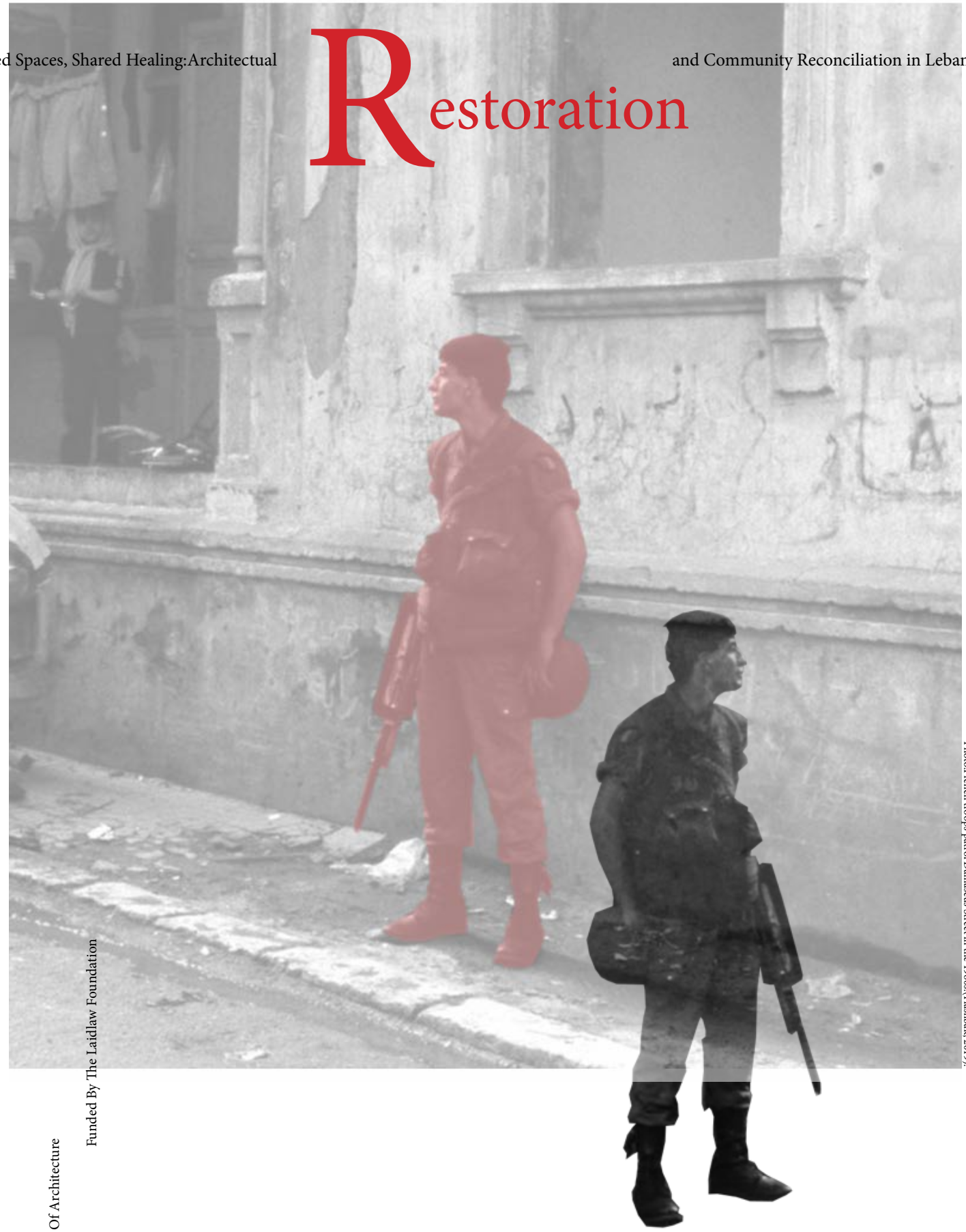

Photo:French troops patrol Damascus Street in the 1980s.(Flashbak, 2019).

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Photo. L'Ensemble d'Arcy playing on the demarcation line, 1980s (Flashback, 2019).

Figure Vintage street scene in Beirut, original source unknown; author's edited version.

Figure Graffiti on a statue in Beirut's Martyrs Square. Scott Peterson/Getty Images; original source and date are given as 'Lebanese Scrape By With Daily Life Despite Economic Meltdown And Multiple Crises' August 30, 2023.

I am profoundly grateful for the scholarship that enabled this research. It has provided me with the freedom to immerse myself fully in a project that has deeply shaped my academic path and personal outlook. This opportunity has not only expanded my understanding of Lebanon's history but also affirmed the importance of pursuing work that bridges memory, architecture, and reconciliation.

Supervised by Ivan Chan, Department of Bartlett School Of Architecture

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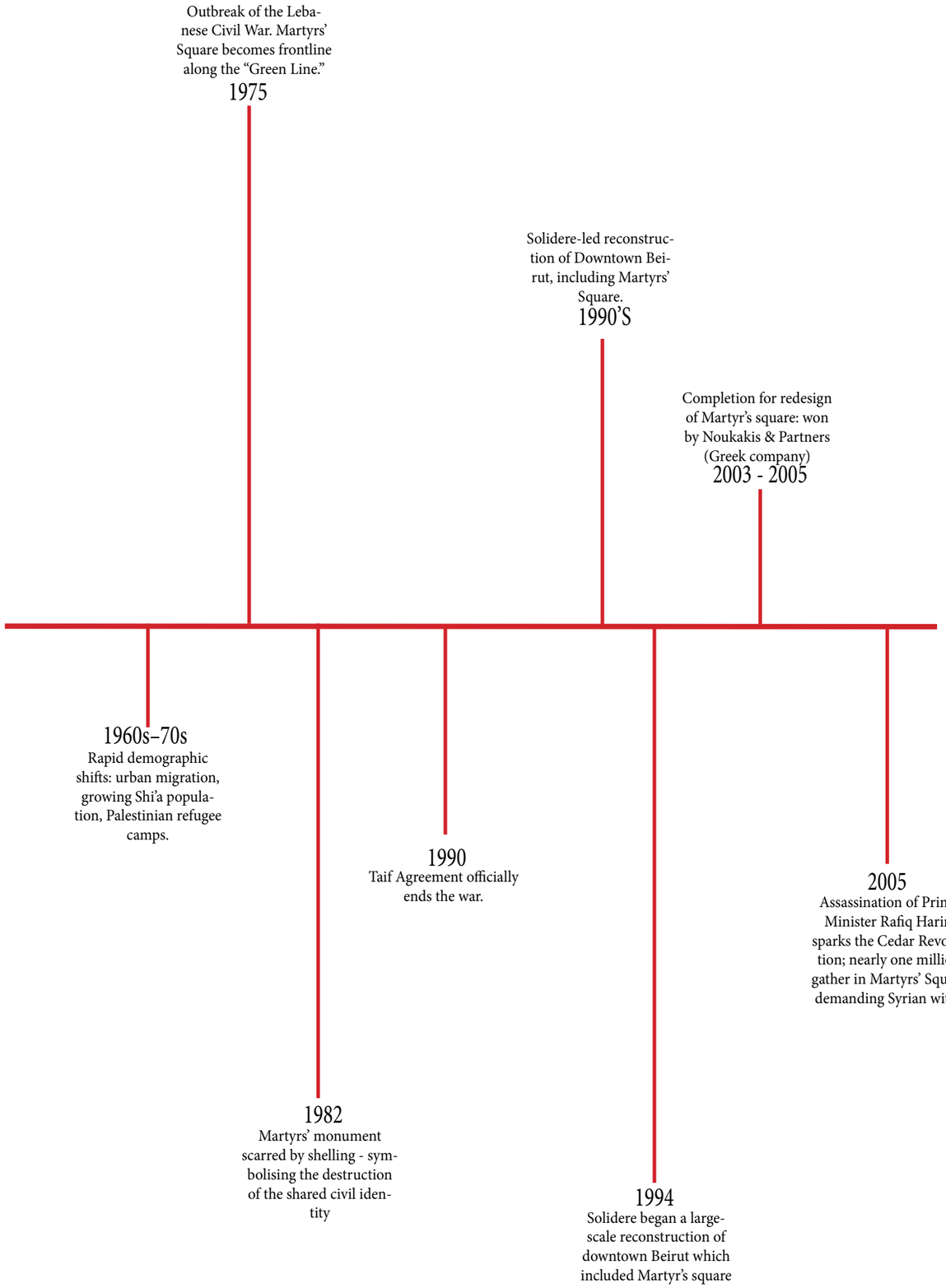


This paper explores how the restoration of religious buildings in post-civil war Lebanon shaped processes of reconciliation and societal healing. It takes as its starting point Martyrs' Square (Sahat el Chouhada), once a bustling civic space in downtown Beirut that became a frontline dividing East and West Beirut during the civil war (1975–1990) (Sawalha, 2010) Amidst the rubble, two sacred structures endured: the St. George Maronite Cathedral, later reconstructed as a symbol of tradition and continuity, and a modest Sunni prayer house that was replaced by the monumental Mohammad Al-Amin Mosque, projecting a new vision for the city.

The story of these restorations reflects Lebanon's broader sectarian dynamics. The Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims, Shi'a Muslims, and Druze communities, whose political and economic imbalances contributed to the outbreak of war, found themselves re-negotiating space and identity through the reconstruction of their sacred sites.

ABSTRACT

Photo:Beirut Airport 1982, 1980s (Flashback, 2019).

Methodologically; this research adopts a descriptive and exploratory approach, drawing on literature, archival sources, visual material, and spatial analysis of Martyrs' Square. It examines whether restoring religious architecture created neutral civic ground for diverse communities, or whether it reinforced existing sectarian divisions.

The findings suggest that while restoration projects did symbolise resilience and enabled a degree of shared identity, they also exposed enduring inequalities — particularly in the imbalance between the cathedral and the mosque. Religious architecture thus emerges as a powerful but contested tool of reconciliation in Lebanon's post-war recovery.

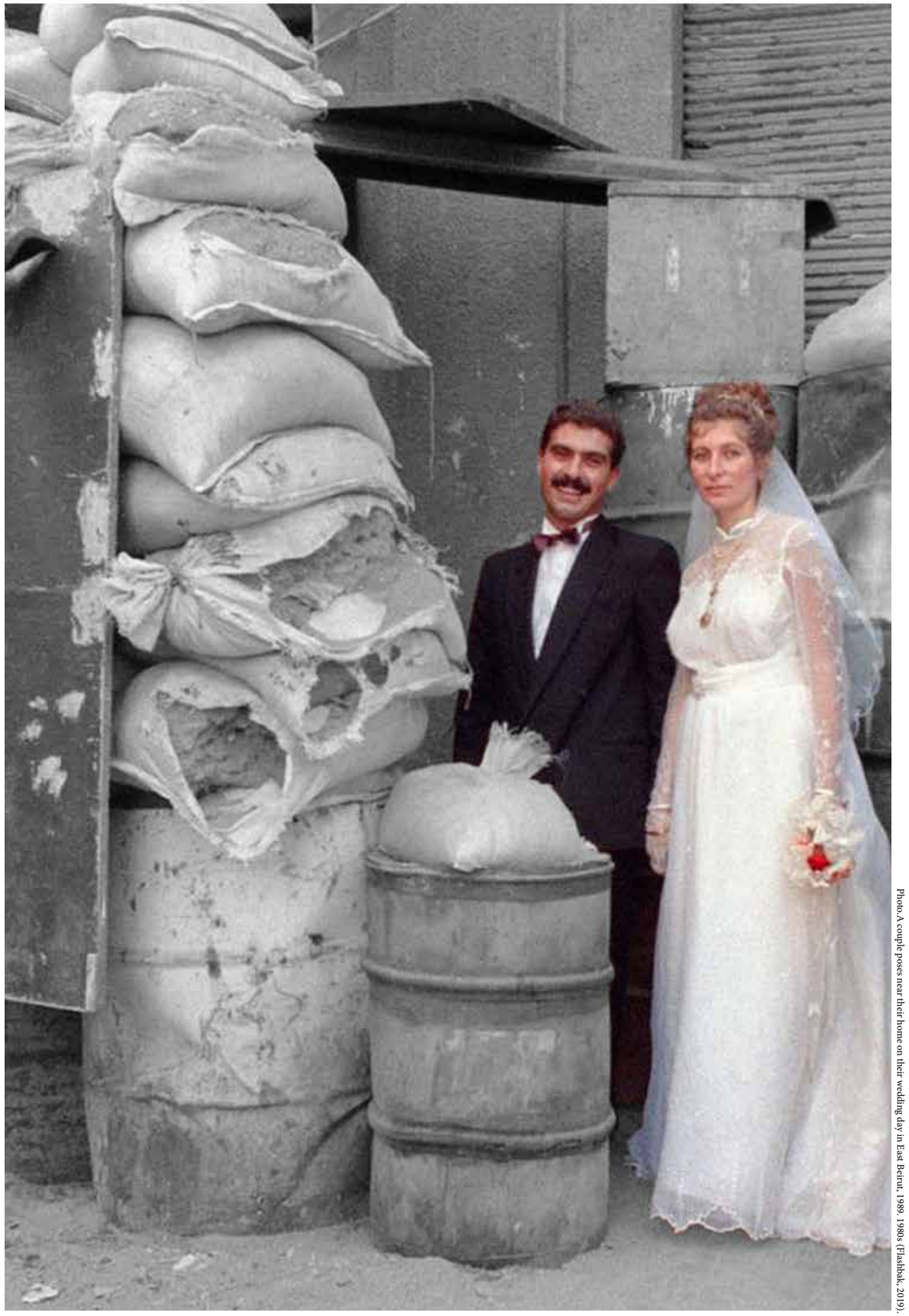


Photo: A couple poses near their home on their wedding day in East Beirut, 1989. 1980s (Flashback, 2019).

Supporting my title, my paper explores how rebuilding and restoring religious buildings in Lebanon can contribute to emotional recovery and social cohesion– with Lebanon being a country whose past is complex and multifaceted – I found the simple act of communities attending their frequent religious events starkly ordinary amidst the country's turmoil. However, it's these regular events; attending cathedral services and hearing the call to prayer, I believe were the initial steps towards collective healing.

While this paper seeks to understand whether the restoration of religious buildings contributed to Lebanon's post-war recovery, it also asks whether the country's healing was, from the outset, bound to its complex religious dynamics. As my research progressed, I found that each answer led to further questions, revealing how multifaceted the conflict was and how its consequences remain unresolved. The war was never defined by a single cause; political stagnation, external interventions, and shifting demographics all played their part. Yet religion became the visible marker of division, carried into the built environment where churches, mosques, and other sacred sites were both destroyed and rebuilt. It is within this layered context that restoration must be understood — not as a simple act of repair, but as a gesture imbued with symbolic meaning for communities searching for 'normality'.

I believe much of Lebanon's complex history is embodied in Beirut's Martyrs' Square, once the vibrant soul of the city but later scarred as the dividing line between East and West Beirut during the civil war. Since then, it has struggled to recover, undecided whether to recreate its former self, or to embrace the troubled past and incorporate it into the city.

2.Historical Background: Sectarianism and the Roots of the War

Photo.Civilians take shelter in an underground parking garage during heavy fighting in downtown Beirut, 1980s (Flashbak, 2019).

Photo.French troops patrol Damascus Street in the 1980s (Flashbak, 2019).

2.1 politcal structures and the confessional system

The political and social strain within the country wasn't just the few years prior to the war. From undergoing this research, it quickly became apparent to me the importance of understanding the social dynamics pre-war and the brief history of religious sectors; showcasing it all ended in a social eruption in 1975. With the war beginning 21 years after the French and British troops departed from the country (SAMIR MAKDISI, 2005). The participants of the war included Lebanon's largest three groups; the Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims who historically shared the power roles within the country, which reinforced corruption and uneven representation (SAMIR MAKDISI, 2005). The process behind distributing the roles stemmed from the ratio of those within the country – with the intentions to reflect and represent their population.

2.2. Demographics Shifts (1932 Census -> 1970)

By the early 1970s, Lebanon's demographic balance had shifted dramatically. The 1932 census recorded Christians as comprising 59.2% of the population (The Monthly Magazine, 2013) by 1970 the Muslim population became the dominant due to a much higher birth rate and migration of Palestinian refugees (Heiberg, 1983) . The Muslim communities repeatedly called for a more equal distribution of the political power, however as the country was dominated by Christians, who had the support of the French church, then later the Vatican – it was ignored with the fear of losing dominance (Khazen, 2000).

2.3. External Presures (Palestinians, Israel, Regional Politics)

Events outside of Lebanon contributed significantly to the rising instability. The creation of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent arrival of large numbers of Palestinian refugees into Lebanon altered the demographic balance too (Makdisi, S, 2005). By the early 1970s, these pressures had become more pronounced. Beirut experienced rapid urban expansion in its poorer suburbs, reflecting the country's deepening inequalities (Fregonese, 2012). These districts became home to predominantly Shi'a Muslims, many of whom migrated to the capital in the 1960s and 1970s in search of work (Makdisi, S, 2005), Palestinian refugees; displaced by conflict and had established camps that often bordered or merged with these suburbs, further intensifying the pressures on the city (Sayigh, 1994). Alongside them lived working-class Lebanese migrants — including Druze and some Christian families, who had moved closer to Beirut in search of economic opportunities (Al-Harithy, 2006). Meanwhile, wealthier Maronite Christians remained concentrated in the city's eastern districts, reinforcing the stark contrasts between Beirut's fragmented society (Fregonese, 2012). The constant demographic shifts created an increasingly unequal distribution of communities across Beirut, deepening existing sectarian rivalries into the city's geography. In this sense, the city's pre-war geography was already inscribed with inequality, setting the stage for the conflict that followed.

Understanding the Lebanese Civil War requires a different lens than many other conflicts of the twentieth century. Alongside Lebanon's internal rivalries, a web of external influences continually reshaped the dynamics of the war. As Farid El Khazen observes, "In Lebanon enemies and targets continued to change as did the objectives of the protagonists" (Khazen, 2000). This constant reconfiguration made the conflict highly unpredictable, while reinforcing the sense that sectarian and political divisions were inseparable from regional and international pressures.

3. Martyrs' Square: From Hub to Frontline

3.1. Pre-War Civic Life

Prior to the civil war, Martyrs' Square was the main hub of Beirut — a shared civic space where people of all religions gathered for commerce, culture, and everyday life. Its central position meant that one would pass through the square almost inevitably, whether by design or chance. This status made its later devastation during the conflict deeply symbolic, and the decisions taken in its restoration — which buildings to preserve, rebuild, or replace — were inevitably charged with meaning.

3.2. The Green Line and Wartime Devastation

During the conflict a 'Green Line' was coined which divided the two sides of the city, this went through Martyr's square and unfortunately turned it into the home for war. The name 'green line' is not just symbolic for the divide between the predominate religions within the country but also to represent the area of greenery which developed after the area was abandoned for the duration of the civil war (Charlesworth, 2017). Once the war ended in 1990, the square became empty with no identity left (Patterson, n.d.) - even with the Saint George cathedral still somewhat standing throughout the war, the area became abandoned.

Photograph from the AUB LibGuide showing a scene from the Lebanese Civil War. (AUB, n.d.)

3.3. Post-War Emptiness and Reconstruction

Sat within Martyrs square throughout the war was both a Maronite Cathedral and the Zawiyat Abi al-Nasr which was destroyed very soon after the war began (Seif, 2022). The former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri initiated the construction of a new place of worship for the Muslim community, resulting in the Muhammad al-Amin Mosque. While not a reconstruction, the mosque's design was, unfortunately, influenced by political agendas. The mosque is very eye catching as it greatly contrasts its surroundings – with the neighbouring built environmental being honey-coloured stone, clean lines, nostalgic architecture (Hamdan, 2017). Next door to the mosque still sits the restored St. George Maronite Cathedral, which feels admits the shadows of the mosque. The cathedral recently underwent the addition of a campanile, elevating its vertical profile to approximate the height of the adjacent mosque (Hegasy, 2017).

While their exteriors project a sense of harmony between the religious communities, few residents perceive the reality in a similar light. Hegasy's field research illustrates this complexity: interviews reveal that the recent addition of St. George's Cathedral's campanile, intended simply for bells, is experienced differently across communities. One resident noted that while the ādhān (call to preyer) is widely appreciated, the cathedral bells irritate some, showing how everyday acts of piety are often interpreted politically. What appears as interfaith coexistence is often experienced as sectarian competition (Hegasy, 2017).

The war-ravaged Martyrs' Monument, Martyrs' Square, Beirut (Mazzacurati, 1982).

4.1. Anthropological Perspectives (Nora, Halbwachs, Hegasy)

Martyrs' Square has remained a charged site in Lebanon's collective memory. Post-war, it became the stage for killings, mass protests, and moments of unprecedented unity, most notably the March 14, 2005 demonstration, when close to one million people of all religions gathered to demand the withdrawal of Syrian forces (Young, 2010). With the people within Lebanon putting their pasts aside and uniting on a front shows a rare moment of 'collective expression' Yet beneath these moments of solidarity lies a layered past: many argue that the square has long been "haunted" by successive traumas — from colonial interventions and state collapse to civil war and politically driven reconstruction. As Hegasy notes, the post-war rebuilding of downtown Beirut was not merely an act of renewal but often interpreted as an attempt to erase inconvenient histories and contested memories (Hegasy N. S., 2018).

4.2. The "Haunted" Square

From an anthropological perspective, Martyrs' Square embodies what Pierre Nora (Pierre, 1989) describes as a lieu de memoire— a site of memory where history is condensed into symbolic form. In Lebanon, however, the coherence of this collective memory is fragile, as living memory remains fractured and unreliable across sectarian lines. As Hegasy (Hegasy N. S., 2018) observes, the square is haunted by multiple layers of meaning — colonial domination, civil war, and post-war reconstruction — all of which risk erasing rather than preserving its complex past.

Halbwachs' theory of collective memory reinforces this reading. Memory, he argued, is not held individually but constructed through shared social frameworks (Russell, 2006) In Lebanon's sectarian context, each community remembers Martyrs' Square differently: as a site of martyrdom, loss, resistance, or betrayal. These divergent memories could not be unified into a single narrative during reconstruction. Instead, the square became a contested stage where memory is constantly reinterpreted, mirroring the very divisions that restoration efforts aimed — but often failed — to heal.

With these frameworks in mind, and returning to my guiding question of whether the restoration of religious buildings in Lebanon facilitated reconciliation, it becomes clear that even well-intentioned post-war projects were constrained by structural impossibilities. Architecture in Martyrs' Square functioned as a mnemonic device, embedding selective narratives into stone and space, but in a society fractured along sectarian lines, these

4. Memory and Contestation

Photo:Muslim Lebanese Army soldiers set up a Christmas tree on the Green Line to celebrate the holiday with Christian soldiers on December 23, 1987. (Hashhak, 2019).

4.3. Comparison: Nicosia's Frozen Green Line vs. Beirut's Shifting Fronts

Both Beirut and Nicosia experienced what came to be known as a "Green Line" — frontiers carved out by sectarian and political rivalries that split their cities in two. In Nicosia, however, this division solidified into a fixed and enduring boundary, what (Oktay, 2007) describes as a "lifeless corridor" that froze the city's cohesion. Beirut's case was markedly different. Though Martyrs' Square lay along its own Green Line, the conflict's frontiers shifted continually as alliances, enemies, and external interventions evolved. This instability meant that Martyrs' Square was never simply a static border, but a volatile stage where the city's — and the nation's — fractures were constantly rehearsed and reimagined. Because Beirut's "line" was never clearly fixed, new borders kept emerging, reopening old wounds time and again. This made the square's post-war reconstruction uniquely charged: an attempt not just to repair a place, but to stabilise a space that had rarely been stable, projecting an image of unity onto ground marked by contested memories.

4.4. Polished erasure; reusing ruins?

Sarajevo, a city in Bosnia and Herzegovina faced rapid post-war reconstruction which often adopted their pre-war forms without addressing the imprinted ethnic divisions which caused the conflicts. Lebbeus Woods War and architecture (Lebbeus, 1993) offers a counterpoint, he believed to leave physical traces of the trauma allowed visual traces of the war to be witnessed. Martyr's square was redevloped in a new polished manner with the abense of memorialisation. Wood's ideology raised the question of whether alternative renovations might have created a more inclusive form of reconciliation.

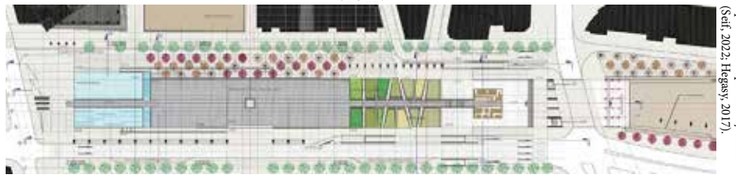


Figure B: (Charlesworth, 2017). Post-war reconstruction was marked by selective rebuilding, often reinforcing existing inequalities and political symbolism (Sefi, 2022; Hegasy, 2017).

5. Unity in Fragmentation

Photo. A 1990s Martyrs' Square street vendor sells posters of the same place in the late sixties, 1980s (Flashbak, 2019).

Beirut residents watch a controlled demolition during rebuilding efforts in the Lebanese capital, which is recovering from 16 years of civil strife.

5.1 City Moments of Togetherness

In a personal interview conducted in August 2025 with an academic who has visited Beirut regularly since the civil war, he reflected that Martyrs' Square often appeared "emptied" in daily life, its edges increasingly dominated by luxury shops that alienate much of the city's population. Yet he noted that the square repeatedly comes alive in moments of experimentation, particularly through the actions of Beirut's youth — whether in protest, commemoration, or artistic expression. In these instances, the square temporarily reclaims its civic role as a space of gathering.

From a theoretical perspective, these moments of activation can be read through Henri Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1968) where he describes urban spaces as constantly renegotiated and claimed by the population against those who dominate the power. Martyrs' Square, though shaped by top-down reconstruction and sectarian politics, becomes re-appropriated "from below" whenever people fill it with collective presence. Victor Turner's idea of liminality (1969) also helps frame these episodes: in times of protest or artistic gathering, the square functions as a threshold space where ordinary divisions momentarily dissolve, creating fleeting experiences of unity. Crucially, its symbolic weight is reinforced by the coexistence of both a mosque and a cathedral, preventing exclusive ownership by any single sect and allowing the square, however briefly, to embody a shared urban identity.

When redeveloping the city post war, the aim was to remove all physical evidence of it – however once they began reconstructing the area they soon realised that 80% of the sites in the downtown area were damaged beyond repair (Makdisi, 1997). Scholar Hermez said how it was hard to speak about the reconstruction of the city as the process was to eradicate the history of the war which many who lived through it found understandably troublesome (Larkin, 2010).

5.2 Healing; What really is it?

The concept of "healing" in a post-conflict socioty is often proposed but rarely defined. From my research i would suggest it is beyond physical reconstruction but psychological and social - specifically when addressing civil war. It can involove returning to the rhythms of your own life, and regular daily ritials - which in this paper focuses on religious attendance - this can all create a sense of 'normality' to an individual. Yet i believe healing requires recognition and inclusive naratives which can greatly be supported by the built environment - as our surroundings hold most memory.

With this study exploring whether the restoration of religious buildings in post-war Lebanon—specifically in Martyrs' Square—contributed to national reconciliation, I was often surprised by my findings across the six weeks of research. While restoration undeniably allowed communities to resume their religious practices and daily rituals, the evidence suggests that these projects rarely functioned as neutral acts of repair. Instead, they often reinforced the political and sectarian tensions embedded in Lebanese society. Even seemingly small details, such as the height of St. George's new bell tower, carried symbolic weight that fuelled further rivalries. The findings therefore point to an unsettling conclusion: in Lebanon's case, architecture is not neutral. Each act of rebuilding was shaped by sectarian politics, symbolic struggles, and the desire of different groups to stake territorial and ideological claims in the urban fabric.

From an anthropological perspective on memory, Martyrs' Square was perhaps always unlikely to serve as a model of reconciliation. Nora's (1989) notion of lieux de memoire—sites of memory that condense a community's shared identity—fails to map onto Lebanon's fractured sectarian context. Here, no single narrative could take hold. For some, Martyrs' Square symbolises martyrdom; for others, resistance, betrayal, or erasure. Haugbolle (Haugbolle, 2010) has argued that Lebanese war memory is less about active remembrance than about "collective amnesia," where silence and selective forgetting function as coping strategies. Seen in this light, the reconstruction of Martyrs' Square appears less as an effort at healing than as participation in a culture of erasure, producing polished urban spaces that mask, rather than resolve, the city's contested past.

Martyrs' Monument with Lebanese flag, Beirut (Karrberger, 2019).

6. Conclusion

Photo. A 1990s Martyrs'A Muslim militiaman aims his automatic rifle at Christian forces on the other side of the Green Line in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1982. 1980s (Flashbak, 2019).

Yet this is not the whole story. Despite its fraught symbolism, Martyrs' Square has not been abandoned. In the post-war period, the square has been reanimated at key moments—mass demonstrations, youth-led protests, commemorations, and artistic interventions have all temporarily transformed it into a shared civic space. These fleeting instances of solidarity show that while architecture may not resolve deep-seated divisions, the square remains a stage where unity can at least be imagined and performed.

Ultimately, the case of Martyrs' Square illustrates both the potential and the limits of architecture as a tool in post-war recovery. Restoring religious buildings created opportunities for the return of daily rituals and offered symbolic reassurance of resilience. But in Lebanon's context—shaped by financial precarity, sectarian rivalry, and contested memory—no reconstruction project could ever have been pursued with truly neutral intentions. Architecture here did not dissolve divisions; instead, it reflected and reproduced them, leaving Martyrs' Square suspended between remembrance and forgetting, between fracture and fleeting unity.

Ultimately, Lebanon's people remain bound by a shared desire to avoid further war, loss, and destruction — a longing shaped by decades of recurring conflict. Yet deep-seated religious and, by extension, political divisions continue to hold the nation at arm's length from genuine unity, leaving reconciliation an ever-fleeting aspiration.

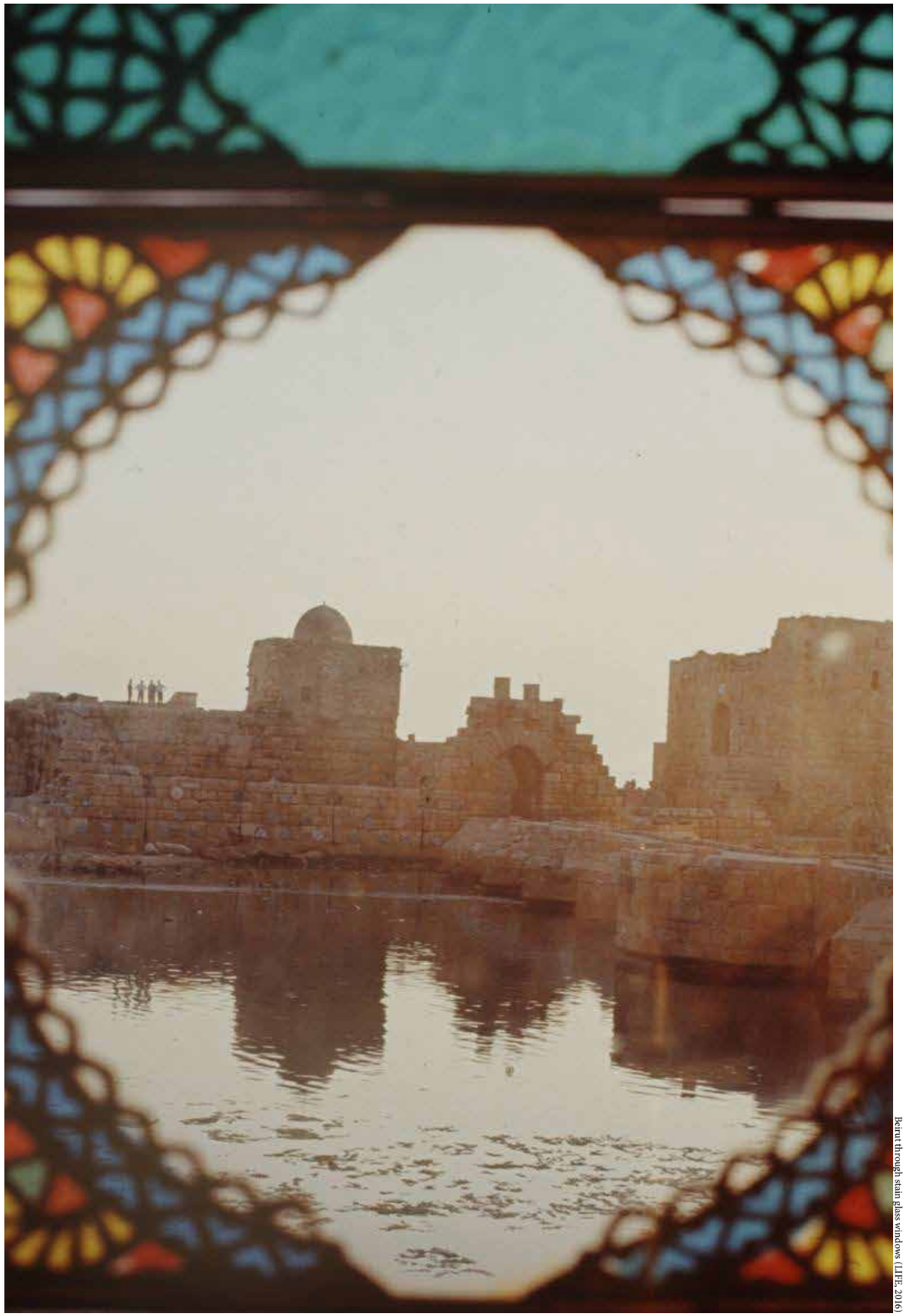
7. Reflections

Looking back on this project, I believe its greatest strength lay in the layered methodology I employed — combining historical analysis, anthropological theory, and critical readings with first-hand oral insights. This dispersal of approaches enabled me to capture both the scholarly interpretations of Martyrs' Square and the lived dimensions of its significance, grounding abstract theory in the textures of everyday experience.

In many ways, the reflections arising from this project feel inexhaustible. When I first proposed the topic, I anticipated a relatively linear trajectory of research: locating individuals who had lived through the reconstruction, recording their stories, and observing patterns of footfall within Martyrs' Square itself. Yet as my investigation deepened, it became increasingly clear that much of the conflict surrounding the square was less visible on the surface, embedded instead in silences, erasures, and contested memories. What I initially expected to document as clear and tangible narratives often dissolved into absences or contradictions.

One of the limitations of this project was the extent of my reliance on secondary sources. While these were invaluable, they frequently came from architects, planners, or scholars reflecting retrospectively, rather than from a breadth of ordinary residents or diverse community voices. In hindsight, the research would have been enriched by engaging directly with a wider spectrum of people — particularly those from different sectarian backgrounds — to capture the multiplicity of lived experiences that continue to shape the square. These conversations might have provided a deeper sense of how memory, identity, and daily life intersect in such a contested urban space.

Street scene in Beirut before bombing (LIFE, 2016).



Beirut through stain glass windows (LIFE, 2016)

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Figure B; (Charlesworth, 2017). Post-war reconstruction was marked by selective rebuilding, often reinforcing existing inequalities and political symbolism (Seif, 2022; Hegasy, 2017).

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Anonymous academic, 2025. Personal interview conducted in August 2025.