

"In Lebanon enemies and targets continued to change as did the objectives of the protagonists" (Khazen, 2000)

Purpose of Project

This study examines how the restoration of religious buildings in post-civil war Lebanon shaped reconciliation and social healing, focusing on Beirut's Martyrs' Square. Once a bustling civic hub, and heart of the city, the square became a frontline during the 1975–1990 Civil War, leaving parts of the St. George Maronite Cathedral standing while other religious sites were destroyed, then later rebuilt or commissioned. Restoration projects, including the monumental Mohammad Al-Amin Mosque, showcasing resilience but also reflecting the political agendas and sectarian tensions (Sawalha, 2010; Hamdan, 2017).

Historical Context:

Lebanon's war stemmed from deep-rooted sectarian divisions, uneven power-sharing among Maronite Christians, Sunni, and Shia Muslims (Makdisi, 2005; Samir Makdisi & R. S., 2005), demographic shifts, and regional pressures from Israel and Palestinian refugees (Fregonese, 2012; Sayigh, 1994). Martyrs' Square, a shared civic space pre-war, became a "Green Line" dividing East and West Beirut

Memory and Contestation:

Martyrs' Square functions as a palimpsest of contested memory. Different communities interpret its history differently, reflecting Nora's "lieux de memoire" (Pierre, 1989) and Halbwachs' theory of collective memory (Russell, 2006). Restoration projects could symbolize shared identity, yet often reproduced sectarian hierarchies, exemplified by the height of St. George's campanile and the prominence and decision of construction for the mosque (Hegasy, 2018).

Methodology

Despite structural and symbolic constraints, moments of collective presence — protests, commemorations, and youth-led artistic interventions — temporarily transformed Martyrs' Square into a shared civic space (Lefebvre, 1968; Turner, 1969; Young, 2010). Architecture facilitated the return of rituals and civic life but could not erase underlying sectarian divides.

Unity in Fragmentation:

Despite structural and symbolic constraints, moments of collective presence — protests, commemorations, and youth-led artistic interventions — temporarily transformed Martyrs' Square into a shared civic space (Lefebvre, 1968; Turner, 1969; Young, 2010). Architecture facilitated the return of rituals and civic life but could not erase underlying sectarian divides.

Conclusion:

Restoration of sacred buildings in Lebanon offers insights into the limits of architecture as a tool for reconciliation. While symbolic resilience and temporary unity are possible, deep-seated sectarian and political divides persist. Martyrs' Square illustrates both the potential of civic architecture to foster shared memory and the enduring fragility of social cohesion in post-war Lebanon.

Figure A

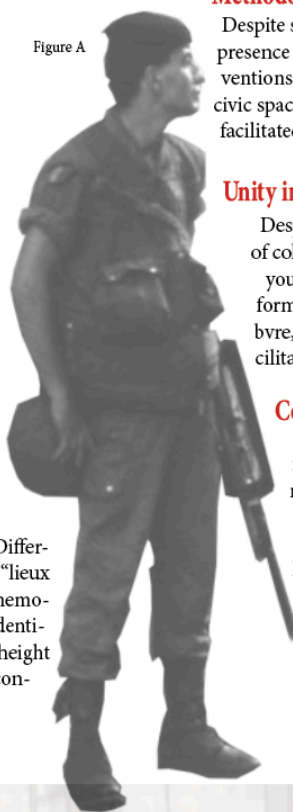


Figure B

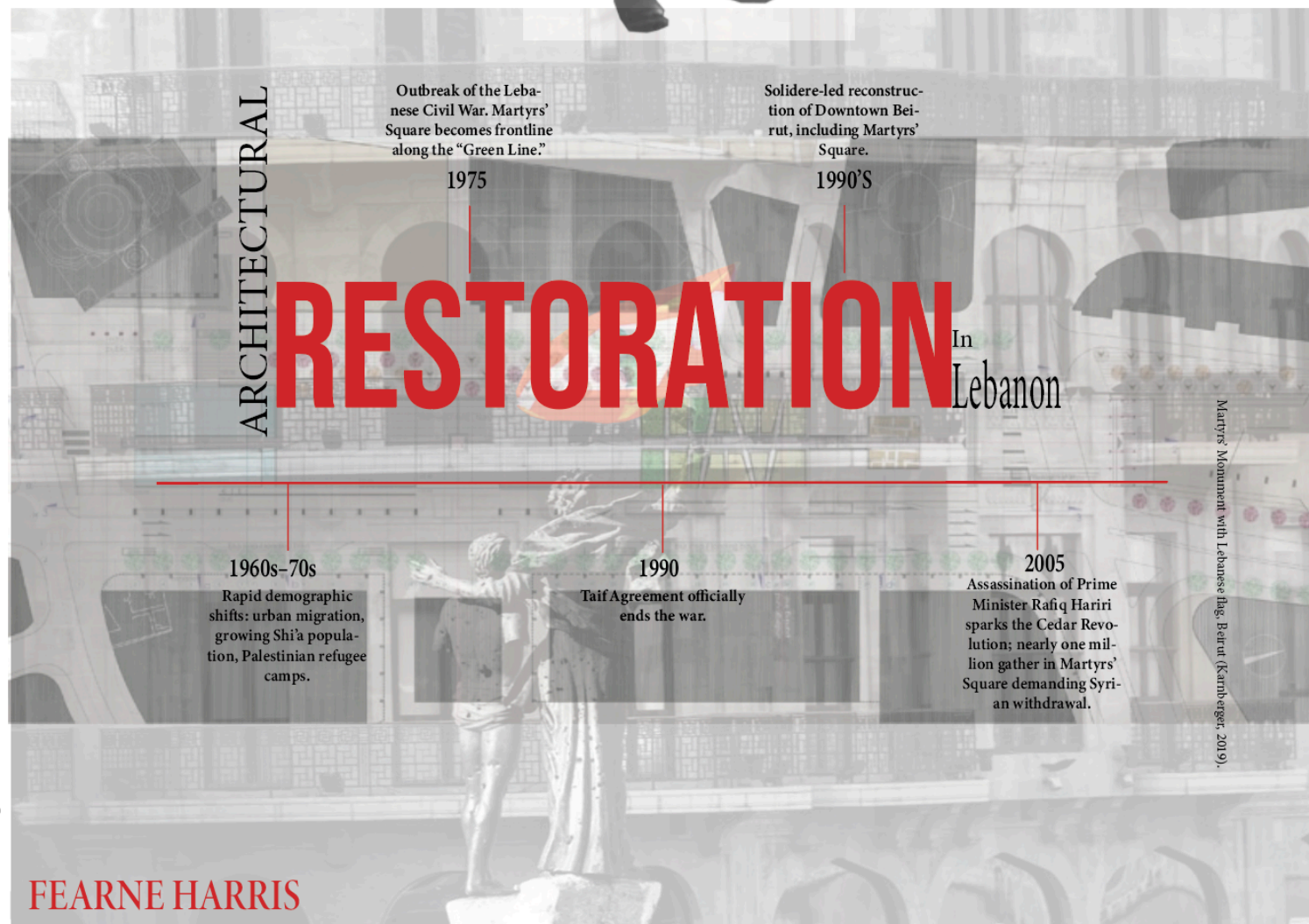


Figure A: Solidere (n.d.) Martyrs' Square open space plan and public art details. Solidere. Landscape architect: Noukakis & Partners (Greece), competition winners 2005. Public art: Renato Marino Mazza-curati (Italy). Available at: <https://www.solidere.com/city-center/solidere-developments/open-spaces/martyrs-square> [Accessed: insert date of access].

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