

# Post-Trauma Aesthetics

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*Cities must address the complicated aftermath of reconstruction as the front lines of wars are waged within urban areas. Nearly 20 years after the Lebanese Civil War ended in 1991, reconstruction has taken many forms, but significant efforts have attempted to ignore and move beyond the War. Thus, “accidental” monuments have sprung up in the absence of formally preserved relics of the War. Coupled with the efforts of artists, independent cultural institutes, and activists, vital histories of the War have been preserved, bringing citizens closer to acknowledging the War. To illustrate an alternative future, we suggest the transformation of what was the front line during the War, at a time appropriate for such a large-scale intervention to address the trauma of the War. In *Post-Trauma Aesthetics*, we argue that Beirut, Lebanon is an excellent site to test the effectiveness of applying Lebbeus Woods’ three theories of reconstruction to evaluate the effect of post-war reconstruction on the collective memory of war as represented in the built environment.*

Beirut, Lebanon’s cityscape was torn apart by the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), in addition to numerous wars with Israel. Damage caused by military operations, neglect, occupation, and terrorism have prompted different approaches to reconstruction. With the front line of war moving into urban areas, cities must continue to address the complicated aftermath of reconstruction.

Governments, private markets, and artists take vastly different approaches toward post-war reconstruction. It is well-documented that the aftermath of many of the world’s greatest tragedies are welcomed with pleas for the total erasure of the damaged landscape. Furthermore, the opportunity for reconstruction “often trigger[s] notable forms of collective solidarity,” “an invitation to transformation,” and even “the possibility of building something better.”<sup>2, 3</sup> Architecture physically represents social relationships, and carries the possibility of concretely impacting social change. Yet, the idea of preserving relics of the past as an essential part of societal transformation is continually met with overwhelming resistance.

Few activists have fought for preserving partially destroyed buildings to serve as a continued reminder of the past. The Beit Beirut Memory Museum is an example of a sincere effort to

preserve the visual results of the War. Longtime activist and museum founder Mona El Hallak fought for nearly 20 years to save the badly damaged apartment building and transform the site into a museum. Hallak states, “now the building is still there, and it will tell its story, both before the War and during it...Its preservation is important to prevent the city from being swept by amnesia about the War—and to prevent it from happening again. If I remember, then other people will remember, too.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, efforts for preservation are grounded in the belief that reconstruction must acknowledge the trauma to prevent it from repeating.

While the causes of war and the aftermath of post-war cities is well-documented, little has been written on the decision-making process for reconstruction of post-war cities. Lebbeus Woods, a prominent architect and academic, has become one of the most influential scholars on this topic. Woods proposed fantastical designs of the reconstruction of Sarajevo, Bosnia to instigate conversation on memory and the need to preserve the wounds of war. Years after he was criticized for “aestheticizing violence,” he returned to the topic to describe what he refers to as the three principles of post-war reconstruction.<sup>5</sup> Woods states there are two likely outcomes of post-war reconstruction: raze the land and build anew, or restore the damaged land back to its original state. Both principles follow the logic of forgetting



**Figure 1** *Inside the Beit Beirut Museum.*

the tragedy while promoting a “getting back to normal” mentality. The final, less likely outcome Woods describes takes an active stance toward acknowledging the trauma by stating “the post-war city must create the new from the damaged old.”<sup>6</sup>

Beit Beirut is an exemplary illustration of Woods’ third principle. By using Beirut as a case study, we illustrate the spectrum of reconstruction as a means of exploring how cities scarred by violence are redeveloped in the aftermath of traumatic events. In doing so, we discuss the merits and challenges of preserving relics of war, the role of designers in the aftermath of a traumatic event, and speculate on an alternative future of the “Green Line,” the front line that separated east and west Beirut during the War. We argue Beirut presents an excellent site to test the effectiveness of applying Woods’ three principles as a means of

evaluating the effect of post-war reconstruction on the collective memory of war as represented in the built environment.<sup>7</sup>

## Most Probable Outcomes

To question the effectiveness of applying Woods’ principles, we present several case studies of post-war reconstruction projects and interventions in Beirut. According to Woods, the desire for normality drives the use of his first two principles. In most cases, reconstruction takes the form of either restoring or building anew. The first two principles are represented by the National Museum, which was restored to its original state following the War; Ajami Square, a redevelopment initiative in the center of the city; the ruins uncovered at the Historic Tel site; and the Waad Project, an unprecedented collaboration between a private organization, architecture firms, and residents.

### *‘Getting Back to Normal’: The National Museum*

The National Museum was along the front line between east and west Beirut during the War and suffered serious damage. After many years of restoration, the building was fully reopened in 1999, leaving only traces of the War from the sparse bullet holes remaining in the facades.

### *‘Getting Back to a New Normal’: Ajami Square in Beirut Souks*

Next on the spectrum is Ajami Square. While the damaged structure was left intact after the War, the entire surrounding area was razed and rebuilt. The area does not resemble pre-war Beirut, and thus this project illustrates Woods’ second principle: Demolish the damaged and destroyed buildings and build something entirely new.



**Figure 2** Example of Jad el-Khoury's War Peace on the facade of a damaged building

In another example in Belgrade, government officials preserved a bombed-out structure for the intentionality of retaining a physical reminder of the bombing by NATO forces. The act of preserving artifacts of the War in the built environment took an inherently political stance towards acknowledging the destruction. Thus, reconstructing Ajami Square was inherently political as the space iconically represented the city, and needed to illustrate the possibility for the

economic vitality of the city's future. In this way, the city attempted to hide memories of the War.

### *'Uncovering a New Normal': Historic Tel*

Modern-day Beirut sits atop previous iterations of Beirut previously razed due to natural disasters and war. The reconstruction and redevelopment efforts of Downtown Beirut resulted in the



**Figure 3** View of “The Holiday Inn” in Beirut.

discovery of several historical layers, including the site of the “Rivoli” building at the southern edge of Martyrs’ Square—a historical square in the center of Beirut that sits on the Green Line. Revealing these centuries-old ruins returned them to the urban fabric of modern Beirut and incorporated them into the daily routines of its citizens.

### *‘Getting Back to a Slightly Better Normal’: Waad Project*

During the 2006 war with Israel, much of the urban fabric of Greater Beirut was destroyed by aerial bombardment. This 33-day conflict caused a severe demand for housing and an urgency by developers who promised to “build it ever prettier and better than before.”<sup>78</sup> The leading organization behind the redevelopment was Hezbollah, the militant and political group recognized as a terrorist organization by the United States. Despite their reputation,

Hezbollah led the Waad development through an unprecedented collaboration between private organizations, academics, urban planners, architects, residents, and foreign sponsor states. Unfortunately, the project failed to address the high-density problems facing the area before the war. Many of the housing units were rebuilt hastily with minimal improvements to building structures and the urban context while all traces of the war were eradicated.

The trauma of war makes preserving residential units a controversial subject. Sensitivity toward “heritage of atrocity” is illustrated in the case of World War II (WWII) as Holocaust survivor Primo Levi once notes that “understanding the significance of trauma through material remnants came neither immediately nor easily to survivors.”<sup>79</sup> However, despite initial resistance to preserving any traces of traumatic events, regret from residents may surface years later. The resulting neighborhood follows Wood’s first



**Figure 4** *The Green Line during the war (left) and the proposed Green Line (right).*

principle: Restore what has been lost to its pre-war condition.

## Improbable Outcomes

Another set of examples found in post-war Beirut demonstrates Woods' third principle. These accidental outcomes were not the result of carefully crafted designs, advocacy, or implementation, but are rather dispersed accidents resulting from either neglect, minimal interventions toward adaptive reuse, or in some cases vandalism. In addition to destruction or deterioration caused by wartime activities—including non-combat damage such as abandonment by residents who fled the country, lack of maintenance, squatting by internally displaced people, and building informal additions—time and different levels of urgency often played the role of designer with outcomes as unpredictable as the conflicts that caused them. One such example is the Holiday Inn, termed an “Accidental Monument” by Gregory Buchakjian, a Lebanese artist and historian, and the controversial work of the street artist known as Potato Nose.

### *The Holiday Inn, Beirut: ‘The Accidental Monument’*

As the staging ground for one of the fiercest battles in the early stages of the Lebanese Civil War, the Holiday Inn—designed by André Wogensky in 1971—stands today with its bombed-out facade and its imposing brutalist architecture as a relic of that war. Located in the Hotels District—a thriving seaside district of pre-war Beirut—it stands adjacent to the historical center, which would later become the central business district. The hotel quickly gained strategic importance in the battle for Beirut due to its height and its rigid reinforced concrete shell, turning the Hotels District into the “Hotel Front” on the eve of the War. What was once a symbol of the city’s progress became a military fortress as warring militias fought over the hotel in what became known as the “Battle of the Hotels” (1975-1976). Following the battle, the hotel’s lavish furniture and fixtures were stripped and sold in the streets and markets of West Beirut.

The main building has changed little since the War, with only a smaller building being used as a bank. In the 1990s individuals utilized the parking deck for a potpourri of activities such as underground parties and book fairs. By the end of the War, the Holiday Inn was left out of the reconstruction project for Downtown Beirut—commissioned to SOLIDERE: a company

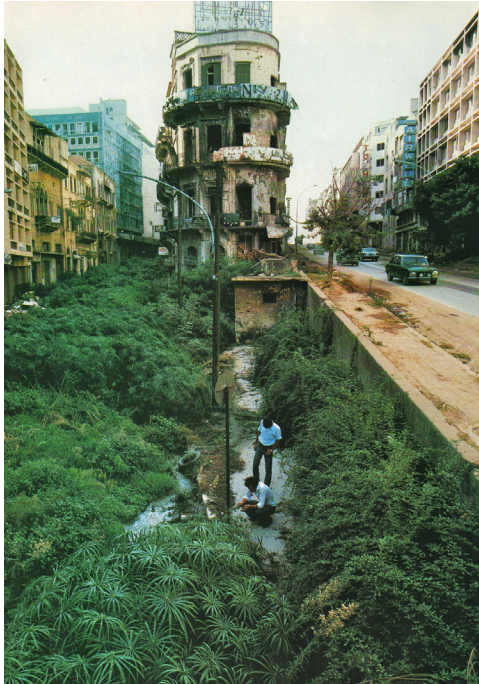


Figure 5 *Beirut's Green Line, 1991.*

created for the reconstruction, development, and management of Downtown Beirut—as it was marked just outside the limits of the project. Today stakeholders remain divided between demolishing and building anew or renovating the structure, and the Holiday Inn remains a relic of the violent past.

According to Gregory Buchakjian, a Lebanese artist and historian, the Holiday Inn stands as an “Accidental Monument” from the Lebanese Civil War.<sup>10</sup> Buildings such as the Holiday Inn tend to attract artists seeking an alternative, more rugged canvas. One such artist is Jad el-Khoury, better known as Potato Nose, most famous for his recent work that responds directly to the war-torn edifices throughout Beirut. In his project, War-Peace, Potato Nose painted murals on several damaged facades, including the Holiday Inn, to provoke conversation. He states:

People who pass by are accustomed to architectures mutilated by the War and do not even see the buildings anymore. Some have accused me of vandalism, but they do not know that the only reason these vestiges are still standing is because of disputes between owners who linger. If they were resolved, they would either be renovated or destroyed. I tapped to allow the Beirutis to open their eyelids on these traces of war. Revive the question of what we want to do with these buildings. The soldiers did not take permission to bomb, I did not take it to bomb either.<sup>11</sup>

Potato Nose further states, “For the old generation who witnessed this barbarism, it’s time to move on. At the same time, for those who don’t know what it is to be living in a wartime, the traces should be preserved to give them an image of the craziness of the situation.”<sup>12</sup> Potato Nose recognizes Lebbeus Woods’ key argument as a critical message for the world to understand, as “Forgetting is an active and in the strictest sense positive faculty of repression.”<sup>13</sup> Entirely erasing all traces of violence and corruption from past regimes allows new regimes to creep into power. Erasing important historical relics (and the emotions tied to them) is a strategy implemented by regimes for obtaining power. As George Orwell states in *1984*, “Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.”<sup>14</sup>

### *Regret in Berlin*

Beirut’s reconstruction continues a long discussion of prior studies on the complications of post-war reconstruction. WWII provides insights toward understanding the connection between trauma, healing, and post-war reconstruction. By the end of WWII, people cheered on the



**Figure 6** Sites located along the Green Line, Beirut.

destruction of the Berlin Wall, such that by 1990 only a small portion remained for the intention of establishing a memorial. While the initial reaction to traumatic events was the gut rejection of any physical reminders of the haunting past, Tumarkin states in her book *Traumascapes*, “After the rage many Berliners felt towards the Wall quietened down, questions began to emerge. Was the near total-destruction of the Wall, though understandable, still a serious mistake?”<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, previous consensus had been met by Berliners nearly 50 years prior, reflecting an attitude of accepting preservation as a part of healing. During World War I, Allied forces nearly destroyed Berlin’s Kaiser-Wilhelm Gedächtniskirche. Following the War, it was the city’s residents, not government officials,

who fought to preserve its ruin rather than reconstruct the damaged building. In this case, there was no immediate desire to tear down the structure; thus the decision to preserve came over 10 years following the end of WWII. What did the Gedächtniskirche symbolize to the people that the Berlin Wall perhaps did not?

### *An Alternate Green Line?*

While the Berlin Wall separated the east and west sides of Berlin, wartime Beirut reverted to an unintentionally ecological barrier: the Green Line. Also known as Damascus Road, this was one of the central arteries in the city that marked the demarcation line between Beirut’s warring communities. Due to the War





**Figure 7** *Aerial view of the Green Line.*

and its lethal dangers, the once-busy corridor was abandoned by its users, resulting in overgrown stretches. Damascus Road extends south from the city's port in its downtown to the overlaying hills in its suburbs. The Green Line became infamous for its sniper nests occupying the overlooking abandoned and damaged buildings. Roadblocks, encampments, and barricades limited access to a few checkpoints at main axes, allowing civilians to pass through during the occasional cease fires. A couple of blocks from the demarcation line, urban life continued as close to "normal" as possible in a war-torn city.

Following the end of the War, government officials promptly cleared the road of greenery and reopened it to through traffic. Consequently, the high-speed traffic produces a new formidable divide between east and west Beirut. Rather than submitting to the urgent reaction of reverting the road back to its previous use, what would it be to speculate an alternative reality? Portions of the

iconic Green Line could have been preserved in the spirit of Woods' third principle. The current road, while it increases mobility, does little to address the historic division between the city and the limited exchanges between populations of Beirut's east and west sides. As illustrated in the map on the following page, transforming the Green Line into a walking path could connect the central waterfront to the Horch—the central park of Beirut, the hippodrome, the Beit Beirut Museum of Memory, and the National Museum—the main checkpoint permitting access between east and west Beirut. All of these landmarks are located along Damascus Road.

Woods' caution toward the "get back to normal" mentality stems from fear of recreating oppressive systems and ways of living. As one divide replaces another, has much changed since the War?

Beirut's amnesty laws protecting former conflict participants, such as warlords and snipers, from prosecution has in part contributed to a "culture

of silence” around the War.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps it is even more relevant to propose solutions to radically alter the cityscape and its social relationships. This proposal for the “Green Line” could radically impact social life in Beirut, as it honors the history of the space by using it to bring formally opposed populations together.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Beirut contributes greatly to the field study of post-war reconstruction and cultural and historic preservation. In many ways, the prevalent rhetoric of burying the memory of the War in the hopes of rewinding to the pre-war glory that shaped post-war Beirut was tainted

with the disinterest in keeping scars of wars present in the cityscape. These instances invoke the alteration of an already altered memory. By not conforming to any typological or functional criteria, they showcase how the forces that shaped these monuments before, during, and after the trauma event were stronger than the intervention of the designer. It is imperative for the designer to understand these forces and the history of the space, as well as the reaction of the public, before staging a public intervention allowing for future alterations that reflect the future state of society. As wars continue to rupture cityscapes in places such as Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Ukraine, decisions pertaining to reconstruction must include conversations on how cultural preservation relates to collective identity. ■

## Endnotes

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## Figures

Figure 1. Inside the Beit Beirut Museum. Beirut Report. Viewable online at <http://www.beirutreport.com/2016/05/inside-beit-beirut.html>. Domus. Viewable online at [http://www.domusweb.it/en/interviews/2016/04/12/beit\\_beirut.html](http://www.domusweb.it/en/interviews/2016/04/12/beit_beirut.html)

Figure 2. Excerpt from Jad el-Khoury’s *War Peace*, viewable online at <http://albustanfestival.com/blog/programme/the-festival-exhibition/>

Figure 3. The Guardian. Viewable online at <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/may/01/beirut-holiday-inn-civil-war-history-cities-50-buildings>

Figure 4. Beirut, The Green Line, 1991. © Chris Steele-Perkins/Magnum Photos

Figure 5. Beirut, up from the rubble, photograph by Steve McCurry. National Geographic, 1983.