

matt jones

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Renaissance men

*The marriage of old and new architecture is the key to the successful regeneration of downtown Beirut, according to Solidere. Text: **Matt Jones**.*

They may not feel an additional burden of responsibility, but the architects working on the regeneration of Beirut City Center are being asked to do much more than add landmark buildings to a cityscape.

Brick by brick and floor by floor, they're actually reconstructing a society devastated by 15 years of civil war; street by street and district by district, they're re-stitching a social fabric shredded by a conflict that divided communities between 1975 and 1990.

In their individual contributions to master-planned commercial and residential districts, the likes of Jean Nouvel, Giancarlo De Carlo, Kevin Dash, Rafael Moneo, Dimitri Porphyrios, Rasem Badran and Abd al-Wahid al-Wakil are putting a spring in the step of Lebanon's advancing economy. By creating a new and exhilarating environment for business and pleasure, they're also providing Lebanon's workforce with good reason not to follow the traditional migration routes to France, Canada and the Arabian Gulf.

Taking the role of the Medicis in this modern-day renaissance is The Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut Central District, more popularly known as Solidere, the name by which many Lebanese now refer to the downtown area itself.

A land developer, real estate developer, property owner and property and services manager rolled into one, Solidere was established in 1994 to mastermind the Middle East's only urban renewal and regeneration project. It is Solidere that determines who will work on this masterpiece in the making, and, through its master plan, it is Solidere that determines the parameters within which the architects must work.

"The master plan for Beirut City Center provides an urban design framework for new construction and the preservation of retained buildings," says Solidere's general manager, Mounir Douaidy.

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Lebanon/Page 2/...

“It recognises the city heritage and unearths the many layers of history. It combines tradition and innovation, control and creativity, and ensures the harmonious integration of traditional and modern architecture. It’s a marriage, really, between old and new. We’re trying to preserve the beauty of the old architecture, but also allowing all types of architects – locals, who are brilliant architects, and international architects – to bring their experience and make Beirut a kind of a melting pot.”

Breaking with the traditional concept of a single use Central Business District (CBD), 40 per cent of Beirut’s regenerated city centre will be residential, 50 per cent commercial and 10 per cent made up of hotels, cultural and leisure services, all centred around a restored historic core. The mixed-use development will cover 191 hectares, including a new district reclaimed from the sea, and some 4.69 million square metres of floor space.

Phase one of the project, which began in 1994 and was successfully completed in 2004, saw the installation of infrastructure and utilities and the reconstitution of the public domain, namely the landscaped streets, squares and pedestrian areas that now buzz with life every evening. Highlights include the restoration of more than 90 per cent of the 300 historic, retained buildings, construction of Beirut Marina and the execution of new development projects, such as the Saifi ‘urban village’ and Wadi Abu Jamil residential complex, which, with its terracotta-tiled pitched roofs, manages to retain its Levantine hill town feel even in the centre of the Lebanese capital.

“Saifi is designed in the Lebanese vernacular tradition. The infill development blends with existing buildings restored to their original glory,” says Douaidy. “The concept design for Wadi Abu Jamil was commissioned to international and local architects selected for their experience in Mediterranean and Middle East countries, and for the responsiveness of their design approaches to the local context, culture and climate.”

Among these architects were De Carlo, from Italy, Porphyrios, from Greece, Jordan’s Badran and the UK-based Egyptian al-Wakil. “The architects drew inspiration from the traditional Lebanese central hall model, the way they used to build apartments early in the last century, and enhanced it by using more articulate forms and modern features,” says Douaidy.

(more)

Lebanon/Page 3/...

As well as buildings from the turn of the 20th century, with central halls and traditional triple arch windows, Saifi's rich architectural heritage includes Art Deco buildings and modern buildings that date from the '50s to the '70s. Similarly, Wadi Abu Jamil has buildings from the turn of the 20th century and the '30s to the '50s. Having buildings from more recent eras in between the very old and brand new is a key to the success of Solidere's regeneration project, says Douaidy. Solidere isn't solely interested in the extremes of French colonial and modern architecture, he explains, but also in the periods in between. "Wherever possible there needs to be a transition between the old architecture and the more modern architecture, without creating a shocking contrast between old and new right next door. There also needs to be a gradual transition from one sector to another."

The costs for renovating what remains of period buildings are born by investors. "We're very strict in the application of norms and specifications for our own projects and even more so when it comes to third party developers doing their projects," says Douaidy. "The requirements are put in the development brief, which is given to the developer when he signs the sale agreement. He gives this to his architect and the design is done on the basis of these details. We make sure all the details are implemented and there is no deviation."

One area in which Solidere does not interfere, however, is interiors. "We make sure the facades and exterior architecture are harmonious with everything around it, but the interior is left to the developer," says Douaidy. However, if a building is Solidere's to lease, the company works closely with its interior designers to produce an apartment product the market demands. Along with considerations of practicality and comfort there is an important deviation from the past here: size. Whereas apartments in the original French colonial buildings would have been small and badly divided up, the new apartments behind the old facades are much bigger. "If you take a 150 square metre apartment, we prefer to have one, maximum two big rooms and the reception areas, rather than having three rooms and two reception areas," says Douaidy.

Most of Beirut City Center's modern buildings will be concentrated on or near the seafront south of Martyr's Square, which, along with the Old Souks of Beirut project, is to be developed in phase two of the master plan, starting this year. Among them is Marina Towers, which is due for completion in late 2005/2006.

(more)

Lebanon/Page 4/...

“Marina Towers is modern, it doesn’t fit into the old style architecture, but it’s not shocking, it marries well with everything else,” says Douaidy. “With a predominance of old-style architecture, a new building like this adds an touch of modernity to the city and creates a nice skyline as you’re approaching from the sea or the air.”

Marina Towers, which consists of a 150-metre predominantly glass tower and two smaller buildings, Marina Garden and Marina Court, has been designed by Kohn Pedersen Fox. Yet, according to its developers, Stow Marina, even this modern building references Lebanon’s rich design heritage.

“We’ve taken several things from typical Lebanese architecture, like the big opening windows, the transparency, the ability to see out and in,” says Mohamad A. El-Set, senior architect at Stow. “In Lebanon, we use exterior spaces seven or eight months out of 12, so a balcony is very important. We have a cantilevered freestanding balcony directly overlooking the marina. But the main thing is that in the middle of downtown we built a project with 3,000 square metres of private garden. Greenery is part of the attraction of Lebanese architecture and it is a well done in Marina Towers.”

In his book *La Mémoire de Beyrouth*, which illustrates with striking ‘then and now’ photographs just how successful Solidere’s regeneration of Beirut has been to date, author Ayman Trawi points out that over 6,000 years of history, from the Canaanites to the Ottomans, Beirut has experienced numerous natural and man-made catastrophes. “On every count, Beirut pulled itself back from the ashes with an astounding determination to live and prosper,” says Trawi.

With phase two of Solidere’s master plan being initiated this year and due for completion in 2020, history looks set to repeat itself for many years to come.

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