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WEAVING HISTORICAL NARRATIVES:
BEIRUT’S LAST MAMLUK MONUMENT

Throughout history, monuments have been built or inserted into existing urban contexts to celebrate historical events, commemorate individuals, or convey ideologies. And throughout history, monuments have been appropriated or have become associated with new events or figures of significance. The Dome of the Rock is an excellent example of the complexity of meanings that can be attached to a single monument, as Oleg Grabar has shown in several studies devoted to the building and its immediate context of al-Haram al-Sharif. These studies are interpretations of the Dome of the Rock that address its Umayyad builders’ intended meaning, religious associations with the ascension of the Prophet acquired in later centuries, and contemporary references to religious piety or political claims.1

The process of meaning construction is equally complex. Only rarely is it instantaneous, and only rarely are multiple narratives born from a single event or process. In this paper I will investigate the recovery of a monument, rather than its making, and the multiple narratives that were constructed by different authors almost simultaneously, within the short time span of four years. The building at the center of this investigation is the zawiya of Ibn ’Arraq, dating to the year 1517. It is located at the southern edge of the souks of Beirut, more specifically the southern end of Souk al-Tawileh. It will be investigated as an architectural sign employed in the construction of multiple historical narratives during the process of the postwar reconstruction of the Beirut Central District. “Architectural sign,” as used here, is not a static sign with a single fixed signifier, as in the Saussurian model, but one that is dynamic, as in the Derridian model.2 In The Truth in Painting, Derrida argues that a sign is not the conjunction between a signifier and its single, univocal signified, but the movement from one signifier to another, the motion between them. As motion, visual signification is therefore incompatible with boundary, threshold, frame; it is a passepartout.3

The process of meaning construction addressed in this paper is the postwar reconstruction of Beirut’s Central District began after the Ta’if agreement of 1989 and the end of the civil war in Lebanon. In December 1991, Law 117 was passed, giving “… the municipal administration the authority to create real estate companies in war-damaged areas, and to entrust them with implementation of the urban plan and promotion, marketing, and sale of properties to individuals or corporate developers.”4 After the late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri took office, in 1992, the Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of the Beirut Central District—a private real estate company known as Solidere5—was formed. It took charge of the postwar reconstruction of the district, following the proposed master plan of 1991.6 The grand vision behind this master plan—to take a tabula rasa approach in rebuilding the city center—led to the demolition of a large number of buildings and the clearing of many sites, including the area of the souks.

During this process of reconstruction, a small domed structure, the zawiya of Ibn ’Arraq (fig. 1), was revealed and stirred public reaction,7 becoming “subject to all the vicissitudes of reception”8 and “encounter[ing] from that moment on the ineradicable fact of semiotic play.”9 The architectural sign was entered into multiple narratives woven by different viewers whose spectatorship or text I will attempt to reconstruct in light of the notion that “the text or artwork cannot exist outside the circumstances in which the reader reads the text or the viewer views the image, and that the work cannot fix in advance the outcome of any of its encounters with contextual plurality.”10

THE FIRST NARRATIVE

Immediately upon the recovery of the structure, in April 1992, a group of Shiites rushed to the site and
immediately laid claim to the building, declaring it a sacred site that should not be touched or demolished. News coverage gave the discovery considerable exposure, though no one remembered the building or had even known of its existence, since it had not been visible in the souk area, nor had it functioned as a religious building in the prewar years. The structure was identified as the qubba of Ibn 'Iraq, also known as the zawiya of Muhammad Khidr al-'Iraqi. Soon after that, it was celebrated as a tomb of a holy Shi'i sheikh known as Ibn 'Iraq al-Dimashqi. Upon consultation of the primary sources, the name was later corrected to Ibn 'Arraq.

The domed structure quickly became the subject of popular accounts from which mythical stories were fabricated. It was reported that

...the old unknown qubba in Souk al-Tawileh in the commercial souks, known as Qubbat Ibn 'Iraq, turned suddenly to a mazār [shrine], visited daily by hundreds of men and women seeking its blessings [fig. 2]. Within three days, this small, deserted dome became a maqâm [holy place] towards which people rushed, of which they spoke, and about which they told stories. Different sources were sought regarding the genealogy of Ibn 'Iraq and his affiliation. On the qubba were hung pictures of Imam Khomeini and al-Sayyid 'Ali Khamenei, black flags, and a poster declaring the maqâm as that of his holiness Ayatollah Muhammad bin 'Ali al-'Iraqi al-Dimashqi, who died in 933 [1526]. Speakers were installed [for the reading of the Qur'an], and spaces, some for the visits of men and others for women, were designated [fig. 3].

People approached the structure, peeked inside into a coffin covered by a green flag, and threw money at a man who was cutting small pieces of the green cloth to sell to those seeking its baraka. It was even claimed that a fountain of orange-blossom water burst forth and filled the place with its aroma. Stories were exchanged of miracles that ruptured the chain of the bulldozer, broke its blade, or paralyzed the hand of its driver; the most amazing tale claimed
Beirut’s Last Mamluk Monument

Fig. 2. The zawiya becomes a mazār. (Photo: Al-Nahār archives)

Fig. 3. People gather around the zawiya. (Photo: Al-Nahār archives)
that the holy man came out of his tomb to tell the workers, "Don’t harm me, and I won’t harm you." One journalist actually reported that “a woman wearing a white scarf told of the shaykh appearing to the driver of the bulldozer of the CDR, forbidding him to touch the mausoleum,” and quoted her as saying “the first bulldozer stopped functioning as well as the second. The engineer on site touched the wall of the structure and his hands got stiff.” Merchants of all kinds gathered around the domed structure to profit from the situation by selling their goods. To add to the rumors and increase their profits, they too claimed to have been on the site when the bulldozer was miraculously stopped.

The Shiite Hezbollah-affiliated group that took charge of the mazâr was composed of temporary residents of the Wadi Abou Jmeil neighborhood of Beirut’s Central District, where they had taken refuge during the war years. In support of their claim, they stressed, in their identification of the holy man, that he was not only al-Dimashqî (the Damascene) but also al-‘Irâqî, in reference to Iraqi Shiism. Originally from the South of Lebanon and historically without a religious locus in the Central District, this group, through their identification of the holy man as a Shi‘i shaykh or even imam and through their appropriation of the building as his own tomb, sought to make permanent their status and to claim a piece of the future in the city under construction.

Their claim did not go uncontested, however. On May 18, 1992, the Faculty of Legal Islamic Studies in Beirut, upon researching the Islamic sources and retracing the genealogy of the holy figure, issued the statement, “The zawiya that was found is that of Muhammad bin ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Rahman bin ‘Arraq, Shams al-Din Abu ‘Ali al-Kan‘ani al-Dimashqi, known as Shaykh al-Islam, and that noble great scholar is of the Shafi‘i jurists,” thus reclaiming him as a Sunni shaykh. The statement was accompanied by Ibn ‘Arraq’s biography, excerpted from al-Zarkali’s al-Alâm. This led to a quick response from the Shi‘ite group, discrediting the claim:

We cannot say for sure that Ibn ‘Arraq was affiliated with the Shafi‘i rite, because history books do not refer to his rite. Even if al-Zarkali (volume 6, page 290) and Kahala (volume 11, page 21) have pointed to his Shafi‘i affiliation, they are only contemporary sources, which are not dependable in such critical matters, especially when older sources are available. Islamic history books from the Mamluk period used to refer to the Imami Shi‘i ulama with the Shafi‘i label... Citing examples from al-Ghazzi’s Kawâikh, they further argued that there was no reference to his Shafi‘i affiliation in Ibn ‘Arraq’s own books, and accordingly they could permit themselves to assign him to the Shi‘ite sect because of his tutors and followers, who come from places in Jabal ‘Amil and Jabal al-‘Alawi such as Sarafand, Bazouniya, and Saqba.

Eventually the dispute came to an end. On May 22, 1992, the building was handed over by Hezbollah to a delegation of the General Directorate for the Islamic Waqfs of Dar al-Fatwa, and under this body’s supervision a committee of experts was formed and charged with its restoration and management. The mazâr was encircled with barbed wire and a wall constructed around it, guarded by police.

In this first and short-lived narrative, the small domed structure was claimed by the Shi‘ite group as the tomb of their holy imam, Ibn ‘Iraq. They entered the architectural sign into their writing of a religious-historical narrative against their socio-political framing of the reconstruction project as an economically and religiously alienating process. Represented by the low-income squatters who had settled in the downtown area, and who saw in this an opportunity to lay a more permanent claim to the heart of the city, they were in a sense inscribing a text of resistance to a reconstruction project that was perceived as class oriented, thus alienating a major sector of society. This was a scenario of a socially operated sign, intertextualized and turned into an icon, standing for a holy figure and projected through the discourse of lineage to represent the Hezbollah-affiliated Shiites.

WHO WAS IBN ‘ARRAQ?

The figure at the center of this dispute, a Sufi scholar, is in actuality not buried in his zawiya in Beirut. His name is Shams al-Din Muhammad b. ‘Ali b. ‘Abd al-Rahman b. ‘Arraq. According to medieval biographical accounts from the tenth and eleventh centuries, he was born to a wealthy Circassian Mamluk amir in Damascus in 1473, spent his life in Damascus and Beirut, and died in Mecca in 1526, at the age of fifty-four. The domed structure could not have been his tomb, because the sources confirm that he was buried in the cemetery at the Bab al-Ma‘la in Mecca.

He first visited Beirut in 1490, at the age of seventeen, after his father’s death. According to al-Ghazzi,
who provides us with the most elaborate biography of Ibn ‘Arraq, he went to Beirut to regain control of his father’s iqṭaʿ (land granted to army officials), where he is said to have led a life of luxury. In Beirut, he sought guidance from Shaykh Muhammad al-Rayiq, who directed him to different shaykhs in Beirut, Tripoli, and Sidon. Upon his return to Damascus, however, he went back to a feudal lifestyle, occupying himself with the iqṭaʿ and with horseback riding, archery, hunting, chess, and other pleasures.32 In Damascus five years later, in 1495, he encountered Shaykh Ibrahim al-Naji, who persuaded him to abandon these hobbies, taking him under his wing and initiating him to Sufism. From then onward, Ibn ‘Arraq devoted himself to the study of tafsîr (scriptural interpretation), Hadith, and fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence).

His second visit to Beirut was in 1499, this time for the purpose of jihad. He participated in defending the city against what the sources describe as “Frankish attacks.” It was the custom for Sufis to go to both Sidon and Beirut to take part in defending the towns, first against such attacks and later, in the time of Ibn ‘Arraq, against the pirates who constantly threatened the Syrian coast of the Mediterranean trade routes.33 In 1499, Ibn ‘Arraq was visited by Shaykh ‘Ali b. Maymun al-Maghribi, who remained his principal tutor until the shaykh’s death in 1511.34 From Beirut Ibn ‘Arraq traveled to Egypt to pursue further study under the shaykhs of Cairo and Dimyat. In 1500 he returned to Beirut, where he stayed for about five years, during which he went on his first pilgrimage to Mecca (in 1500), married a second time (in 1501), and instructed students. He returned to Damascus with his family in 1505 and in 1506 joined ‘Ali b. Maymun in Hama for four months of tutoring, after which he returned to Beirut and spent two years, through 1507, teaching and writing a number of books. He then returned to Hama to receive further guidance from Ibn Maymun for the next four years.35

His last visit to Beirut was in 1517, again for the purpose of jihad. This sojourn lasted only a few months, after which he departed for the hajj to Mecca in 1518. He lived the last decade of his life in Mecca and Medina and died in Mecca in 1526.36 It was during this last visit to Beirut that he built a house for his family and a ribâṭ, or zawiya, for his followers there. He was by then a very pious and learned member of the ulama as well as a popular Sufi scholar sought by many who followed his ḥarīqa (Sufi order).37

Ibn ‘Arraq built his house and zawiya outside the city proper and near the the oldest of Beirut’s zawiyas, that of al-Imam al-Awza‘i.38 Given their shared function and proximity, the two zawiyas are often confused.39 Al-Awza‘i, who was born in Baalbek in 707 and died in Beirut in 774,40 instructed his students and followers in the zawiya named after him, which at that time was situated outside the city proper, where the Ottoman souks were later built. Thus it came to occupy the southern end of Souk al-Tawileh, to the west of the zawiya of Ibn ‘Arraq. Though al-Awza‘i’s zawiya was demolished and replaced by a warehouse in the nineteenth century, a prayer room constructed on top of the warehouse became known as the mosque of al-Imam al-Awza‘i. The zawiya was provided with a sabîl (charity fountain), which was built adjacent to it in 1529.41 and whose inscription refers to both zawiyas, which may have contributed to the confusion.42 Neither the mosque of al-Awza‘i nor the fountain survived the demolition of Solidere’s reconstruction project for Beirut’s Central District.

Today only the domed chamber from the zawiya of Ibn ‘Arraq is extant (fig. 4). Given the medieval custom of attaching domed chambers to religious foundations such as madrasas, khanqahs, and zawiyas, and given the common typology of religious Mamluk foundations, the domed chamber was most likely part of an iwan plan, connected to a vaulted iwan that opened onto a courtyard around which living cells were organized. Surviving examples of Sufi foundations from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Egypt and Syria, such as the zawiya of Zayn al-Din Yusuf (1298–1336),43 the khanqah of Sitt Urdükin (1517) (fig. 5),44 and the more contemporary tekîyiya of Muhi al-Din Ibn al-‘Arabi in Damascus (1516),45 illustrate the type and are comparable to the zawiya in terms of plan and scale. Archaeological excavations from 1994 to 1995 of the souks in the center of Beirut, in the site “BEY 006,” confirm this supposition. The report states that

...the features associated with the construction of the shrine [of Ibn ‘Arraq] and contemporary with it are limited to the basin and associated plaster floor. Since they form part of the north–south extension of the building, their character suggests that they were located within an internal courtyard. Traces of a wall...to the west of the plaster floor provide a western limit to these features.46
Fig. 4. The zawiya of Ibn 'Arraq. (Plans and elevations: Howayda Al-Harithy, based on Solidere’s documents)

Fig. 5. The khanqah of Sitt Urdukin, Cairo, 1317 (Photo: Howayda Al-Harithy)
The zawiya has a history of its own relative to its changing context, which was not fully urbanized until the second half of the nineteenth century, when the Ottomans built the souks. Ibn 'Arraq built it in an open area north of the medieval city, on the edge of an industrial zone and surrounded by mulberry plantations. The 1994–95 archaeological excavation reports provide insight into the historical evolution of the area: “It seems that this area witnessed only sporadic building and was for a large part of its history—between the late seventh and early nineteenth century—an open space.” As the reports further note, the 1994 excavations revealed that the Mamluk building stood on Beirut’s main east–west street, in an artisans’ quarter that served the medieval town to the south and was also connected to the harbor by another street leading straight north, probably through a green space.

After Ibn ‘Arraq’s death and burial in Mecca in 1526, the Ottoman rulers in Beirut took charge of his zawiya. Under the Ottomans, the zawiya took on a funerary function when it became the resting place for the Ottoman rulers of Beirut, beginning with Muhammad Pasha al-Arna‘uti, who was buried there in the second half of the seventeenth century. The zawiya of Ibn ‘Arraq continued to be a significant religious foundation throughout the Ottoman period, despite the diminishment of Sufi practices. British plans of Beirut from 1831 and 1841 record the urban condition around the zawiya during the first half of the nineteenth century (fig. 6), at which time the area northwest of the city was still not developed and remained largely covered with mulberry plantations. These plans also show the long path that crossed the area and connected it to Bab al-Santiyya and the port. Along the southern part of the path, an area that later became Souk al-Tawileh, appears a small group of buildings, including the zawiyas of Ibn ‘Arraq and Imam al-Awza‘i.

During the second half of the nineteenth century the whole area was developed into an urban commercial center as the Ottoman souks were gradually constructed along the path connecting the core of the medieval city to the port. In 1864 the first paved souk, Souk Ayyas, was constructed, followed in 1894 by Souk al-Tawileh (fig. 7). The zawiya was integrated into the souks and continued to function until the late nineteenth century, when the Ottomans, as part of their modernization process, closed it down along with many other zawiyas in Beirut. Its function was then reduced: “At the beginning of the twentieth century, this zawiya was transformed into a religious school for teaching the sons of Beirut the blessed Qur’an, the Prophet’s tradition, and basic knowledge of Arabic and arithmetic. Its shaykh and director was Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ghani Bundaq,” who was also buried in the zawiya, as confirmed by the report issued by Dar al-Fatwa, which states: “The tomb within the zawiya is dedicated to one of Ibn ‘Arraq’s students from the Bundaq family who lived during the late Ottoman period in Beirut.”

Eventually the zawiya, now a religious school, gave in to the socio-economic transformations Beirut was experiencing—the aggressive expansion of the souks and the shift in the educational system toward secular and foreign models. By the beginning of the twentieth century, it ceased to function as a religious foundation and was subdivided into shops. A 1963 source notes that most of the zawiya had been transformed into a shop managed by the family of Baylaryan, and another source from three decades later reports that the zawiya contained three shops, behind which lay the burial area.

It becomes obvious, in tracing the history of this building, that it had a narrative of its own: built as a zawiya, it became a burial chamber, then a religious school, and finally shops within the souks. It regenerated itself as a text within a changing urban context, demonstrating the post-structuralist notion “that ‘context’ is in fact unable to arrest the fundamental mobility of semiosis for the reason that it harbors the same principle of interminability within itself.” But the surviving fragment of the building, the domed chamber, was reduced from an open text to an architectural sign, which was in turn entered into the narratives formed as the postwar reconstruction project unfolded.

THE SECOND NARRATIVE

The second narrative, constructed by Solidere, creates yet another interesting condition within this complex text-context production. Since the context of the souks was completely erased by Solidere, I will follow Culler’s suggestion and investigate the “framing” of signs rather than “context.” Culler poses the following question: “How are signs constituted (framed) by various discursive practices, institutional arrangements, systems of value, semiotic mechanisms?” I will, in this case, take design as the operating discursive practice.
At the same time as the dispute over the identity of Ibn ‘Arraq was taking place another narrative was being woven with regard to the whole Central District. During the demolition and digging phase of the reconstruction project, many other archaeological sites were also revealed, capturing the attention of the Department of Antiquity, archaeologists, and activists alike. They campaigned to pressure Solidere to protect the archaeological finds and to integrate them into the project. Archaeologist Helen Sader of the American University of Beirut stated that “the reconstruction operation launched a destruction frenzy in the city center and an army of bulldozers threatened both modern and ancient remains.” She further added, “A Department of Antiquity official summed up the situation by openly asking whether the outcome of the forthcoming reconstruction project would simply be ‘une destruction de l’histoire.’”
The new developments on the ground forced a major shift in Solidere’s planning strategy:

During the process, the grand-plan, tabula-rasa manner of the early master plans gave way to a more contextual approach that valued the preexisting, visual townscape and the topographic features of the city; substantially increased the number of salvaged buildings; and placed greater emphasis on the archaeological heritage of central Beirut, locus of ancient settlement and a site continuously inhabited for more than 5000 years.

As historic buildings and archaeological finds became a factor, the conceptual frame for the design also changed. Two design concepts emerged as dominant: “memory” and “layers.” In the words of Angus Gavin of Solidere’s planning team,

Historical or “city” memory became a fundamental concept of the master plan. Beirut is an ancient, “layered” city containing the surviving features of some twelve distinct civilizations, with the earliest substantial remains dating from the Bronze Age. Fragments of each influential era and successive patterns survive to the present day. We need to respect and preserve the continuum and allow such a pattern of layering to survive and evolve into the future.

It was then that the motto “Beirut: Ancient City for the Future” was coined by Solidere.

These concepts were spatially translated into “a series of heritage trails meant to carry the message of ‘city memory’ through different layers of the city’s past,”74 as well as “a system of open spaces and promenades intended to preserve the city’s memory.”75 Though the statements reiterated by Solidere’s planning and design team stress preservation and suggest a Ruskinian conception of memory that perceives architecture as “society’s primary harbor of memory,”76 Solidere’s actual practice as reflected in the master plan and the treatment of the historic and archaeological artifacts in actuality invokes Alois Riegl’s conception of memory and produces what Riegel termed the “Modern Cult of Monuments.” Riegl had argued that the memory we care to construct defines what we identify as a monument; that memory is a product of the present rather than the past.77 This clearly applies to Solidere’s selective process of identifying buildings, archaeological finds, and historic periods to be integrated into the narrative that is “city memory”: “Findings from the Bronze, Phoenician, Roman, Byzantine, Mamluk, and Ottoman eras have been discovered in numerous locations in the city center,” said Oussama Kabbani of Solidere’s urban design team, adding, “These glimpses of the past can be seen as traces, alongside restored buildings as well as fragments of spaces, that collectively establish a sophisticated interpretation of the past rather than a literal recollection.”78

But what constitutes Beirut’s Mamluk layer? The medieval city did not witness much building during the Mamluk period: no major buildings or fortifications of that time survive, nor is there any archaeological evidence of extensive construction; rather, it was the Crusaders who rebuilt the fortifications of the medieval city.79 According to Helen Sader,

No substantial evidence related to the city’s urban planning and extension during that period was yielded by the recent excavations. The center of the medieval city seems to have focused on the main Crusader Cathedral of St.
John, later transformed into Beirut’s Great Mosque by the Mamluks. Worth mentioning is the discovery of an industrial zone in the souks area where pottery kilns and a pottery dump have been found together with evidence of a glass industry. No new buildings have been discovered, and with the exception of Ibn Iraq’s partly preserved ribat at the entrance of Souk al-Tawileh, the Mamluks do not seem to have attempted rebuilding the city.80

As a matter of fact, very little survives from the whole of the Islamic medieval period:

Apart from a small number of finds of Abbasid and Fatimid date, which although of interest in their own right were not found in association with any contemporary remains, there was little structural evidence of occupation between the 7th and 12th centuries in the souks area. The site apparently remained an open ruin throughout this period, and many of the late Roman floors were directly covered by finds of Mameluk date. It seems more likely that streets such as Souk Tawileh could be reestablished over the line of an ancient road because the ancient ruins were still visible, rather than because of any continuity of occupation along its line.81

In the narrative of “city memory,” the zawiya of Ibn ‘Arraq became an extremely precious fragment for Solidere’s project (fig. 8). It is not only the last surviving fragment of the Mamluk layer, dating to the last year of the Mamluk era, but also of the whole Islamic medieval era. A graphic illustration of the notion of the layers of “city memory”82 indicates seven layers: Phoenician, Roman, Medieval, Ottoman, French Mandate, Wartime, and Reconstruction. The zawiya is employed as the architectural sign making the reference to an important period in the layers of the “city memory” narrative. It seems that what Solidere has engaged in is “a case in which the sequence (from context to text) is actually inferred from its endpoint, leading to the kind of metalepsis that Nietzsche calls ‘chronological reversal.’”83 Unwilling to address the present with its most recent social memory, that of the war, nor able to start anew, Solidere gives us “the city of collective memory, with its quasi-archaeological presentations and staging, as well as restored buildings.”84 As Christine Boyer, writing on the place of history and memory in the contemporary city, observes, “Engulfed and enframed by a set of new constraints forged in contemporary times, these fragments from the past appear denigrated by nostalgic sentiments that fuel their preservation or reconstruction, while our collective memory of public places seems undermined by historic reconstructions.”85

The two narratives are distinctly different in their discursive practice of framing the architectural sign and in the objectives of their authors. The first narrative, authored by the Shiite Hezbollah group, is a religious one, constructed through the practice of rituals. The architectural sign is framed to signify the holy man. The narrative is woven to serve socio-political ends and is authenticated by the notion of lineage in which the patron of the building is the operative agent. The second narrative, that of Solidere, is archaeological, constructed through the practice of design, and the architectural sign is framed to signify the Mamluk layer. The narrative is woven to serve economic ends and is authenticated by the notion of time—five thousand years of history—in which the age of the building is the operative factor.
The third narrative is an architectural one, in which the zawiya of Ibn ‘Arraq is framed to signify a traditional architectural style. Like the second narrative, it is woven through the discursive practice of design—in particular, Rafael Moneo’s design of the souks. A different manner of referencing history is found in this scheme, however. While in the second narrative, the text is “city memory” and history is commodified, in this narrative the text is the “old souks” and tradition is invented.

The decision to restore the domed structure of Ibn ‘Arraq’s zawiya meant that it was to be incorporated into the the souks, the master scheme of which was designed by the architect Jad Tabet and approved in 1999. This scheme retains the street patterns and orientation of the pre-war souks and accommodates the concepts of the more encompassing master plan for the entire Central District by providing open spaces and integrating the archaeological finds within the souks.

In 1996, the architect Rafael Moneo took charge of translating the master scheme of the souks into an architectural design of the buildings and open spaces. One central concept occupied him: “The charge for the project concerning the souks of Beirut entailed finding an architectural solution that revitalizes the familiar character of a souk while accommodating the contemporary needs of shopping and retail.”

While preserving the street patterns dictated by Jad Tabet’s master scheme, Moneo attempted to meet the charge both formally and spatially. Formally, elements were borrowed from the buildings left standing on the site of the souks—the zawiya of Ibn ‘Arraq and the façade of the jewelry souk—into the design of the façades of the new buildings. Spatially, in Moneo’s words,

> The general urban layout reinforces the relationship of the souks with the surrounding context by connecting the roads with the souks. As such, the souks retain the prewar openness of the city’s pedestrian traffic, a quality that has always distinguished the Beirut souks from the self-contained character of other souks such as those of Aleppo and Istanbul.

The success of Moneo’s planned attempt at openness and continuity is questionable, however, since the souks are in reality raised on a 2500-car parking garage, and their main means of approach and departure is from within. The character of the old souks is further compromised by the distribution of his scheme’s components, with department stores dominating the primary souks (fig. 9):

> The project consists of three main programmatic elements. They are: retail, housing [at the eastern and western edges], and offices [confined to a five-story building on Weygand Street]. The retail section is the largest and is laid out in a traditional manner. The major souks, al-Tawileh, al-Jamil and al-Arwam, are lined with larger shops that satisfy modern retail criteria [department stores] whereas the smaller souks, Ayyas, Sayyour, Boustros, Arwad, and the al-Franj, maintain the scale of retail in traditional manner.

One can argue that retaining the old street patterns does not ensure maintaining the spatial social practices that animate the souks, especially if elements on the site and beyond are not interdependent in their programmatic distribution, access, and circulation.

In this scheme, Souk al-Tawileh remains a major spatial feature, a spine 8.5 meters wide and over 200 meters long that stretches from Weygand Street to Trablous Street. Its northern end is marked by ‘Ajami Square and its southern end by Ibn ‘Arraq Square. “Ibn Iraq [‘Arraq] Square,” Moneo states, “acts as the main entrance from Weygand Street to the over-
all area of the souks." The published design documents and the model of the souks show the zawiya of Ibn ‘Arraq restored only as a domed cube and articulated as a freestanding building in the open space (fig. 10), as if it were a fountain, playing the role of a landmark at the entrance of the souks (fig. 11). In this design process, the building has been desanctified. Though the burial area adjacent to the domed area proper survived the demolition, it has gradually disappeared from the proposed scheme for the souks; that the pavement pattern for the square is to be integrated with that of the domed chamber indicates the intention of opening it to the public, pedestrian realm of the project.

In this third narrative, unlike the previous two, the domed structure is stripped of all of its self-referential systems, denied reference to its age, patron, or function. It is reduced to a visual sign whose style and formal presence suggest the “old” that is to be emulated by the façades of the surrounding buildings in an attempt to reconstruct the past. Its presence authen-

Fig. 10. Model showing the zawiya of Ibn ‘Arraq within the scheme of the souks. (Model: Solidere; photo: Howayda Al-Harithy)

Fig. 11. Urban context of the zawiya of Ibn ‘Arraq. (Plans: Howayda Al-Harithy)
ticates the process of recreating the old; it constitutes the “old frame” onto which the new is clinging. The zawiya plays a dual role in signifying both the medieval layer of Beirut and the style of the “old” or “traditional” character of the souks, though in reality its Mamluk architectural language differs from the late Ottoman language of the old souks. The duality that serves both the second and the third narrative is clearly reflected in the following statement:

The small Mamluk monument and sanctuary on Beirut’s main east–west thoroughfare will stand in the city of the future as a tangible witness to Beirut 500 years ago. Even in its post-war state it reminds us of the intimate and functional composition of Islamic architecture based on infinite variations of arches and domes, enclosing shady courtyards with fountains and birds, and interlaced with gardens, public or planted spaces where trees rose high above the domes and terraced roofs.  

In his attempt to keep to the notions advanced by the Jad Tabet master plan, Moneo used the domed chamber as a trace of “a past” to be recreated, the “traditional” souks. He thus gives us an illustration of Eric Hobsbawm’s invented traditions, “which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”  Hobsbawm further describes invented traditions as “responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition.” Thus the narrative here is one of traditional architecture that plays on the nostalgia for the past and in which the past is invented. A major difference among the
three narratives lies in the manner in which they reference history—through the notions of lineage, layers, and, finally, style.

Today, the fate of the zawiya of Ibn ‘Arraq, within the project of the postwar reconstruction, is being decided. Solidere hired the architect Youssef Haidar for the restoration of the zawiya but restricted him to the urban design guidelines articulated in the scheme for the souks, leaving it as a freestanding structure in the open square. According to Haidar, the domed structure will be treated as an archaeological object on display. It will not be assigned any particular function and will be open on three sides, with its floor integrated into the paved area of the urban space (fig. 12). The semiotic play will most certainly continue, and the next narrative will eventually be written by the users of the space and the structure as they claim, gaze upon, dwell within, or in other ways reframe the monument.

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NOTES

Author’s note: This paper was delivered as a lecture at MIT in May 2001 and at UC Berkeley in Sept. 2002. Its publication was delayed awaiting more information on the fate of the building in question, the zawiya of Ibn ‘Arraq, as determined by the ongoing reconstruction project of Beirut’s Central District. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Philip Saad for his tremendous help in researching this paper. I would also like to thank Al-Nahar Research and Documentation Center, Solidere’s Information Office, and Professor Helga Seeden of AUB for providing information critical to this paper.


3. Ibid.


9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.


14. Ibid.


17. Ibid.


19. Ibid.


21. This is in reference to Khayr al-Dîn al-Zarkalî, al-’alam (Beirut, 1986).

22. This is in reference to ‘Umar Rîdâ Kahâlû, Mu’jam al-Mu’alîfûn (Damascus, 1961).


24. In reference to the medieval biographical work, Najm al-Dîn al-Ghazûzî, al-Kawâkib al-sâ’ira bi-a’yan al-mi’a al-’âshira (see n. 29 below).


27. Ibid.


30. Except for Tashkubrî-zâda, who maintains that Ibn ‘Arraq died in Medina, all biographers record that he died in Mecca and was buried there. Ibn Tulûn further states that his funeral was attended by the sultan of Mecca, Abu Numay Barakat. See al-’Aydarî, al-Nîr al-sâ’îr ‘an akhbâr al-qarn al-’âshir, 192–98; Tashkubrî-zâda, al-Shaqqîq al-nu’mânîyâ, 212–13; al-Ghazûzî, al-Kawâkib al-sâ’ira bi-a’yan al-mi’a al-’âshira, 59–68; Ibn Tulûn, Dakhkhat al-qasî fi tarâjîm nubal’tâ’ al-asr.
31. According to al-Ghazzi, this was also the year of his first marriage. See al-Ghazzi, al-Kawâkih al-sâ’ira bi-dâ’yân al-mi’a al-lâ’ishâra, 59.

32. Ibid.


34. al-Ghazzi, al-Kawâkih al-sâ’ira bi-dâ’yân al-mi’a al-lâ’ishâra, 60.

35. According to the sources he wrote twenty-four books that were critically reviewed and corrected by his tutor, Ibn Maymoun al-Maghribi, during this period. See al-Ghazzi, al-Kawâkih al-sâ’ira bi-dâ’yân al-mi’a al-lâ’ishâra, 62.


37. al-Ghazzi, al-Kawâkih al-sâ’ira bi-dâ’yân al-mi’a al-lâ’ishâra, 63.

38. For more details on the zawiyâ of al-Awza’i and the zawiyas of Beirut see Shaﬁq Tabbâra, al-Imám al-Awza’i (Beirut, 1965), 269.

39. This is the case in an undated report commissioned by Solidere to determine the status of the zawiyâ of Ibn ‘Arrâq (lot no. 90) and submitted by the architect ‘Abd al-Wahid Shihab, and a letter dated Feb. 16, 1983, by Mahmud Hatab, General Director of Antiquities, requesting that the zawiya of al-Awza’i be listed as a historic monument (document no. 450, General Directorate of Antiquity). The zawiyâ of al-Awza’i is clearly identified with lot no. 72 in ‘Abd al-Rahmân al-Hut, al-Jawami’ wa l-masâṣijd al-sharîf al-Bayrût (Beirut, 1966), 19.

40. Dâwud Kan’an, Bayrût fi l-târîkh (Beirut, 1963), 19.

41. Ibid., 20, and Tabbâra, al-Imâm al-Awza’i, 270.

42. For the full text of the inscription see Kan’an, Bayrût fi l-târîkh, 20.


45. Abdul Qader Rihawi, Arabic Islamic Architecture in Syria ( Damascus, 1979), 225.


47. According to Helen Sader this is where the Roman and Byzantine economic center was found, and the site had no evidence of building during the medieval period or later, until the nineteenth century. See Helen Sader, “Ancient Beirut: Urban Growth in the Light of Recent Excavations,” in Rowe and Sarkis, Projecting Beirut, 36.


49. The 1841 British map shows the mulberry plantation. The mulberry plantations may date to the period during the seventeenth century when al-Amir Fakhr al-Din al-Ma’ni revived the silk industry. See Urban Archaeology ’94, 15.
82. See Gavin, “Heart of Beirut,” 224.
85. Ibid., 1.
86. Solidere, Annual Report (Beirut, 1999), 32.
87. Rafael Moneo, “The Souks of Beirut,” in Rowe and Sarkis, Projecting Beirut, 263.
88. Ibid.
89. Ibid., 263–64.
90. Ibid., 266.
91. Ibid., 270.
92. Ibid., 271.
94. On display at the headquarters of Solidere in downtown Beirut.
96. This notion of recreating traditional forms recurs in different formulas at Solidere, a most revealing example being the Saifi Village project within the Solidere area.
98. Ibid.