COMMUNITY RESPONSES TO post-civil war reconstruction efforts articulate the local and the global in Beirut, Lebanon. This paper discusses the nature of, and discourse surrounding, large-scale redevelopment of the central business district and the ways in which community groups respond to it. Despite the fact that local residents positively identify with international aspects of pre-civil war life, they object to new forms of global investments. Constructions of local heritage produced by residents are largely responses to the exclusionary practices of the new investors. [Global-local, urban space, post-war reconstruction, Beirut, Lebanon]

FROM 1975–1991, a devastating civil war destroyed much of the physical infrastructure of Beirut. Nationally, one quarter of all dwelling units were damaged or demolished, and half of the population had been temporarily or permanently uprooted from their homes (Charif 1994; Faour 1993; Trendle 1991). Of a population of 3.5 million, almost one-third emigrated; an additional 800,000 had become internal refugees, and over 150,000 had been killed (Percy 1995:6–7; Kisirwani 1997:87). At the end of the civil war in 1991, Lebanon began the arduous process of rebuilding. Major reconstruction projects are currently underway in Beirut in an attempt to repair the city’s infrastructure, and to return Beirut to its previous role as the cosmopolitan center of the Middle East. Many individuals and groups, both Lebanese and foreign, have been drawn into discussions about how to reconstruct Beirut as a twenty-first-century city, while at the same time conserve references to the city’s past and celebrate the numerous groups that comprise its population. Towards that end the new Beirut is being promoted as “An Ancient City for the Future.” Despite the many disagreements over the details of the city’s reconstruction, there is general agreement about the basic motivation for
rebuilding Beirut’s central district. Reconstructing central Beirut has an economic benefit by stimulating local as well as international investment in the city. In addition, discourse surrounding the reconstruction project reveals that the physical and spatial restructuring are linked to healing the social wounds left by the long civil war. The rebuilding of Beirut is intended to create a city where the previously warring factions can live in relative harmony. And Beirut’s new face is also being designed to return the city to its pre-war role as a cosmopolitan center of the eastern Mediterranean (Gavin and Maluf 1996:12–13). Local lore traces Beirut’s cosmopolitanism as far back as the Phoenician navigators who were engaged in trade throughout the Mediterranean, and includes Roman, Ottoman, and French activity in the region. Given Beirut’s location on the classic trade routes from the Orient to Europe, it has often been referred to as the gateway between East and West (Gavin and Maluf 1996:12–13). These transnational precedents culminated in the pre-war era when Beirut functioned as the main Middle Eastern center of European tourism and business. Between 1950 and 1975, many of the major commercial, financial and cultural institutions of the Middle East were located in Beirut. During the civil war, most of the financial and cultural institutions closed or relocated elsewhere in the Middle East and the tourists and businessmen were replaced by militia members and arms dealers.

The private company SOLIDERE (Société Libanaise pour le Développement et la Réconstruction de Centre Ville de Beyrouth), has been appointed by the Hariri government to rebuild and develop the main commercial district, about 1.5 square kilometers. One of SOLIDERE’s explicit aims is to create a central district that can compete internationally
with other cities of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. SOLIDERE claims that "a massive and global reconstruction of the war-torn city center was seen as a must-do action to announce the end of war and the beginning of return to normality" (Kabbani 1996:8). In order to implement its plans, large areas of central Beirut had to be acquired from private owners. Those whose property is confiscated are to be allocated fifty percent of the company's total shares. The other half is earmarked for outside investors. More than two hundred companies from Western and Arab countries are to take part in the project (Beyhum et al. 1992).

Responses to the Plan

Beirut's reconstruction has provoked vigorous debate. Participants include: funding agencies (which have different techno-economic interests); urban planners and architects (whose main concern is to reshape the physical appearance of the city); Lebanese social scientists, historians, writers, and "traditional" local, religious and political leaders (who champion the call to preserve as much as possible of certain aspects of the city's past); pre-war users of the space, such as tenants and owners; displaced groups who occupied different spaces in the city during and after the war; and finally, semi-governmental institutions like the Waqf (the organization that manages religiously endowed property). The project has been criticized for trying to impose reconstruction without taking into account the city and the people's diverse historical and social identities (Al-Abdulah 1993, Beyhum et al 1992, 1994, Corm 1994, Dajani 1994, Dnawi 1994, Khalaf 1991, Khalaf and Khoury 1993, Khoury 1995, Labaki 1993, Seeden 1993). Critics argue that the plan of the city center is based on technical and economic considerations, and on the interests of the regional and international investors, ignoring issues of public space, the city's identity, local inhabitant's interests and needs. As Giles Trendle (1991:22) put it, "Today, with the fighting over, there is a new plan to destroy the city center once again, but this time with the bulldozer and the pick-axe, in order that Beirut can reclaim its former title as the Hong Kong of the Middle East."

A common concern of many of these groups, is that SOLIDERE's plan appears to be designed as if the area has no history, ignoring the population's emotional and cultural attachment to urban spaces (Nasr 1993:65). Planners, architects, social scientists and writers, advocate the designation and preservation of select buildings and monuments. Jad Tabet (1994:79), an architect, recommends preserving historical sites to enhance "the city of the future" in a form where the past and future intertwine providing historically imbued spaces and symbols around which new ideas and activities can be structured. The archaeologist Suzy
Hakimian (1994:17) underscores the importance of cooperation among architects, archaeologists, and promoters and emphasizes that archaeological and historical preservation should not be an obstacle to the reconstruction project. In one of the more poignant critiques of reconstruction, Elias Khoury (1995), a Lebanese novelist and journalist, writes:

Beirut attempts to regenerate itself by recycling garbage and destroying its own memories. The city center appears as an empty space, a placeless space, and a hole in the memory. How are we to preserve the memory of this place in the face of such frightening amnesia?

Similar concerns and critiques are commonly voiced by local residents. Abu Sami expressed his dissatisfaction and helplessness towards the reconstruction project: "What can we do, they [SOLIDERE'S workers] throw the bones of my father and mother into the sea. If I want to visit my mother's grave, maybe I will have to visit one of SOLIDERE's glass towers." Abu Sami was referring to an Islamic cemetery located in Beirut's downtown area that had been bulldozed by SOLIDERE to make room for new development. SOLIDERE has revised its reconstruction plans several times to accommodate those who worry that the city will lose its identity. To address such criticisms, SOLIDERE has tried to reemphasize the slogan "Beirut madina ariqa lil mustaqbal," (Beirut: an ancient city of the future). The identification and preservation of select examples of Beirut's architectural heritage is one strategy SOLIDERE has adopted which aims to imbue the new city center with symbolic and aesthetic references to the past. Through this process Beirut's rich layered heritage—Phoenician, Greek, Roman, Mamluk and Ottoman—is to be preserved in an archaeological park (Percy 1995; Director General of Antiquities of Lebanon 1995).

Domestic reactions to SOLIDERE'S project often reflect the conviction that the terms of reconstruction have been imposed on the Lebanese from the outside. To counter external pressures, groups and individuals exert their own influence through investment or through public critiques. Indeed, experts have published a number of books, booklets, brochures, and articles promoting their views. But, the reconstruction project also affects the daily lives of the inhabitants of neighborhoods surrounding Beirut's center, most of whom are underrepresented in the planning process. These groups utilize other modes of self-representation, developing daily opposition strategies in the form of public speeches, demonstrations, gossip, and issuing religious legal casuistrys.

In response to the perception that SOLIDERE is giving priority to global over local initiatives, a number of community-based organizations have emerged as representatives of local residents' interests. Some of these groups are new, while others are revising and reforming their agendas to satisfy the changing needs of their constituency.
discussion with me, Sheikh Ahmed, the leader of an Islamic Group (Al-Jama'a Al-Islameyya), criticized the reconstruction project and voiced suspicions about the intentions of both the government and SOLIDERE:

I won’t buy SOLIDERE’S claims of restoring the heritage of Beirut. In their future city, there will be no place for the pre-war social and cultural activities. What’s going on in downtown Beirut is a complete destruction of the city’s past and history. SOLIDERE’s only concern is to bulldoze buildings that survived two decades of war and to replace them with glass towers and sell them to non-Lebanese. The result of this project is to force Beirutis out of their city. What happened so far is that SOLIDERE demolished the houses and popular markets and left the people of the city with bitterness and grief. Our response as an Islamic Group is to issue a legal casuistry (fatwa shareyya) that it is illegal to buy SOLIDERE’s shares.

Not all community-group action is aimed directly at SOLIDERE. Many groups are tackling more localized global challenges to specific spaces and activities in their own neighborhoods. The practices and strategies of the community groups range from completely rejecting the modernist and global leanings of the post-war development projects to negotiating ways in which they themselves might be incorporated into the modernizing initiatives. The residents and organizers hope that community groups will be able to voice concerns about the rate of compensation for real estate, the loss of control over neighborhood spaces, and protecting the endangered heritage and history of their city.

A Global Neighborhood?

The neighborhood of Ayn al-Mreicheh is bordered by three areas dominated by global interests: the city center, the area known to house Beirut’s major hotels, and the American University of Beirut. Before the war, Sunni, Druze, Shi’i’, Christians, Armenians and Kurds lived side by side in Ayn al-Mreicheh. The area’s inhabitants worked as merchants in the city center, laborers at the port, in the entertainment and tourism industries, and as fishermen. During the civil war, Beirut was divided into West Beirut, where mostly Muslims and a few Christians lived, and East Beirut which was exclusively Christian. With a majority of Muslims and Druze, Ayn al-Mreicheh became part of West Beirut, and many of the area’s previous inhabitants moved out and displaced Shi’i, mostly from Southern Lebanon and East Beirut moved in. Due to its proximity to both the city center and the sea, Ayn al-Mreicheh is expected to experience an economic upturn as Beirut is rebuilt.
Consequently, regional and international businesses are investing in the area and opening establishments. The price of land has increased threefold over the past two years, prompting many residents to sell their property, hoping to start new lives somewhere else. Umm Jihad, a fifty-eight-year-old woman who had recently sold her apartment to a Kuwaiti businessman explained:

I lived in this same apartment for the last thirty years. My son Jihad, his wife and two children live in one room in the same apartment. My unemployed son, Ziad, and my disabled father share another room. . . . I did not want to sell my apartment, but my neighbors on the second floor sold theirs and moved back to their village in the mountains. My two sons put pressure on me to sell. With the money that we got, we paid the first installment for two apartments in the southern suburbs of Beirut. My son Jihad and his family will live in one apartment, and the rest of us will live in the other. We kept the rest of the money for my unemployed son, Ziad, to buy a taxi and start working.

Some families are moving to their villages of origin and planning to commute to jobs in the city. Others are moving to the suburbs of Beirut where they can find cheaper housing. As the residents move out, their buildings are demolished and replaced by hotels, or large-scale office and apartment buildings. Those who remain are faced with the challenge of sharing neighborhood spaces with new users.
including luxury hotels such as the Saint George and the Phoenicia, nightclubs, and furnished apartments. Their contact with the world is also proven by the fact that according to a survey by the Ministry of Migrants, there are immigrants from the Ayn al-Mreicheh area in nineteen different countries all the way from Canada to the Ivory Coast. When telling the history of Ayn al-Mreicheh, residents often begin by listing the names of the famous “international” hotels of Ayn al-Mreicheh, without forgetting to name some of the well-known politicians and personalities from all over the world who stayed at these hotels before the war. Many of the people I interviewed insisted on showing me some of the photos they’d taken with these “global” personalities. Residents typically volunteered a list of the foreign embassies which had residences in Ayn al-Mreicheh, (e.g. the American, Austrian, French, German, and British), often emphasizing the fact that they had good social relations with embassy officials. Abu Hassan, who has lived in Ayn al-Mreicheh since his birth there sixty-five years ago, described his relationship with a high official in the French embassy:

I was an athlete when I was young. Once I was swimming and diving and a secretary in the French embassy saw me. He sent his Lebanese driver to ask me to go and see him. The driver told him that I am a boxer, too. He asked me to go and exercise with him for three hours a day and he used to pay me five liras, and afterwards I started to give his wife massages.

Commenting on the current changes to his neighborhood, Abu Hassan continues:

There is an attack on our neighborhood now by the investors who are supported by the government. Up to now, we have lost six swimming beaches which are going to be part of the highway that leads to the city center. These beaches were attracting tourists as well as Lebanese. In each of these beaches at least ten to fifteen people were employed from among the inhabitants of Ayn al-Mreicheh.

As this quote indicates, although the residents of Ayn al-Mreicheh identify with the neighborhood’s past role as a tourist center, the new global initiatives are viewed as antagonistic to the local economic and social fabric.

The Ayn al-Mreicheh Mosque Committee is one of the oldest community-based organizations. Its members are mostly Sunni Muslims who consider themselves the original inhabitants of the neighborhood. Members claim that during the war they ran the schools on a voluntary basis, collected aid for the displaced, and coordinated with political authorities to provide services such as water and electricity to local residents. The Mosque Committee also helped reduce tension between different political groups, encouraging them to keep political and
ideological conflicts outside the neighborhood and engaging their assistance in maintaining stability in the area. During the sixteen years of war, a number of political and ideological parties existed in Ayn al-Mreiceh, including the Progressive Socialist Party, the Amal movement, Hizballa, the Murabitoun, and the Communist Party. These controlled local space, recruited residents but at the same time were sponsored and supported by a variety of outside sources, including the Soviet Union, Iran, Syria, Libya, and the PLO. The Mosque Committee negotiated with members of the different parties to ensure the daily safety of the neighborhood and to protect the area from outsiders' interference in the absence of a central government. Abu-Yousef, a member of the committee, described residents' loyalty to the neighborhood during the civil war:

We, as people of the area, had an unspoken agreement to leave our ideologies and political affiliations on the stairs leading to Ayn al-Mreiceh. The minute you are here, you are only the son of Ayn al-Mreiceh, nothing else.

The Mosque Committee is faced with new challenges. It must find ways to negotiate with the increasing number of businesses moving into Ayn al-Mreiceh. When the Hard Rock Café announced plans to open directly across the street from the Mosque of Ayn al-Mreiceh, the Committee tried to prevent it. Members of the Committee relied on a city law which says that any entertainment establishment (i.e. a bar or night club which plays loud music and serves alcoholic drinks) must be located at least fifty meters from any religious establishment. The Committee's appeals failed and in December of 1996, the Hard Rock Café opened with a gala event attended by numerous investors and dignitaries, including the Prime Minister Raffia Al-Hariri. Now, each night the Hard Rock Café's loud Western music competes with the mosque's call to prayer.

A full year after its opening the Hard Rock Café has not been integrated into the residents' experience nor has it become part of the vocabulary of the daily life in Ayn al-Mreiceh. When they give directions, residents do not refer to the Café, instead they name an army mobile checkpoint which is located next to the Café. As, Hassan, an Ayn al-Mreiceh resident explained: "These large entertainment businesses are not built for [the local residents]; they are for the rich and the tourists." Only a few of the area's residents with whom I spoke had visited the Café. Shadi, one of the few who had been to it, described his visit:

Two weeks after the opening, I went there with my friend. We dressed like the customers of the Café so the guard at the door wouldn't stop us. Immediately after we sat down, a waitress, who was wearing a skirt this long [pointing to five inches above his knee], came to ask us what we wanted to drink, speaking in English. To aggravate her, I said in Arabic: "Give me a
Miriam's Blood but without alcohol." [Practicing Muslims do not drink alcohol.] The waitress repeated in English, "You want two orders of Bloody Mary." The waitress did not come back to us, but a waiter brought us the order. We sat there for fifteen minutes and left.

The Hard Rock Café is one of the few restaurants in Beirut that employs waitresses. So, for Shadi it is a new experience to see a woman serving alcohol. Although it is quite evident that Shadi's animosity toward the Café predated his visit, his experience there did little to change his opinion. In an interview with the Café's manager, I asked why Ayn al-Mreicheh was chosen for the location. He explained that the selection was based on the recommendations of a feasibility study conducted by an international consulting company. The manager, a Lebanese-American, admitted that he has very little knowledge of the area or its inhabitants, nor did he express any interest in acquiring any since, according to him, the Café has nothing to do with the residents of the area. The customers of the Hard Rock Café are mainly rich young Lebanese, foreigners who live in Beirut, and, of course, tourists. Even the employees are outsiders, primarily students from the American University.
While the Mosque Committee’s formal plea to stop the opening of the Hard Rock Café was based on religious and moral grounds, residents also complain that the Café does not bring any economic gains for the inhabitants. Pre-war “global” establishments are generally portrayed in a positive light, highlighting their contribution to, and integration into, the local economy. One resident made the following comparison:

Most of the waiters and workers at the Saint George Hotel used to be from Ayn al-Mreiceh. The management used to buy the hotel’s vegetables and the meat from the shops of the area. When the workers walked in the streets of the area, they would say good morning to you, unlike [the employees of] the Hard Rock Café. All we’ve gained is that our street is blocked all night by the cars of the Café’s rich customers!

The objection to the Hard Rock Café, and other similar businesses, is not their foreignness, since Ayn al-Mreiceh residents are familiar with the potential benefits of foreign investment. Rather, what they find objectionable is that these businesses make little effort to involve area residents.

Collecting History and Preserving Spaces

Another community group, which is active in Ayn al-Mreiceh, is the Association for the Revival of the Heritage of Ayn al-Mreiceh. Members of this association are primarily Druze, Sunni and Christian Lebanese whose residence in Ayn al-Mreiceh can be traced to before the war. Some of its members are also active in the Mosque Committee. The aim of this association is to protect the neighborhood’s threatened heritage. The Association’s understanding of the concept of “heritage” is not particularly clear. Najem, its founder, explained his objectives to include the preservation of anything old and authentic in Ayn al-Mreiceh and to encourage residents not to sell their property to “outsiders,” meaning anyone who is not from Ayn al-Mreiceh.

Residents acknowledge the efforts of the founder of the association and refer to him as “The one who can tell the history of the neighborhood.” Najem, a retired fireman who currently works as a fisherman and a diver, has transformed the second floor of his house into what he calls the “Museum of Ayn al-Mreiceh.” Najem collects any older items that were used by the inhabitants of Ayn al-Mreiceh. People of the area donate objects that they no longer use but judge to be valuable for the heritage of Ayn al-Mreiceh. The three-room museum holds, among other things: forty albums of photographs of people, buildings and sites in the area; a collection of old radio sets, telephones, and phonographs;
traditional Beiruti clothes, coins from different parts of the world and paintings and postcards of old Beirut. Najem emphasizes the importance of his museum as a way to preserve the heritage and guarantee the continued existence of the area: “Our heritage is our history. If we do not do this now, in ten years you won’t find any of us here, and maybe there will be no Ayn al-Mreicheh anymore.” Najem has detailed knowledge of most of the items that he has, such as the name of the owner, the year it was purchased, and its price. And, he will happily and proudly share this information with visitors. He tells me the story of an old radio: “This radio was the first radio set in Ayn al-Mreicheh. The owner who is a friend of my father sold his carpentry equipment to buy it in the 1930s. The neighbors used to go to his shop to listen to the radio.”

Najem’s heritage collection is not limited to documenting the local. In fact, he includes anything that has been adopted by the residents over time, regardless of the item’s origin. According to Najem, the minute an item is used by the inhabitants of Ayn al-Mreicch it becomes part of the neighborhood’s heritage whether it is an appliance, a coin, clothing or fishing equipment. The museum’s collection of photos include the visits to Ayn al-Mreicheh made by numerous international celebrities such as Hollywood actors and actresses, the Shah of Iran and King Hussein of
Jordan, Mohammed Ali and the officials and foreign employees of different embassies. For Najem and the constituency he aims to serve, these photos illustrate a crucial aspect of Ayn al-Mreicheh’s heritage, namely, the fact that Ayn al-Mreicheh’s beaches, nightclubs, and hotels, attracted many foreign visitors, some of whom formed friendships with local residents. Najem complains about the current commodification of features of Ayn al-Mreicheh’s natural environment: “With their money, [the new inhabitants] buy beautiful views of the sea, but they do not know the actual meaning of it. They only watch the sea through the glass of their air-conditioned balconies.” One of the rooms in Najem’s museum is devoted to artifacts from, or related to the sea, such as shells, stones, fish bones, pieces of sunken ships and boats, and old fishing equipment. Through these displays, Najem hopes to document certain moments of the past as a way of providing the area with roots in the present.

A somewhat different strategy has been used by yet another member of this Association. From 1950 through the 1980s, Abu Adnan owned and operated a sporting club in Ayn al-Mreicheh devoted to water sports such as swimming and diving. The owner of the building in which the club was located is replacing it with a large, new apartment building. With the support of the Association, Abu Adnan, successfully negotiated with the owner for a space for his sporting club in the basement floor of the new building in lieu of cash compensation. The club is also expected to provide a place to hold meetings and conduct activities of the Association.

Conclusions

The activities of the Mosque Committee and the Association for Protecting the Heritage of Ayn al-Mreicheh illustrate the range of local responses to the global initiatives of Beirut’s reconstruction. While not all these efforts are successful, the local inhabitants’ previous experiences and historical connections to the area informed claims for continued access to, and control of, neighborhood space. In Beirut, international and regional investors, such as the Hard Rock Café, have a stake in segmenting urban space and familiar locales, thereby introducing new practices of exclusion. As they do so, the confrontation between local groups and capitalist investment schemes will engender new usages and meanings of space. Local community groups are not completely rejecting global processes. Instead, they attempt to engage the global on acceptable, that is, local terms.

Acknowledgments. The fieldwork for this project was conducted in Beirut from May 1996 through July 1997 and was funded by a generous fellowship
from by the MEAwards of the Population Council. An earlier version of this article was presented at a conference entitled “Globalization, Cities and Youth” in Cairo in March 1997. I am grateful to the organizer of the panel, Seteney Shami, for her numerous insightful suggestions and continuous support. Likewise, the editors of the present collection, Sharon Nagy and Farha Ghannam, provided substantial comments and detailed readings. I am also indebted to Vincent Crapanzano, Jane Schneider, and Samir Khalaf for invaluable comments on this article at various stages. Finally, I owe a great debt of gratitude to all of my friends and informants in Beirut.

References Cited

Al-Abdulah, Hassan

Beyhum, Nabil et al.

Beyhum, Nabil, A. Salam and J. Tabet, eds.

Charif, Hassan

Corm, George

Dajani, Nabil

Director General of Antiquities of Lebanon

Dnawi, Adnan
1994 SOLIDERE: Speculation or Reconstruction Company? Beirut (In arabic.)

Faur, Ali

Gavin, Angus and Ramez Maluf
Hakimian, Suzy  

Kabbani, Oussama  

Khalaf, Samir  

Khalaf, Samir  

Khoury, Elias  

Kilmister, Richard  

Kisirwani, Maroun  

Labaki, Boutros  

Nasr, Salim  

Percy, Charles  

Robertson, R.  

Seeden, Helga  

Tabet, Jad  
Trendle, Giles