

Heart of Beirut

Samir Khalaf

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Reclaiming the Bourj



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At the centre of Beirut lies the Bourj, one of the world's great public squares, as well as one of the most durable. The square is an 'open museum of the world's civilisations', resonating with influences from ancient Phoenicia to modern France and beyond. The heart of a 'merchant republic', its receptivity to foreign cultures and beliefs meant that traders of different backgrounds assisted each other in private ventures; a sense of solidarity arose that carried over into times of need. During the Lebanese civil war from 1975-90, this pleasant, vibrant entertainment district, transport hub and melting-pot of cultures was riven by the notorious 'Green Line' that divided the city into warring factions. Israeli air raids in successive years worsened the damage, sinking the Bourj further to the status of a 'no-man's land'. Samir Khalaf, a Beirut resident and an internationally acclaimed sociologist, is an ardent admirer of the Bourj's cosmopolitan history and argues passionately that its reinvention is at hand, and must be encouraged: the Bourj must reclaim its disinherited legacy of pluralism and tolerance.

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