

DECOLONIZING POST-WAR URBANISM: HERITAGE-LED RECOVERY MODELS IN OCCUPIED CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT

Rebuilding of urban areas after the war has cured top-down, neoliberal development paradigms, which are normally oriented toward infrastructure, but in fact ignore cultural continuity. Such approaches have a profound impact on the character of a city and the lives of its inhabitants. In cases of long-lasting occupation – such as Palestine – the situation is even more complicated: A heritage issue can become a major battleground where colonial pasts are kept alive through new planning policies. This article is a critique of one-sided reconstruction schemes viewed from a decolonial perspective, and it puts forward a heritage-driven recovery that places the local people’s spatial stories at the core. First, the authors make a comparison between the cases from Sarajevo and Beirut, which serve as examples of heritage being a form of spatial resistance and the continuous survival of the culture. Second, by referring to the critical urban theory and the decolonial scholarship, the paper sets up a theoretical framework for culturally responsive reconstruction in the occupied urban contexts. The research data show that heritage-led recovery, should community participation and historical continuity be present, we will be able to resist elimination of the past and make a generous contribution to urban futures that are more just.

Keywords: Decolonial urbanism, Cultural heritage, Post-conflict recovery, Spatial resistance, Occupied cities, Indigenous planning.

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INTRODUCTION

Post-war reconstruction is usually represented as a technical and humanitarian necessity – one that is focused on rebuilding infrastructure, reviving services, and restoring a semblance of normality to devastated urban landscapes. However, reconstruction is a deep political act. The work is not only about the physical repair of buildings and roads but also about the symbolic and material reordering of power, memory, and identity. The situation is even more complicated when war is combined with colonization and occupation histories, such as in Palestine. In this place, post-conflict reconstruction is no longer a peace talk, but a turn of the same political struggle. In such occupied places, urban recovery usually happens under very unequal conditions, whereby local agency is limited since international actors are the main powers holding the reconstruction agenda. The use of words, such as “development,” “modernization,” and “recovery,” is very often an attempt to hide the fact that the situation is still the same as before and the only difference is that reconstruction is portrayed as a non-political and passive process (Chechel *et al.*, 2025). However, the actuality turns out to be the opposite, as it is mostly reflecting the external values, neoliberal imperatives, and donor-driven priorities which push aside the lived experiences and cultural heritage of local populations.

This erasure is very visible in the treatment or just the neglect of cultural heritage after the war. While the recovery efforts after the war generally focus on rebuilding the critical infrastructure, reestablishing the governance system, and stimulating economic growth, they leave cultural and spatial memory as the second, or even dispensable. Thus, heritage is still utilized either as a symbol of national identity for the legitimization of political power, or it is totally out of recovery discourse. However, in the cities largely formed by a prolonged period of occupation or colonial domination, heritage will be something more of a symbolic nature than of real importance. It offers the ground for resistance, it is its identity, and the place where the local people remember the things they have in common (Bhambra, 2020). This tension is nowhere more obvious than exactly in Palestine, where the coloniality of the place is continuing because of settler planning regimes, militarized borders, and the systematic marginalization of Palestinian

heritage. The urban reconstruction of Gaza, East Jerusalem, and parts of the West Bank unveils a gap between the applied reorganization schemes and the essence of Palestinian urban life, being the cultural and historical fabric. Along these lines, those places of memory are sometimes desecrated, ignored, or simply taken over to serve as the means of the settler/colonial fables perpetuating, thus the place and the culture of the coming/continuous people become even more vulnerable (Saadallah *et al.*, 2025). At the same time, the absence of sovereignty and impaired institutional capabilities make it so that, after the conflict, the role of rebuilding is mostly delegated to the international agencies and, thus, these agencies distance themselves more from the local communities and even lose sight of them. Nevertheless, quite amazingly still, the Palestinian heritage is not only that which suffered from the occupation, but it is also the resistance. The traditional building resources of local people, cultural practices, and vernacular spaces have become a thriving archive of identity and a recording of adaptations for survival. They confront the erasure concept through the very act of recognition, the power of recollection, as well as the guarantee of the future. Unfortunately, the implementation of the formal financial recovery models very rarely allows these practices to become a part of the plan (Sengupta, 2023). The models focus mostly on technical blueprints; thus, they borrow heavily from the post-war paradigms of different geopolitical contexts.

This paper aims to show that in occupied contexts, such as Palestine, there is an urgent need to rethink post-war urban recovery through a decolonial lens, which is one focusing on the heritage not as a preserved object but as the dynamic and disputed arena of cultural resilience. The author tries to uncover the unwritten assumptions in reconstruction models that are dominant and offer a different perspective that is grounded in heritage-led recovery. This perspective is one that gives priority to local knowledge, historical continuity, and spatial justice. In fact, this paper outlines a theoretical framework that takes from decolonial urban theory, critical heritage, and spatial justice. The goal is to conceptualize a form of urbanism after war that does not go along with the ways of thinking of occupation or colonial modernity, but rather it is a new one that culturally grounded form of recovery. By drawing parallels with the post-war history of Beirut and Sarajevo, the

places with similar events and memories of conflict and reconstruction, the writer of the paper relates the heritage-led model with the struggle against erasure and the work of reclaiming place. The major question on which this research is based is: How can heritage be used as a tool for decolonizing the process of urban recovery after the conflict in the occupied areas? The answer to this question leads to two important points that this paper is addressing; (1) It is about the criticism of the paradigms of post-war reconstruction first their replication of the colonial spatial logics in places where the power is asymmetrical, and (2) The fact that heritage has been repositioned as a key player in urban recovery – beyond preservation – toward cultural survival and resistance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many recent scholarly articles that deal with post-war urban reconstruction. They talk about the limitations of traditional recovery models that focus more on physical infrastructure and less on social cohesion, cultural continuity, and spatial justice. The history of those models shows that they came from retrofitting frameworks of technocrats and humanitarians who aimed to establish governance and prompt economic recovery. At the same time, present academic writings point out that the failure of such paradigms to recognize the meaty political and cultural dimensions of urban space leads to their inevitable collapse, particularly in situations of occupation or colonization (Elfverson *et al.*, 2023; Waterton *et al.*, 2023). These post-2020 publications focus on the fact that urban recovery is never neutral; it is always the case that it reinforces power relations and exposes the colonial epistemologies of international development and urban planning institutions that are embedded within it. Elfverson *et al.* (2023), for example, ideates that the reorganization of space following a conflict generally moves along well-laid-out paths, in accord with Western technological and bureaucratic ideals, restricting the locals' spatial logic and erasing memory. It is especially hard to overcome the problem of healing in places that are still subjected to colonial or military occupation and thus still have a different kind of urban governance. Palestine is, for example, a place where the spatial policies of the Israelis are very much intermingled with, if not completely the same as, the settler-colonial goals (Allegra & Maggor, 2022). Consequently, the significance of cultural heritage in post-war reconstruction has become more prominent. Hence, in the earlier approaches, the heritage of war and the esthetics of the after-effects were often considered failures. Newer frameworks, on the other hand, provide the understanding of heritage as a key part of community resilience and a return to identity. Giblin *et al.* (2022) states that heritage is nowhere near a sterile collection of objects or monuments but a vibrant cultural life of practices, spatial connotations, and collective memory that should be part of the recuperation.

The notion of heritage-led recovery has become a positive reaction to the negative media coverage of the concept of heritage in a post-conflict setting. It is a more holistic and participatory approach to post-war urbanism. Mehan (2025) explains it as a cultural recovery program that exploits the wealth of local knowledge and the skills of the local people in implementing the redevelopment strategies of urban areas. This method is more than a simple rebranding of the older traditional planning discourse in that it reveals the political and social significance of heritage as a medium for resistance, belonging, and spatial justice. Besides, it is consistent with the present trend of critical heritage studies, which argues for the deconstruction of "authorized heritage discourse" and the recognition of the subaltern voices, indigenous people, and the everyday as the agents of cultural memory (Giblin *et al.*, 2022; Younus *et al.*, 2023). It almost goes without saying that in occupied or settler-colonial areas the politics of heritage are very intense. Heritage can be a tool of violence or, on the contrary, it can be forgotten. Archeological excavations and zoning policies in East Jerusalem are a case in point in this matter because they are an instrument that enables the Israeli government to make its territorial claims more believable and at the same time, they facilitate the forced evictions of the Palestinian families

and the erasure of the Palestinian architectural heritage (Greenberg & Hamilakis, 2024; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2021). Patterns of spatial domination through heritage manipulation that are seen in contexts in which urban space is militarized or ideologically instrumentalized were also repeated globally. The same dynamics are the very things that decolonial theorists name the coloniality of power – a regime that exercises dominion through the management of space, knowledge, and identity even after the official end of colonialism (Ausic, 2022; Bhabra, 2020).

Decolonial urban theory provides a new lens through which to view post-war reconstruction. The writings of (Ausic, 2022; Bernal, 2021) stand as a clarion call for severing the association between urban development and Eurocentric paradigms, while they still advocate for pluriversal approaches that draw upon the knowledge systems and spatial ontologies of the peoples of the earth who have been affected by colonization. This viewpoint not only emboldens us to think about the matter and the structure of post-conflict urban recovery in a new way, but also probes many questions, such as: Who dictates what needs to be rebuilt? Whose memories are to be stored, and whose are to be forgotten? How is the future going to be designed? Further essays dwell on the ability of heritage to render local agents of change and ingenuity, thereby illustrating community resilience. In the words of Buheji and Marouf (2024) figuratively, communities in Gaza, through their grassroots undertakings for recording and mending the old buildings thus, they become the embodiment of the cultural innards which are under siege. These bottom-up processes are frequently informal, without funds, and at times contradictory to the official recovery frameworks, yet they are deeply significant. They manifest the potential of heritage to be more than just a locus of loss but a field of survival, innovation, and carry on the tradition.

In the cities of Sarajevo and Beirut, interrogations of heritage after war are the twenties of a couple of the same coin. Bublin (2022) asserts that there is a tendency of Sarajevo's ethnonationalist heritage projects to dominate the picture of intergroup relations in that city. Rather than reconciliation, these projects might have reinforced the spatial segregation. On the other hand, in Beirut, notwithstanding the damage done by the 2020 port blast, local grassroots heritage initiatives argued for an inclusive memory work that is free from the influence of the privatization of memory and the continuation of the sectarian schism (Habib, 2025). Yet, a significant disparity continues in the development of theoretical ideas how heritage-led recovery can be extended into the occupied cities, those cities, moreover, where the ordinary methods of planning and administration have lost due to political domination. Large parts of the aftermath urbanism literature remain predominantly state-focused and pre-suppose that the national government is functional and legitimate. In cases like that of Palestine, where sovereignty is still a question, and urban planning is left to the hands of the occupiers, the usual models do not work well (Atabay *et al.*, 2024). For that reason, it becomes the authors operate in the field of decolonial theory, critical heritage, and spatial justice – models that can represent not only the physical limitations of the conquest but also the human side of the situation, such as the necessity of the identity and memory.

METHODOLOGY

The research uses a theoretical method, based on critical and decolonial epistemologies, to figure out how an object of history and culture can be redecorated as the main factor in an urban revival of a place that has been attacked. Instead of taking empirical fieldwork or quantitative data, the method deals with the constructional integration of interdisciplinary theories by going through secondary literature, spatial discourse analysis, and comparative urban insights. The intention is to create a theoretical framework that allows urban reconstruction in the wake of war and colonially entangled regions, such as Palestine to be envisioned as heritage not only a passive object of the past but also an actively locally embedded strategy of space resistance and identity formation (Fig. 1). Decolonial theory is fundamentally here the state of



Fig. 1: Heritage-led recovery framework

the research, and this is evident in the ideas of many writers, including Aníbal Quijano, Arturo Escobar, and Walter D. Mignolo that are mentioned (Escobar, 2021; Mignolo, 2021; Soto & Tafur, 2023). The main point of decolonial theory is that Western models of urban planning are presented as universal, while pluriversal models need to be introduced, which permit the recognition of various forms of knowledge, dwelling, and rebuilding. As a result, in urban space, it is no longer seen as a neutral container for social life, but rather as a contested terrain where colonial logics are present through various examples, such as planning systems, infrastructural hierarchies, and heritage erasure. Expanding on this theoretical theme, the work takes up issues from critical heritage studies, especially the notion of “authorized heritage discourse” (AHD) that Laurajane Smith has given. AHD is a public, which through its discourse, organizes heritage by establishing, valuing, and preserving its main forms, including the top officials, the elites, and the artists, but it excludes every day and marginal groups by not granting them the right to knowledge (Smith, 2022). Within cities that are occupied, the situation is even more confusing since the instrumentalization of heritage is added to the ideas of settler-colonial, nationalist, or neoliberal groups. In line with this scope, the methodology asks how the heritage is switched on or turned off when the occupation forces are planning the post-conflict urban environment and what the potential regrowth of new narratives, personal ones, can exist coming up from the bottom of the hill.

Another, more theoretical, point of view discussed in the paper is spatial justice theory, which includes the thoughts of Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja, who see space as something created by social forces, and it is political in the core. According to a new study, they stress that the availability of space and the right of changing its character, and the understanding of the place is the most basic of all human rights. Hence, the reconstruction after the war becomes not only rebuilding of residential buildings, but it is also a process of recognition of individual rights in the area and compensation of the old wrongs (Soja, 2023; Vaide, 2023). Besides, the spatial justice theory by positioning urban space as a place of influential power, freedom, and resistance provides a critical view on the reconstruction programs, which continue in the old paradigms, and hence they are insensible to the new injustices, the changes of the demographic structure that entailed the oppression and the loss of the culture of the local people. The research embraces a comparative theoretical analysis of three urban milieus, being those of Palestine, Sarajevo, and Beirut, respectively, as a methodological

strategy. The situations of Palestine, Sarajevo, and Beirut are not the main empirical foci of the study; rather, they function as examples of thematic areas that could illuminate the study’s general theoretical claims. These towns are the scenes of the areas, which have experienced a lot of the carnage of war and have been visited by many foreign powers who have had their go at reconstructing the place are moreover the sites of those places where the narrative of the past and present events is quite vague and hotly debated. If Palestine is taken as an example of the groups of the occupational regimes and the settler colonizers in their spatial struggle, then it the method of elucidation utilized is critical interpretive synthesis, that means the organized combination of ideas, debates and case-method findings from different sources to create new theoretical understanding. The data set is made up of scholarly peer-reviewed literature, institutional records (e.g. UNESCO, UN-Habitat), and chosen policy documents underpinning the issues of post-conflict urban planning and heritage conservation. Such sources are not regarded as empirical evidence but as discussion elements that expose the ideologies, the assumptions and the power relations behind the reconstruction narratives.

The methodological character of this approach permits a reflexive mode of knowledge production, one that is still sensitive to the researcher’s positionality and the geopolitics of academic discourse itself. Embodying decolonial ethics, the research is no longer defensive to its objectivity or universality. It aims to become one of the members in the dialogue thread that talks about the alternative ways of reconstructing cities which are in harmony with the cultural memory, make spatial justice come true, and fight against the erasure. To guarantee an analytical rigor, the investigation is orchestrated around three interrelated conceptual interrogations:

- Epistemological critique: To what extent do the dominant reconstruction of the post-war era mimic colonial and neoliberal worldviews that are particularly linked to space and heritage?
- Spatial contestation: How can the urban heritage be employed as a weapon, or be the one to erase war acts, or be the one that preserves in the situation of an occupation, and what will be the consequences for the recovery after a conflict?
- Alternative models: How can a heritage-based, decolonial recovery model for the city, on the one hand, and on the other hand, still be beyond the features of empirical planning, be reloaded and re-invited to the conceptual syntax of the present – shall be the research question.

The questions are theorized only, not proven or demonstrated through case studies, hence a multi-layered theoretical grounding. The method openly announces the non-belief in positivistic postulates and rather it takes complexity, contradiction, and the plurality of critical inquiry as the core of its endeavor. Eventually, the thematic framework view paves the way for a more profound insight into the heritage political role not only as a repository of memory but also a resource pool for the endeavors of socially just, culturally local, and politically emancipatory urban future in war-torn and occupied situations.

ANALYSIS: HERITAGE-LED RECOVERY IN OCCUPIED AND POST-CONFLICT CITIES

Palestine: Heritage as resistance under occupation

In occupied Palestine, urban recovery takes place in a poisoned environment that consists of spatial violence, bureaucratic restrictions, and systemic erasure. The Israeli occupation has enforced a dual logic of destruction and denial, through which Palestinian urban heritage is not only directly targeted but also an unintended side of modern conflict and planning regimes. This decision is nowhere to be seen more clearly than in Gaza, where the built environment, including significant heritage structures, has been affected many times by the devastation. The Great Omari Mosque’s complex, Hamam al-Samara and the Qasr al-Basha, the three oldest buildings in Gaza, were destroyed by bombs in 2023 and 2024 (Al-Houdalieh *et al.*, 2024). These monuments are the history of the architectural roots, the architect’s skills, and the

innovation among architects of a town that has been deserted. Because of the erosive process they have become the only realizable things that speak the identity of the local people (Sudiar *et al.*, 2023). Al Qarara Cultural Museum was a place that has been kept safe and certain from the human mind so that what we do or say cannot poison it later, that notion of a protected place of the imagination can mostly be found in the character of certain museums. This museum has always been a place to dream bigger, and this dream came to an end as it was looted and destroyed during the invasion (Hawari, 2024).

Israel's blockade has completely stopped the process of rebuilding in the Gaza Strip due to the lack of construction materials. This stifling has been pursued by the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM), which is the implementation of this blockade by the Israeli government. In the case of the delivery of materials, it has been made clear that the first place will be the urgent shelter and basic needs, and only then the cultural heritage (Bell *et al.*, 2021; Milton *et al.*, 2024). Yet, Palestinian civil society organizations have nurtured heritage-led recovery models that are based on local traditions. RIWAQ is an example of such work which has not only documented but also restored more than 100 village centers in the West Bank employing traditional lime mortars and stonework, as well as integrating local craftspeople and oral historians (Giblin *et al.*, 2022). Their "50 Villages Project" is the very evidence that heritage-led recovery can be both architectural preservation and community empowerment. Similarly, the reconstruction of the Al-Ghussein House in the Old City of Gaza – initially damaged during past attacks – has given a new life to a 19th-century family home that is now serving as a cultural center. These kinds of projects put the emphasis on heritage not as a memory, but as a continuous struggle. In his work, Ausic (2022) refers to a "pluriversal" approach to urbanism where he talks about issues related to the adoption of local cultural practices, rather than the implementation of one-size-fits-all solutions from different parts of the world.

Oral history cannot be disregarded also as a matter of cultural memory. Due to the lack of archives and institutional support, people in Gaza commit themselves to memory preservation through methods, such as storytelling, community exhibitions, and neighborhood mapping, which are only the techniques of carrying on knowledge but, along with that, they also become a kind of memory of the people asserting the right to live in contested space (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2021). The informal activities are the main factor that creates the counter-cartography of presence; thus, they are rejecting not only the Israeli spatial erasure but also the donor-driven abstraction. Hence, in Palestine, heritage-based recovery in no way becomes a supplement to the physical reconstruction. It becomes the basic thing for reclaiming urban agencies.

Sarajevo: Divided memory and ethno-spatial urbanism

Sarajevo's post-war recovery experience after the Bosnian War (1992–1995) demonstrates another issue – the memory and heritage fragmentation in a city that was deeply divided along ethnonational lines. The 1995 Dayton Accords ended the war by establishing a difficult-to-navigate convocal governance system, which institutionalized ethnic representation at every level, even in urban planning (Abazović, 2024). The city, which for a long time had been a symbol of multicultural coexistence, turned out to be functionally and symbolically divided. During the war, Sarajevo's multicultural heritage became the target of a deliberate campaign. The burning of Vijećnica (the National Library) was a tragic symbol, as it contains manuscripts and books that represented the Bosnian history from the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and Yugoslav eras. In the same way, churches, mosques, synagogues, and museums were not merely collateral damages caused by the war but were aimed at the cultural elimination of a particular people (Bublin, 2022). The post-war reconstruction period saw the return of some significant places – Vijećnica was completed in 2014 through renovation – but still within the space that was contested and divided (Novo, 2024). Sarajevo was divided into municipalities that were predominantly ethnic groups, and therefore, each had its own spatial logic and cultural needs. In

Bosniak-controlled regions, places of worship were rebuilt and there was a revival of Ottoman-style architecture; in Serb-controlled Istočno Sarajevo (East Sarajevo), the construction of new Orthodox churches and national monuments was continued. The double spatial layout only served to deepen the ethnic divisions instead of mending them (Mulaosmanovic, 2024).

Most importantly, the often-symbolic reconstruction of the cities did not involve people from the communities in the processes of their rebuilding. Individuals from local communities and international organizations did not actively participate; thus, they were appreciated by high-profile politicians and donors. They concentrated on "high heritage", that is, lavish buildings and monuments rather than local community initiatives that represent memory. The author, Bublin (2022), claim that this model of the state in the central part of the city, which they describe as the core of decision-making, thus, citizens from ordinary society were left out and local community memory sites, such as working-class neighborhoods, bridges, or shared marketplaces that once reflected Sarajevo's lived multiculturalism were not taken into consideration. Simultaneously, the center of Sarajevo was changed with the help of neoliberal urbanism. The residents were replaced with those who could afford the new cars, high-rise buildings, luxury developments, and foreign-owned malls that replaced war-damaged blocks. Developments funded by the Gulf brought visual modernity that was without any connection to Sarajevo's architectural continuity. The commodification of heritage for tourism – seen in the gentrification of Baščaršija (the Ottoman bazaar) – has let one the fact that it obscured community histories, has even turned into a factor of social exclusion (Griswold, 2021).

But there are still counter-narratives. The "Sarajevo Memory Module" is one of the grassroots initiatives which employ digital platforms, community exhibitions, and walks for commemoration to record the civilian experience of the siege. Artists and educators organize interethnic memory-sharing events that take place in bombed-out venues thus providing space as a medium of reconciliation. Decolonial heritage theory supports these attempts by agreeing that they are changing the nature of memory. Instead of having one dominant memory to represent nationalism and ethnic groups, they are now plurality of memory due to the diversity of the community that they are serving (Waterton *et al.*, 2023). Sarajevo, therefore, represents a case of a very negative type of lesson in heritage instrumentalization illegitimate practices and risks. If reconstruction after a war follows the logic of ethno-political or neoliberal, the local community sees heritage only as a tool of division or commodity. The communities, however, that drive the changes from below, are seen by the ones who suffer as completely different, more positive opportunities for healing and connecting historically across the lines of conflicts.

Beirut: Commodification, disaster, and living heritage struggle

Beirut, which is often portrayed as the "Paris of the Middle East," has gone through numerous cycles of wars, destruction, and rebuilding from the time of the civil war (1975–1990) until the Israeli burning in 2006 and the most recent explosion of the port of 2020 (Trovalo & El Ariss, 2025). Each of these cycles transformed the urban fabric while at the same time showing how heritage can be alternatively destroyed, tricked, or reclaimed. Following the end of the war, the Hariri-led Solidere company took the lead in rebuilding Beirut's historic downtown. While publicly promoted, Solidere was essentially a for-profit developer with almost unlimited powers, including the right to take land without compensation. It removed ruined buildings from the Ottoman period and the Mandate era and instead built luxury towers, thoroughfares, and sanitized heritage facades. Habib (2025), among other critics, maintain that heritage-led neoliberalism of that kind was focused on market value and not on memory. The traditional souks were changed into malls for high-end retail and community housing was exchanged for offices and luxury housing that resulted in what many called "ghost city" with no residents.

The catastrophe at the port in 2020 not only created a huge economic and social crisis but also triggered a different kind of recovery response. More than 200 people died, 300,000 were displaced, and very large parts of Gemmayzeh and Mar Mikhael – sanctuaries for Ottoman and early modern buildings – were reduced to rubble (Arabi, 2022). To begin with, the government response was slow and tortuous because of corruption, but rapidly, the grassroots forces were proactive and picked up the slack. Several organizations, including the Beirut Heritage Initiative, Save Beirut Heritage, and Live Love Beirut, launched documentation, triage, and restoration projects within days. Their method indicated a transition: Rather than targeting only conservation of buildings, they highlighted community involvement, trauma recovery, and intangible heritage. The volunteers have gone around the affected areas, talked with the people who were there and gotten the oral histories. In this way, memory is protected even when structures are no longer there. The “Urban Recovery Framework for Beirut” (2021), implemented by UN-Habitat, has also reiterated this approach by suggesting a district-based, heritage-driven method not only for the restoration of the physical but also for the social healing of the communities (Pietrostefani *et al.*, 2022).

However, the neoliberal pressure has not disappeared. When international aid was abundant, developers’ fears were that they would exploit the crisis to gentrify the areas, which got damaged, and they would displace the residents of these areas that have been there for a long time by giving them a mere explanation of safety or modernization. This is very similar to the earlier critiques of post-1990 Beirut, where the promise of urban rebirth had been a cover for the process of dispossession and spatial capture of the elites (Giblin *et al.*, 2022). Heritage-led recovery in Beirut is now more than just a mere past preservation exercise, it has become a battleground over the future of the city. The questions remain, will these new buildings be constructed for the use of the residents or the tourists? Can the memory of the past be of any help to the healing of the community or is it only going to serve the marketing of real estate? Nobody can still tell the answers, but the fight itself is a representation of a new heritage resistance model that is still unfolding - the one that is flexible, participatory, and highly political.

Comparative reflections

Heritage, in all these three instances, bears a resemblance to an arena of conflict, power, and potential:

- Heritage preservation in a Palestinian context is a way of resistance, which communities employ to overcome spatial erasure and to establish their sovereignty, even if they have no state
- In Sarajevo, the ethnic dimension of the conflict is so strongly linked with heritage that even the top-down regeneration just buying wars from the past and the division, while the bottom-up efforts are struggling to revive the plural memory
- With the tragedy of the explosion in 2020, heritage in Beirut, which was sometimes a place of neoliberal commodification and

sometimes the source of community resilience, is now shifting toward participatory urbanism.

Such cases clearly illustrate that heritage-led reconstruction must not be seen only as a physical conservation of architectural edifices but also as a significant political, cultural, and epistemological journey. Heritage is not a neutral entity; it can be utilized to either deepen who drives the process, whose memories are focused, and what values influence reconstruction (Table 1).

RESULTS

The comparative theoretical analysis of Palestine, Sarajevo, and Beirut brings to light several pivotal results that not only question dominant models of post-conflict urban reconstruction but also identify the key role of heritage in the process of dealing with spatial justice, cultural continuity, and political identity. These findings indicate that heritage is not limited to the realm of preservation, but rather it is a political resource, a cultural lifeline, and a counter-urban methodology. One of the significant results is that heritage is not merely a technical asset but a terrain of power. Across all three cases, heritage is not a technical, neutral, and non-political market, but rather a space of disputed power where the actors compete for the control of the resources. Heritage is the continuous, active process of erasing through Israeli urban planning and military destruction in Palestine but, in Sarajevo and Beirut, it is the same process of wresting heritage from the hands of nationalistic or neoliberal agendas. The exploitation of heritage to impose inveterate stories is, whether it is through the Solidere’s rebranding of Beirut or the ethnonational reconstruction of Sarajevo’s religious symbols, a demonstration that heritage is not a depoliticized object to be preserved, but it is a spatial discourse loaded with political and ideological energy. This is in direct contradiction to paradigmatic post-conflict frameworks (examples include UN-Habitat’s standard recovery tools) which frequently perceive heritage as an unimportant element of reconstruction or as only symbolic beautification instead of being an arena of social justice. The outcomes say explicitly that decolonial critiques (Ausic, 2022) and (Waterton *et al.*, 2023) are right in asserting that the transition from heritage as “preserved past” to heritage as “lived struggle.” In situations, such as occupation (Palestine), ethnonational fragmentation (Sarajevo), and neoliberal displacement (Beirut), the research discovers that heritage-led recovery models driven by communities still provide a kind of bottom-up resistance (Fig. 2). In this respect, the examples of Riwaq and neighborhood initiatives in Gaza, as well as local architectural practices and cultural memory, come to mind, as such they are the very elements that counter settler erasure. Alternative commemorative of events thus reimagines repressive ethnic segregation, if the task be a memory of a given plurality, a case in point being the event of Sarajevo. Post-2020, however, youth and civil society actors in Beirut, through their recovery efforts, re-established community control over historical neighborhoods. These cases confirm the theoretical suggestion that heritage can become a strategy of spatial

Table 1: Comparative overview of heritage-led recovery models

Aspect	Palestine	Sarajevo	Beirut
Context	Ongoing occupation and settler-colonialism	Post-ethnonational war, divided governance	Post-civil war, neoliberal urbanism
Damage to heritage	Systematic destruction, blockade limiting repair	Targeted cultural cleansing and division	War damage and explosion; neoliberal redevelopment
Governance of reconstruction	Humanitarian and donor-driven, limited local control	Ethnically segmented municipal authorities	Private real estate developer (Solidere) dominant
Community participation	Strong civil society-led initiatives, marginalized formally	Limited, fragmented grassroots initiatives	High post-crisis mobilization, previously low
Role of heritage	Resistance and survival	Contested memory, ethnonational narratives	Commodification versus grassroots resilience
Spatial justice challenges	Restrictions on materials and permits	Segregation and ethnic enclaves	Gentrification, displacement
Key heritage-led practices	Vernacular architecture restoration, oral histories	Commemorative events, plural memory efforts	Neighborhood mapping, participatory restoration

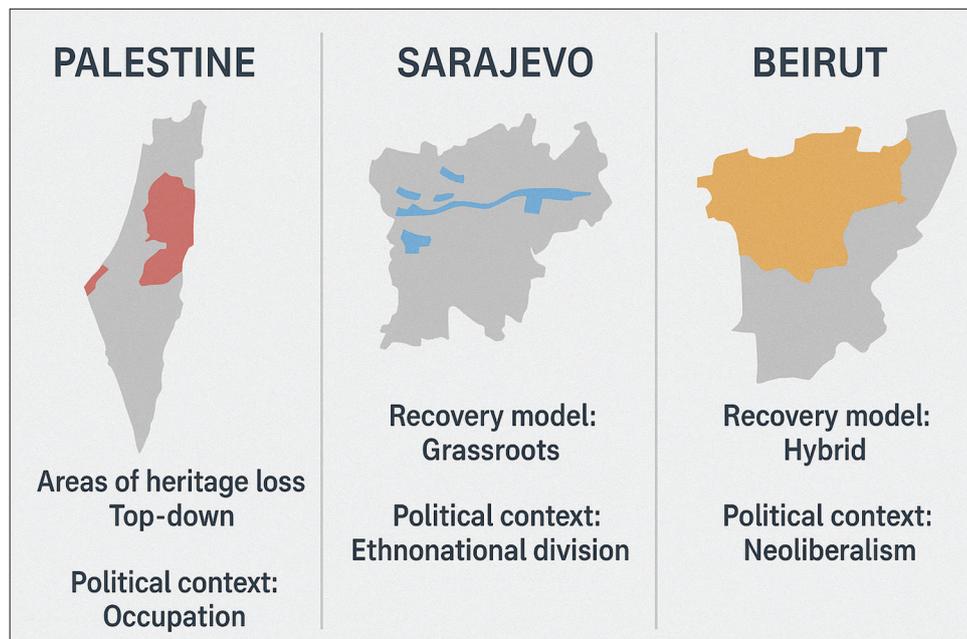


Fig. 2: Comparative conditions in Palestine, Sarajevo, and Beirut

sovereignty – where communities decide to take back the right to develop their urban environment and narrate their own stories, thus they resist exclusionary master plans or top-down heritage branding.

One more important finding is the consistent non-appearance or marginal presence of participatory planning in the official recovery frameworks. Whether it was in the GRM, the Sarajevo municipal zoning systems, or the Solidere-led plan for the Beirut downtown, the grassroots heritage actors and the residents were not allowed to be part of the decisions that were going to change their urban futures. This exclusion becomes the reason for creating structural spatial injustices – such as the violent displacement, the disappearance of the communal memory, and the turn of the space into the commodity. On the flip side, where there was participation – like the neighborhood-based mapping and oral history projects in Beirut after the port explosion or the village revitalization in the West Bank – heritage-led recovery created more locally rooted and socially inclusive impact. These findings are in line with Soja (2023) contention that spatial justice goes beyond just fair allocation of resources but is about fair involvement in the creation of space. Moreover, heritage is now the entire study's focus, as it is the vehicle for psychological healing and the rebirth of culture in the post-conflict societies that are. The local community reconstruction in Gaza however is also more than physical structures that is it is a matter of bringing back meaning, identity and dignity.

During the destruction of the sacred architecture and community museums in Gaza riddle it was an attack on the collective memory and intergenerational continuity that was perpetrated. On the other hand, in Sarajevo, the removal of multicultural urban symbols only serves to prolong trauma and create historical amnesia. The heritage damage that followed the explosion in 2020 in Beirut was a metaphor for the systemic breakdown and the public grief that was spreading there. Nevertheless, the recovery of the heritage-led plays, such as the narration of the events and the use of the old crafts, and the reactivation of the places of the past does not only open new paths to the process of the trauma but it also helps with the building of resilience and the regeneration of the culture. They, therefore, restate the decision that heritage is not afterthought to the recovery- it directly provides the psychological infrastructure (Fig. 3). In the same vein, the study highlights that the reigning global heritage governance instruments of the likes of UNESCO, UN-Habitat, or the World Bank do not meet the requirements for heritage management in areas that are scarred by

the continuous occupation, colonial domination, or state failure. These frameworks prioritize post-conflict normalcy, assume sovereignty, and favor centralized institutions – which often do not exist or are complicit in spatial injustice.

In Palestine, international aid routes that bypass local knowledge systems only serve to deepen the dependency of Palestinians. In Sarajevo, the ethnic power-sharing arrangements that are in place are the only ones that can limit the integrated cultural policy. In Beirut, market-driven reconstruction is still ignoring the marginalized communities. In all these instances, the top-down heritage policies proved to be a failure because they didn't take into consideration the political complexity and the cultural plurality of post-war urbanism. This is in line with the arguments of Giblin *et al.* (2022) and Younus *et al.* (2023), who argue that there is a need for a new approach to heritage governance in fragile, hybrid, or colonially entangled contexts (Table 2).

CONCLUSION

The development of cities, ravaged by war and occupation, is never just a technical or material job. It is a very political, cultural, and epistemological process. This paper has most carefully investigated the idea of heritage-led recovery in the context of three cities heavily scarred by violence: Palestine under occupation, Sarajevo after ethnonational war, and Beirut in the period of long-lasting crisis and neoliberal takeover. A theoretical methodology based on decolonial thought, spatial justice, and critical heritage studies, the analysis argues that heritage is not just an architectural element – it is a battlefield of meaning, a means of resistance, and a new beginning for just recovery. The main finding of this research is that typical models of post-violent urbanism – usually motivated by government-centered, donor-led, and technocratic systems – repress cultural heritage without a change, only when it is presented as an economic or a symbolic resource (Fig. 4). The three cases are from areas where the top-down approach to the reconstruction work fails to correctly bring in the local memory, community knowledge, or traditional building practices. Be it the erasure of local Palestinian vernacular urbanism through the Israeli occupation, ethno-spatial fragmentation in Sarajevo, or Beirut's commodified heritage under Solidere, history rewriting of post-war rebuilding is only a repetition of injustice that is the source of conflict.

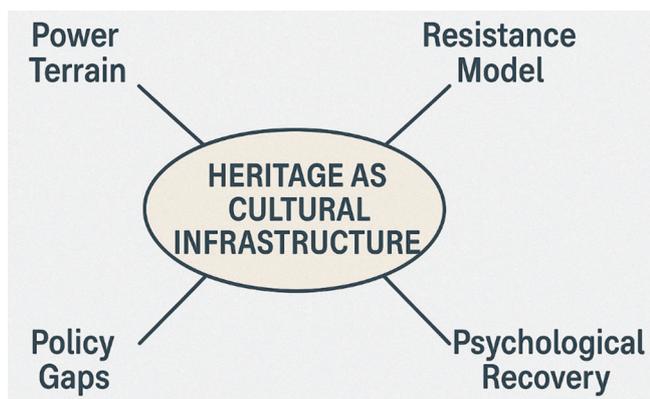


Fig. 3: Results framework diagram

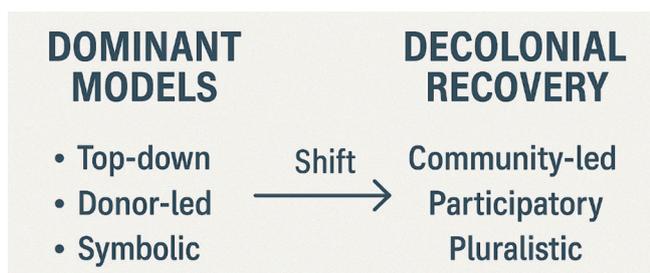


Fig. 4: Policy implications graphic

Table 2: Summary of results by thematic area

Theme	Key findings
Heritage as political terrain	Heritage is deeply contested and instrumentalized by power structures in all cases
Bottom-up resistance	Community-led heritage recovery offers counter-models to occupation, ethno-politics, and neoliberalism
Participation and spatial justice	Lack of participatory processes fuels spatial injustice; inclusion enhances socially embedded outcomes
Psychological and cultural recovery	Heritage is integral to trauma healing, identity, and dignity
Inadequacy of international frameworks	Existing models insufficient for contexts with occupation or political fragmentation

Then again, across the various communities’ resistance streaks are very evident. This resistance finds expression in a few ways. It is to be found in Gaza, where the construction of a bathhouse is an act of sovereignty. It happens in Sarajevo, where residents of that city celebrate the anniversary of the siege by decorating the walls with street art and conducting walking tours. It further finds expression in initiatives by youth in Beirut when they seek to document, conserve, and reinterpret the destroyed neighborhoods during the period of state non-intervention. The words of these heritage-led recovery paradigms are participatory, justice-oriented, and decolonial in nature. The paper shows the need for a change in the way we think of urban heritage as something more than just preservation and toward praxis – a lived, political act that can interrupt spatial violence and re-inscribe suppressed narratives. In Palestine, the heritage of the country is most definitely not a static past that has to be carefully chosen, but a living memory of survival. By utilizing, for instance, traditional construction methods, restoring cultural centers or narrating oral histories would be a way of demonstrating one’s presence and at the same time, resisting the settler-colonial disappearance. According to Mignolo (2021) and Ausic (2022), these decolonial actions are the ones that put the

epistemic dominance of Western urbanism in question and give new value to the subaltern knowledge. The findings of the work reveal that international post-conflict recovery protocols are fundamentally insufficient. United Nations agencies, such as UN-Habitat, UNESCO, and the World Bank generally consider state actors as neutral partners in the recovery process. However, this assumption does not hold true in fragile, colonized, or clientelist contexts. For example, the case of Palestine is recovery being executed through the mechanism of humanitarianism that is devoid of the political context, thus, it merely becomes a situation of dependency and of external control (Buheji & Marouf, 2024). Reconstruction of donor-led activities, therefore, deepened the division of the City of Sarajevo into ethnic enclaves while international capital in this context enabled elite capture of the city center in Beirut. Therefore, the urban recovery should be positioned within the local politics. New frameworks are urgently needed that understand asymmetry, occupation, and contested sovereignty as the new normal in the planning equation – no longer as exceptional occasions.

Heritage, as shown here, should be seen as social infrastructure – not only harvesting nature, but also nurturing cultural, emotional, and psychological bonds making communities stronger after they have been traumatized. It is a storehouse of human dignity, identity, and relations to the past. Traditional architecture in Gaza and family museums are examples that emphasize the residential character of local people since they have been continuously displaced. Recovering Beirut after the disaster mainly concentrated on the aspects of Habib (2025) call everyday heritage – the places where balconies, staircases, streetscapes are the focus – from memory and life cells. The identification of heritage in this manner potentially broadens its importance even to those who are not part of the elites or the monumental arena. It grounds the recovery in the very fabric of daily life and the esthetics of the vernacular. This research wraps up with an appeal for the necessity of heritage-led recovery models that are participatory, pluralistic, and deeply rooted in justice. Such models should be:

- Empowering local actors to be at the center of planning and funding
- Respecting vernacular construction skills and combining traditional techniques with the reconstruction correction
- Representing the diversity of memory by saving only those places of shared heritage and trauma, not the exclusively prestigious ones
- Agreeing urban heritage with human rights and connecting it with spatial justice and cultural sovereignty.

These models have not spread over a large area yet but, what the grassroots responses in all three cities indicate is that the communities still have the energy of planting the seeds of these models being thus.

Final reflection

This research aims to empower people who are rebuilding their cities from below, by centering their lived experiences, to decolonize urban theory and planning practice. It sets forth ideas of heritage being not the end of conflict recovery, but its beginning space for dialogue, healing, and resistance. After devastation, which is going to be preserved, what is going to be reconstructed, and who is going to have the power to make the decisions are no longer mere technical issues, rather they are the issues of justice. As cities all over the world are on the brink of wars, climatic upheavals, and mass displacements, the experiences from Palestine, Sarajevo, and Beirut constitute a crucial roadmap. Heritage-led recovery, if executed correctly, is not one of undoing the past – it’s one of creating a future built upon memory, fairness, and dignity.

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