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 Derridan 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 mazar [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...