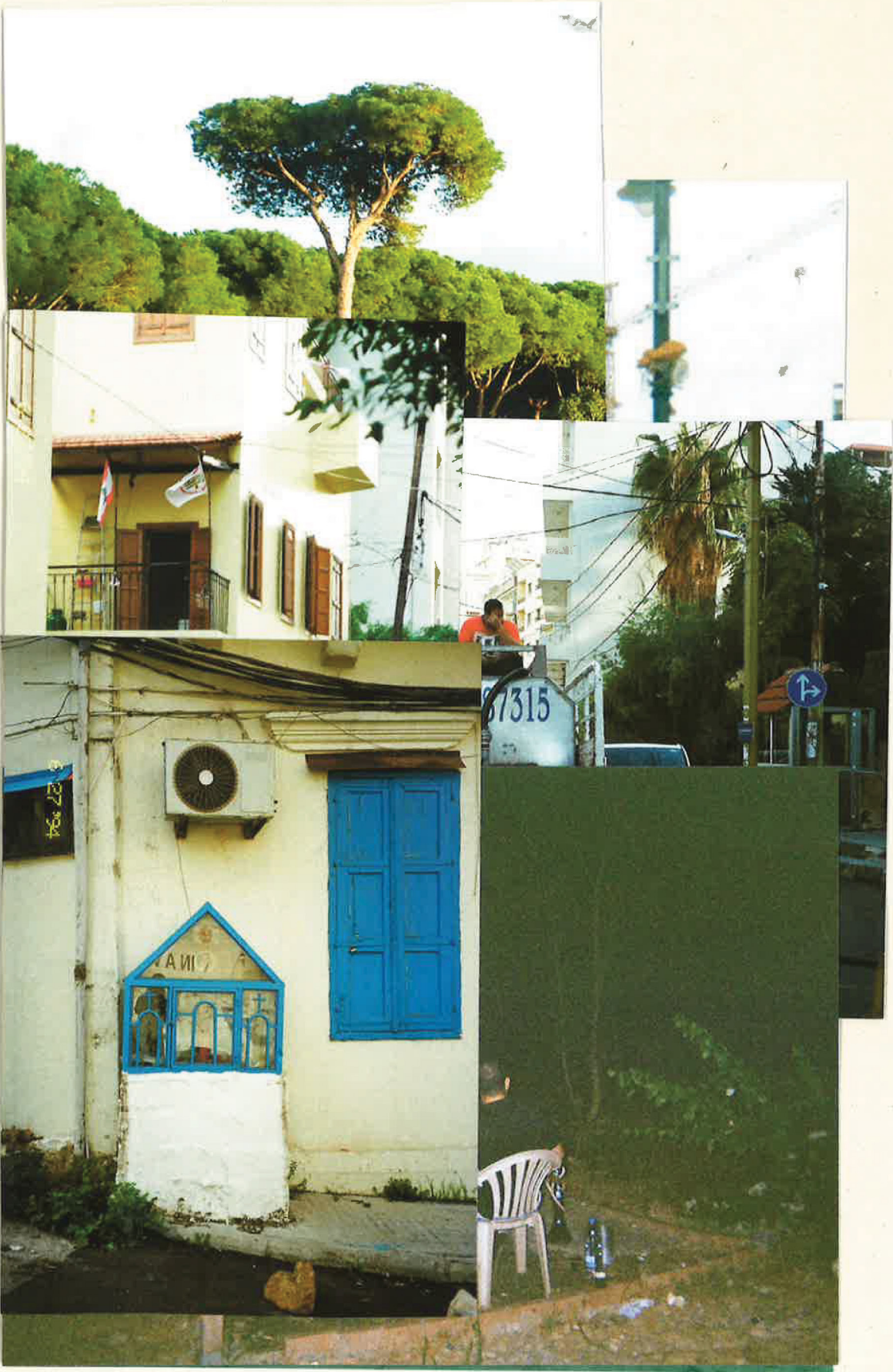


Untangling Beirut's Sectarian Geographies
Stories on Negotiating Commons

Nathalie Marj





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لبيروت



On the 2nd of January 2024, an Israeli drone hit Dahiye, the southwestern suburb of Beirut. I was having coffee with my bestfriend in Hamra, in West Beirut. She quickly told me, let's go back to Hazmieh, the southeastern suburb where we reside, "we'll be safer there". I asked her if realized that Hazmieh was closer to Dahiye than our current location and that a stray bullet fired from there on new year's eve landed on my rooftop. She was surprised when I showed her the map; she had never realized the physical proximity. In her mindmap of Beirut, our Christian suburb couldn't be farther from the Shi'a dominant Dahiye.

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Introduction

Context & Methodology

Introduction

Context & Methodology

1 Hanf, *Co-Existence in Wartime Lebanon*

2 Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon*, 12

3 Mady, ‘Exploring Beirut’s Instability through Its Informal Mobility’: 26

4 It should be noted that the Civil War ended with the Taif agreement, which reconfirmed power sharing among religious communities that had been in force in Lebanon. For better balance, an important part of the functions of the President, a Maronite, was transferred to the Council of Ministers, presided by a Sunni Prime Minister.

The foundations of sectarianism in Lebanon date back to the 19th-century Ottoman Empire. The country’s limits were drawn in relation to confessional belonging, with the establishment of the nation of Lebanon under the French mandate in 1920, ensuring France had a Maronite base in the Levant. The Republic of Lebanon, independent as of 1943, was founded on the principles of a consociational government: a political system characterized by power-sharing arrangements and distribution of state roles among different societal or ethnic groups to ensure equity in a multi-sectarian population.¹ The institutionalization of the politico-sectarian division ensured proportional representation among the different sects, using data from the last demography census in Lebanon in 1932.² With 18 different recognized religious sects in the territory, the Maronite Christians represented the majority, gaining the presidential seat, followed by the Sunni Muslims in the prime minister’s seat, and lastly, the Shi’a Muslims in third place, taking the speaker of parliament seat. This led to a fragmented urban identity between communities sharing deep social bonds and kinship solidarities.³

Beyond religion and theology, sectarian identity is also linked to evolving cultural and social practices. The production of sectarianism in Lebanon has often been considered a phenomenon that is dynamic and procedural, particularly during the civil war between 1975 and 1990.⁴ Indeed, the reason behind the war is often oversimplified as a sectarian battle between Christian, Shiite, Sunni, and Druze militias. As it evolved, the war mirrored the shifting local, regional, and international interventions and alliances. Various scholars have suggested different theories as to why the war extended for such a long period; reasons range from increasingly growing class differences, differing ideas of nationalism –

between a pan-Arabist identity for Lebanon and a primarily Christian-endorsed Lebanese exceptionalism – the Palestinian armed presence in Lebanon and the uneven resource and capital distribution between urban and rural populations.⁵

What is largely agreed upon is that during the war, sectarianism flagrantly spatialized in the urban realm, drawing rigid boundaries, creating large national and international displacements, and militarizing everyday domestic and public spaces. The strongest boundary created was the ‘Green Line,’ delineating Beirut’s Muslim West enclave from its Christian East counterpart with an array of security apparatuses like checkpoints, military installations, and sniper points. This division, although invisible, is still practiced in contemporary Beirut. The militias fighting during the Civil War later developed into political parties ruling Lebanon and, until today, as state or parastate actors. They are involved at every level of governance by providing public services and infrastructure, which have become directly interwoven with the notion of sectarian community, reproducing the wartime inherited borders while creating new ones.

Other borders were created, hardened, and softened throughout the years according to religion, class, nationality, and Lebanon’s broader geopolitical position. Sectarian violence, like the 2008 street clashes, revives memories of the civil war and the subsequent creation of physical or perceived borders.⁶ However, sectarian geographies are also produced and reproduced in times of peace by the ruling class and dwellers through their everyday practices. “Everyday Sectarianism,”⁷ a term coined by Joanne Randa Nucho, manifests in Beirut’s administration, economy, governance, and planning, creating “bordering practices”⁸ that are material, immaterial, internalized, and externalized.

Division spatializes in the city through flagrant representations like symbols and signs, monuments and statues, barbed wire and walls, and more discreetly through the intricacies of infrastructures, real estate, bus routes, and a simple sidewalk. The mundane structures of daily life, electricity and water provision, municipal decisions, urban planning projects, and finished or unfinished infrastructure all reveal the underlying logic of sectarianism in Beirut; they are the channels in which it is reproduced.

In Beirut, division can be understood within the materiality of urban infrastructure and the

networks produced to create it. The relationship between infrastructure and sectarianism becomes dialogic – urban infrastructure and services are produced by sectarian political and religious organizations, also serving as the channels through which sectarian inclusion and exclusion are experienced. In this context, public well-being is understood as the good of a specific community or sect. The dichotomies of public versus private or state versus nongovernmental organizations are challenged, creating new balances. Within this framework, spacemakers – architects, urban dwellers, and planners – must negotiate to find shared resources, spaces, and narratives.

In the first part, this work will look at a seemingly mundane sight in Beirut: a sidewalk project, an unfinished or failed planning project. By untangling this story and its elements and relationships, it will unfold the everyday mechanisms, actors, and objects constructing geographies of division and narratives of alienation in the city. It will look at how this leads to the absence of any unified vision for the development of the city and the installation of commons. In the second part, this work will look at success stories of place-making as symbols of resistance and practices that have shaped alternative collective narratives. The tools and tactics dwellers, architects, and planners use to negotiate common spaces, services, and histories within the prevailing sectarian geographies will help find possible action points to apply pressure for change within the channels producing space in Beirut.

How to navigate these geographies:

I began this work from an experience I had in the summer of 2023 in Beirut, within the framework of an internship at the Beirut Urban Lab. I was working on a project which I call the sidewalk project. As my first working experience in the city, it was the first time I felt to what extent the production of space is embedded within sectarianism. Understanding these sectarian geographies’ roots and spatial consequences felt like navigating a vicious circle of interdependent networks. To better understand and untangle them, I focused on this tangible story I had lived and linked it to larger ones I have read or heard. To do this, this work combines various sources, from personal experiences and readings to long conversations with different actors, all playing a certain role in the stories. These actors talk to each other through different, sometimes contrasting discourses, giving us different perspectives on space-making in Beirut.

5 Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon*, 22

6 The 2008 clashes represent the most violent sectarian conflict since the Civil War, mainly between Shia and Sunni groups. Gunfire and explosions rocked many mixed Shiite and Sunni neighborhoods in Beirut, and Shia parties, Hezbollah and the Amal Movement , took over West Beirut.

7 Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon*

8 Hafeda, *Negotiating Conflict in Lebanon*





From the Story of the Failed Sidewalk
Nothing in Common

From the Story of the Failed Sidewalk

Nothing in Common

1 The project was co-designed by the late Habib Debs, Frederique Francis (Francis Landscapes), traffic engineer Rami Semaan (TMS Consult) and Mechanical Engineer Pierre Damous.

The ‘Mar Mikhael Square’ project by the Beirut Urban Lab, on which I worked during the summer of 2023, exemplifies and materializes how the dysfunctional governance in Beirut unfolds spatially in the city. The Lab obtained donations after the 2020 Beirut port blast and decided to use the funds for a public project in a neighborhood enormously affected by the blast, a few hundred meters away from the port: Mar Mikhael. The project was very simple and could even be considered mundane. The intervention aimed to ameliorate pedestrian access by enlarging the sidewalks, thus diminishing the previously oversized two-way street to a standard width. With traffic engineers and planners on the design team, the project was conceived to calm traffic by allowing less space for informal parking and improving walkability. The proposal also included greenery, urban furniture, street lighting, and improved drainage systems. The project was a collaboration between the Beirut Urban Lab at the American University of Beirut and multiple landscape architects, planners, and engineers.¹ It was seen as a pilot project, a first step towards a larger plan called “Plan de déplacement doux,” aiming to improve Beirut’s walkability and greenery. After applying for a work permit in 2020, the Lab received the green light in March 2022 and started construction in March 2023. After two months of construction and half of the work completed, problems arose. This was when I joined the project as a summer intern. Halfway through construction, the municipality informally asked the Lab to cease all construction because neighborhood dwellers and political representatives had contested the project. The political representatives included parliamentary members of the Lebanese Forces party, dominant in the neighborhood. The main objections of the petitions were against reducing the width of the street, leading to the displacement of parking spots from the street to a designated parking space 100m away.

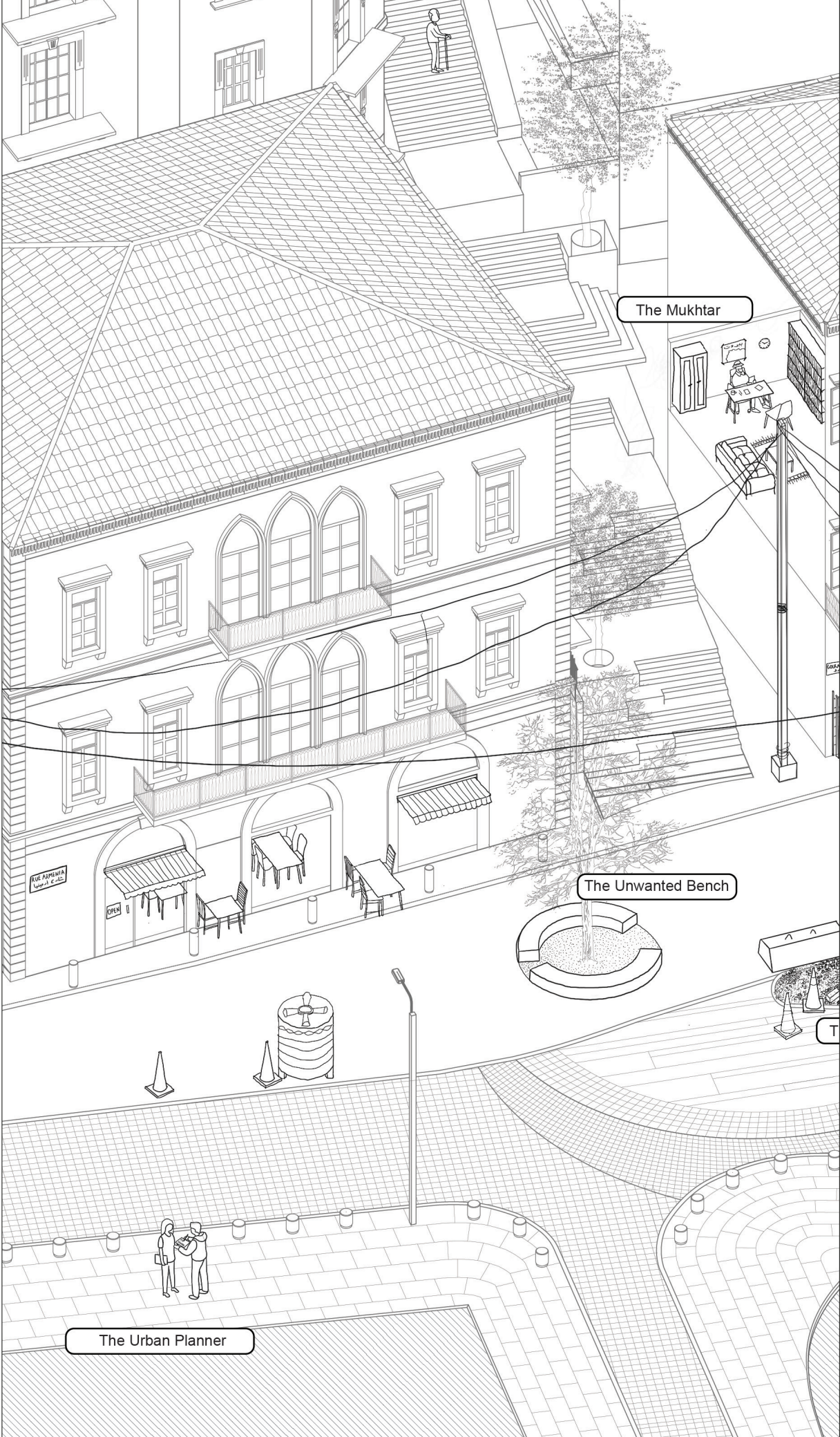
The residents also disagreed with the benches intended to be added. Negotiations then began, leading to a pause in construction for almost two months and the appearance of a common newcomer into the landscape in Beirut: an unfinished project haunting the streets. Let’s

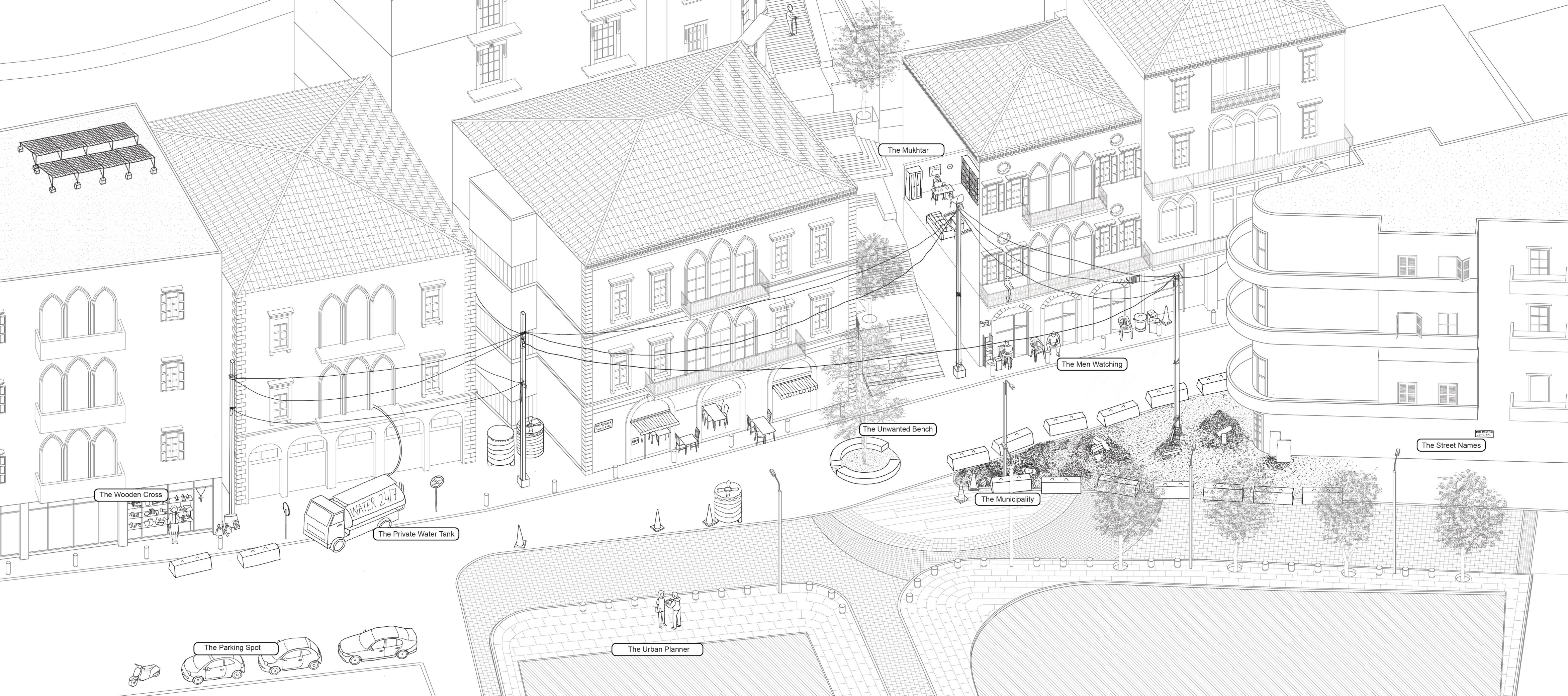
delve into the story of this sidewalk through the lens of its multiple components, from objects, spaces, and actors. This micro space of the city will allow us to unfold and understand the macro sectarian landscape in which spaces are produced in Beirut.



Figure 1
Site of the Failed Sidewalk, taken in July 2023, while construction works w on pause. The right side of the street is done while the left one is untouched, materials remain in the middle, awaiting a decision.

- The Story of The Failed Sidewalk
- The Street Names
 - The Wooden Cross
 - The Men Watching
 - The Mukhtar
 - The Municipality
 - The Urban Planner
 - The Parking Spot
 - The Private Water Tank
 - The Unwanted Bench





The Mukhtar

The Men Watching

The Unwanted Bench

The Municipality

The Street Names

The Urban Planner

The Private Water Tank

The Wooden Cross

The Parking Spot

The Story of the Street Names

Colonial and Variable Toponyms

2 Maria Rajha (architect working on the Mar Mikhael Square), interview by author, Lausanne, November 9, 2023

3 Ibid

4 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.

The sidewalk is situated in East Beirut, at the confluence of the Mar Mikhael and Rmeil sectors, though colloquially, this intersection is seen as linking Mar Mikhael to Gemmayze, a neighboring sector. The site is positioned at the convergence of Gouraud Street, Pasteur Street, and Armenia Street. Residents often call these streets differently out of habit or active avoidance of their real names. Architects who referred to the location as Armenia Street were sometimes corrected, as residents did not resonate with that designation, nor did they identify with the majority of the Armenian community living further down the street.² This community got settled in the neighborhood of Bourj Hammoud, right outside the administrative boundaries of Beirut, in the aftermath of the 1915 Armenian genocide, transforming the agrarian suburb into a densely populated neighborhood. Despite its administrative location within the Mar Mikhael sector, the project faced naming challenges due to these informal toponyms. Consequently, the name “Mar Mikhael Square” given to the project was contested by some residents who identified more with Gemmayze, as Mar Mikhael carried a perception of being a lower-class neighborhood.³ While some people appreciated the project’s name, others also asked for ‘Mar Antonios Square’ instead, referring to another Saint.

The discrepancy between the definition and names of the administrative borders of sectors and the everyday names used by residents relates to how residents ethnographically navigate the city. Linking to Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space and his distinction between “representations of space” and “spaces of representation,” navigation in Beirut goes beyond the map.⁴ Most of Beirut’s streets and buildings have varying names and addresses that sometimes do not correspond to the administrative ones. Lefebvre shows that the negotiation between the different

forms of representation produces the space of borders – administrative borders – which are “representations of space,” and how these borders are lived out as ambiguous “spaces of representation.” Indeed, most people navigate Beirut using landmarks like churches, banks, or educational institutions. This is partly due to the weak exposure to the city map as a public document, not even for finding direction, maybe because it does not recognize lived undrawn boundaries.

Back to the administrative names, Gouraud Street and Pasteur Street, like many others in East Beirut, inherited their name from the French Mandate period. Delving briefly into the country’s colonial past will allow us to better understand the origin of East Beirut as the capital of the Christian community, the origins of sectarianism in Lebanon, and the spatial markers it left in the urban fabric. A photograph taken in September 1920 depicts the French colonial general Gouraud dressed in a white uniform, surrounded by two religious figures representing the local population. The Patriarch of the Maronite Church, an Eastern Christian Catholic sect, is positioned beside him, while the Sunni Muslim Mufti of Lebanon is on the other side.⁵ This image captures Gouraud’s proclamation of the state of Greater Lebanon, forged from the territories of the defeated Ottoman Empire. This proclamation was made under the pretext that persists to the present day, to guide Lebanon’s significant minority – the Maronite community – towards freedom and independence.⁶ Historian Ussam Makdisi argues that sectarianism in Lebanon is a

nationalist creation that dates back only to the beginning of the modern era.⁷ He argues that violence during the Ottoman period was primarily deployed to reaffirm status-based social order, not yet according to religious identity. The first large-scale sectarian conflict occurred in Mount Lebanon in 1860 between Maronite Christians and Druze during a time of detached Ottoman rule.⁸ This violence led to pressure from European missionaries asking for structural reforms, which resulted in Mount Lebanon gaining semi-autonomous status led by a Christian mutasarrif, replacing the earlier model, which had two ‘mayors,’ Druze and Maronite. Several factors led to this conflict, mainly the favoring status of the Maronites, who greatly profited from French investments in the silk industry in the early 19th century.⁹ Even before the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the anti-Christian violence during the 1860 clashes, French infrastructural and institutional projects were already changing the lives and landscape of Beirut dwellers.

The many institutions established before and during the mandate period drastically changed Beirut and Mount Lebanon’s urban landscape, as well as its dwellers’ lives and access to resources, transportation, and education. In contemporary East Beirut, many French institutions remain in place, naming whole neighborhoods. Not too far from the site, in what would become the Yesouieh (Jesuit) sector, the College of the Jesuits was founded by the French Jesuit father Ambroise Monnot (after whom Monnot Street is named). This institution was renamed Saint Joseph University (USJ) in 1881 and is still active.

5 Makdisi, ‘Ottoman Cosmopolitanism and the Myth of the Sectarian Middle East’

6 Ibid

7 Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism*

8 Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon*, 10

9 Fawaz, *An Occasion for War* as cited in Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon*, 11



Figure 2 Proclamation of Greater Lebanon by Colonel Gouraud in 1920 Source: Aeon Essays



It answered the strong aspirations to create institutions helping young Maronites learn French and participate in commerce. The Jesuit archives in Rome emphasize the importance of creating a professional school in Beirut for young Maronites.¹⁰ The creation of the University was a response to the threat posed by Anglo-American Protestant institutions. The Syrian Protestant College (today the American University of Beirut), founded in 1866, opened its doors to all the communities in the region, while the Saint Joseph University was the bastion of the Maronite community.¹¹

Many silk factories, missionary schools, roads, railways, and churches transformed Mount Lebanon into an informal regional empire hub, challenging Ottoman influence. Territorial claims over Mount Lebanon were grounded in historical narratives that tied France and the region together. French rulers were firmly committed to caring for their Christian proteges in the region, which the latter reciprocated, creating familial kinship ties. Familial constructs – fatherly, fraternal, and filial figures – were crucial to constructing France’s informal empire, dissolving boundaries between the Maronites and the French.¹² From the 1830s onwards, French and Lebanese litterateurs, pamphleteers, and clerics painted Mount Lebanon as a surrogate of France; the Lebanese mountains were depicted as a small part of Europe dropped onto Asian territory. These discourses were developed in the works of writers like Gerard de Nerval and Saint-Marc de Girardin. Gerard de Nerval highlights a strong admiration and identification with Mount Lebanon, where he sees a “landscape full of freshness, of shadows and silence, a view of the Alps taken from a Swiss lake.”¹³ Venturing into the Christian parts of Mount Lebanon, he wrote that “Europe and Asia melted into one another.”¹⁴ He compared its architecture to ones he knew; the house he rented on the outskirts of Beirut compared to the bastides that surround Marseille, the mountain hamlet of Beit Meri had the appearance “of one of our Midi villages”¹⁵. He insisted that one would forget he was in “a Muslim country, only a few miles from the desert of Damascus and the powdery ruins of Baalbak.” Religion created an undeniable proximity between the Christians of Mount Lebanon and their European kin. Indeed, Lamartine says that if Syria “offered itself armed” to France, it was mainly because of Mount Lebanon, particularly the Maronites, who were naturally well disposed toward France because of their Catholicism¹⁶.

For Makdisi, the victors of the First World War claimed to arbitrate religious differences in the Middle East when deciding the future of the defeated Ottoman Empire when in reality, they encouraged sectarian politics.¹⁷ Over three days in January 1919, French businessmen, functionaries, politicians, and schemers met in Marseille to crystallize the demands for a French invasion. Along with Lebanese elites, French mandate administrators created the civil and political institutions of governance that produced the modern Lebanese confessional system, allowing proportional representation to different sects following the national pact of 1943.¹⁸

This treatment of the Maronite community as an isolated group translated in the urban landscape with a systematic grid of Maronite community buildings, asserting French and Christian dominance in Mount Lebanon. Many neighborhoods in Beirut are named after educational institutions and hospitals. For instance, the Batrakieh (Patriarchy) sector took its name from the Greek patriarchal college founded in 1865, the Nasra (Nazareth) sector took its name from the College Notre Dame de Nazareth founded in the 1870s, and Hikmeh (Wisdom) took its name from the College de la Sagesse founded by the Maronite bishop in 1878, finally, the Hôtel Dieu sector took its name from the Hôtel Dieu de France established in 1923. In contemporary Beirut, the urban landscape remains a space for religious territorial affirmation; however, in a changing demography.



10 Herzstein, ‘The Foundation of the Saint-Joseph University of Beirut,’ 752

11 Ibid

12 Arsan, “‘There Is, in the Heart of Asia, . . . an Entirely French Population’” France, Mount Lebanon, and the Workings of Affective Empire in the Mediterranean, 1830– 1920’, 82

13 De Nerval and Goethe, *Voyage En Orient*, 410

14 Ibid: 433

15 Ibid: 419

16 Lamartine, *Vues, Discours et Articles sur la Question d’Orient*

17 Makdisi, ‘Ottoman Cosmopolitanism and the Myth of the Sectarian Middle East.’, 6

18 Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon*, 12

Figure 3
Hôtel Dieu de France Hospital



The Story of the Wooden Cross

Religious Memorabilia

While roaming in the street to get petition signatures for the project, we stumbled across a little shop selling various miscellaneous items: kids' toys, accessories, some makeup, and religious iconography. A wooden cross was hung in the store, a common sight in Christian-majority neighborhoods. The lady in charge of the store came outside to talk to us; she was around 70 years old. After explaining the project, she asked, "Where are you from?" Answering Beirut is never enough, East Beirut or West Beirut? Originally from Beirut? When I shared that I was from Mousaitbeh, a neighborhood in West Beirut, she seemed surprised and uncomfortable. I quickly told her my name, Nathalie Marj, to let her know I was Christian. Revealing your name can be an introduction to a friendly greeting or a blunt rejection. The Lab in charge of the project belongs to the American University of Beirut, an institution in West Beirut; this was a polarizing issue when discussing the project with residents.

The project is situated in Mar Mikhael, commonly considered part of Ashrafieh, one of the remaining districts with a predominantly Christian population in Beirut. Historically, Beirut had a Christian and Sunni majority, but the religious balance shifted due to internal migrations during the civil war, conflicts, and increased immigration from neighboring countries. This fear of the Christian population's weakening is evident in the general narrative of dwellers of Ashrafieh, and spatializes in different ways. Adding to the grid of community buildings erected by the French and the Maronite community since the 19th century, the urban landscape is continuously marked today by religious statues and displays, reinforcing the Christian identity of the district. For example, one of the main public squares in Ashrafieh – Sassine Square – an intersection of main roads with a few coffee shops and restaurants, hosts a big

statue of the Virgin Mary. While this statue has been a longstanding fixture, its gradual increase in size mirrors the concerns of the Christian population about demographic changes over the years. To understand how the "fear of Shi'a encroachment,"¹⁹ as Hiba Bou Akar calls it, spatializes in Beirut, it is important to look at this history of displacement in the city. One way violence manifested itself during the Civil War was through sectarian cleansings, leading to extensive displacements as

individuals were forced to leave their homes in 'mixed' areas. Seeking safety, they relocated to sectors controlled by militias that shared their sectarian affiliation. Ashrafieh and Ras Beirut emerged as new centers of the East and West, respectively. In districts like Hamra, historically welcoming diverse religions and classes, this territorial and sectarian-driven rationale led Christian residents and business owners to flee eastward. Starting in 1982, with the Israeli Invasion of South Lebanon, Shiite

19 Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come: Planning Beirut's Frontiers*, 17



Figure 4
The Virgin Mary statue looming over the Sassine Square in Ashrafieh

Figure 5 (left)
Common sight in
East Beirut: Shrine
under a residential
building in Mar
Mikhael, holding
statues, religious
iconography and a
picture of Bachir
Gemayel, founder
of the Lebanese
Forces party. When
taking the picture, a
resident stopped me
and told me “good
job, photograph him,
habibna ‘our love’”.



Figure 6 (right)
Little grocery shop
in Gemmayze with
stickers of Bachir
Gemayel showcased
in the form of a
cross on the street
display. Photo by
Tamara Saade.



20 Mermier, ‘The
Frontiers of Beirut’:
377

21 Hafeda,
*Negotiating Conflict
in Lebanon*, 34

22 Bou Akar,
‘Contesting Beirut’s
Frontiers’, 150

populations escaping the violence moved into the city and its southwest periphery, buying property from Christians looking to flee the West or squatting in empty offices and hotels. Thus, the apprehension surrounding the presence of the Shiite figure in the city was heightened. The Amal Movement, the precursor to Hezbollah – the leading Lebanese Shi’a Islamist political party and militant group – was initially referred to as ‘haraket al mahrumin,’ translating to the movement of the dispossessed people. Indeed, over many years, the Shiite community represented a class of individuals who were disenfranchised, hailing from rural areas and comprising predominantly poor migrants engaged in menial jobs in Beirut. Their primary residence was often found in the informal outskirts of the city. In the Lebanese context, Shiites are typically perceived as rural, economically disadvantaged dwellers, while Sunnis, who originally constituted a significant portion of Beirut’s population, are viewed as champions of Lebanon’s economic prosperity. The shift in Beirut’s demography also resulted from the Syrian political climate: by 2016, with the tense political landscape in Syria, the war resulted in more than one million Syrian refugees being displaced to Lebanon.

War-time displacement patterns were repeated and continued to occur years later: Frank Mermier describes how the fear of future violence defines the social geography and the movements of residents in Beirut since the renewed sectarian violence in 2005.²⁰ Indeed,

displacement patterns have since emerged as a response rather than a forceful movement, as chains of actions motivated by improvisation and instincts of risk mitigation. Mohamad Hafeda describes this as a voluntary movement of residents from one area to another to match political and religious affiliation.²¹ These individual mobility patterns reflect local and global politics, providing an example of how the politics of mobility operate. Indeed, they also result from tactics employed by political and religious factions to establish control and create divisions along sectarian boundaries. Hiba Bou Akar – Lebanese architect and urban planner focusing on the urban role of religious political organizations – claims:

During “times of peace,” conflict has continued, yet it has less to do with military maneuver and positioning than with the production of a spatial order of sectarian and political difference... through mechanisms as land and housing markets, urban planning and zoning residents²²

In her book *For the War Yet to Come: Planning Beirut’s Frontiers* she examines two peripheries of Beirut, illustrating how the anticipation of future conflicts governs the city. The recognition of one group’s dominance over another is conveyed through statues and religious symbols but also becomes evident in real estate transactions, housing accessibility, and zoning and planning regulations.

Land and housing markets are one of the channels through which the religious conflict

is territorialized. The deals made to acquire and develop land can be seen as strategic “chess moves” into the territory of the religious other.²³ Initially, isolated purchases can lead to the perception that the demography of an area is shifting, leading surrounding neighbors to start selling out of fear of living next to the religious other. The church deploys different strategies to try and counter these patterns, which were shared in a political show titled “Land sales in Al Hadath,” attempting to address ways to stop land sales and reacquire land that Shiite developers had already purchased.²⁴ To understand these mechanisms, two examples can be highlighted: one of Beirut’s southwest periphery, Chiyah, through the lens of Hiba Bou Akar, and Mousaitbeh, my neighborhood of origin, within Administrative Beirut.

At the time of Abou Akar’s fieldwork, the Maronite church was trying to halt the territorial expansion of Shi’a communities in Beirut’s peripheries by undoing some of the moves already made. Dahiye is the South-West suburb of Beirut that is considered the base of the Shiite party Hezbollah and that has been growing into neighboring Christian and Sunni neighborhoods like Hadath and Chiyah. The landowners and residents of Chiyah before the war were mostly Christians, with the Maronite Church of Mar Mikhael owning large tracts of land as endowments in the area (Waqf lands). With the rise of Hezbollah and the migration of Christians forming the church’s congregation, some Christian owned plots got divided between supporters of the different Shia parties. As a response, the Church buys land and buildings around its site, mostly in ruins, because it is easier to acquire and keeps them empty, in ruins, or leveled into parking lots. When Hiba asked about the future of these sites, a church official confirmed that nothing was planned for now. She argues that the Church’s intervention in the real estate market at that time was part of a larger land acquisition strategy aimed at curbing what the church saw as Shiite expansion. This strategy would help Christians hold assets against a larger displacement scheme, reclaiming the land as Christian. The contest over Beirut’s peripheries even expanded into a transnational phenomenon, with Maronite church and Hezbollah-affiliated developers finding war-displaced Lebanese landowners willing to sell their land back in Lebanon, fueled by sectarian discourse over the religious identity of land.²⁵ These types of contested frontiers lead to channeled markets of housing and services, serving only specific communities and acting as tools for homogeneous enclaves. Georges Karam, who has been managing

the Waqf lands owned by the church in Mousaitbeh for thirty years, shared with me how these lands serve the Christian community during an interview. Located in the central part of West Beirut, Mousaitbeh has undergone many social and spatial changes during and after the war. Often perceived as a Christian (Greek Orthodox) enclave in the Muslim part of the city, it nevertheless has a strong Sunni community to the North and East, Syriac Orthodox in the South, and some Druze and Shia. During the Civil War, a large population from the South of Lebanon found refuge in the district and other areas in West Beirut. This led to the departure of a large proportion of the Christian population, who poorly accepted the newcomers, mostly Shiites because they did not fit in with the urbanized lifestyles of the Sunnis and Orthodox.²⁶ In recent years, a few Orthodox Christians have returned to the area, although their numbers are small due to the high real estate prices. However, the recent interventions of the Orthodox Bishop’s Office in the area are worth noting, aiming to encourage its community to return. Georges Karam expanded on this during our conversation.



23 Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come: Planning Beirut’s Frontiers*, 57

24 Ibid, 59

25 Ibid

26 Arnaud,
Beyrouth, Grand Beyrouth, 92

Figure 7
Residential building
in Ashrafieh called
‘Jesuit Building’

Excerpt from an interview with Georges Karam (in charge of managing Church Saint-Elie's Waqf lands), interview by author, Beirut, December 23, 2023

NM: Didn't you think of moving back to Mousaitbeh after you returned from Africa?

NM: Were you a majority?

NM: Are all the lands owned by the church developed? Are they only used for housing?

NM: Yes, my grandfather, Allah Yerhamo 'may God bless his soul', used to work in stone. So you only rent housing to Orthodox?

NM: What about the other 8 Buildings?

NM: Oh nice, what does the social system provide?

GK: No...because... it had already started. Everyone was already leaving, the Orthodox, Christian Orthodox. To tell you, Mousaitbeh used to be mixed, Sunnites and Greek Orthodox, we were 50 000 Christians.

GK: No, No, not a majority, but we were living very well together. Then people left, the Christians left. And the Shiites started buying the Christians' lands. Today, we are maybe 6000 or 7000 Greek Orthodox left. And we have two churches, both Saint-Elie. But it is the bigger one, Saint Elie Btina, which owns the Waqf lands.

GK: No, we have a total of 13 buildings including housing for rent and commercial space. The buildings include some low-cost housing that we give exclusively to the Orthodox community. And then we have some lands around the church that I divided in small 1000 m2 properties and gave to people working with stone, its your family, *Beit Marj* 'Family Marj'.

GK: No, actually, we have buildings for Muslim people too. The 5 low-cost buildings that we have, we house *ahlatna* 'our families'. This way, if a guy marries a girl from our kids, we give them an apartment almost for free. Like this, we also keep people next to our churches, so they don't become empty.

GK: The others are for everyone. But Sunnis are the only ones who can afford the normal prices, this is how we make money to give services to the Christians. We created a social system that exists nowhere else, not even in Switzerland, for the 7000 Christians left.

GK: We distribute the capital we have through real estate to people who need it. Because the Christians who stayed in Mousaitbeh are the low middle-class. The first help is that we give them some money every month. Then, for the students, we have the church's school where we provide free education for all Greek Orthodox. Then the old people with illness, we give them a bag of medicine at the end of each month, we also send them to the hospital at our expense.



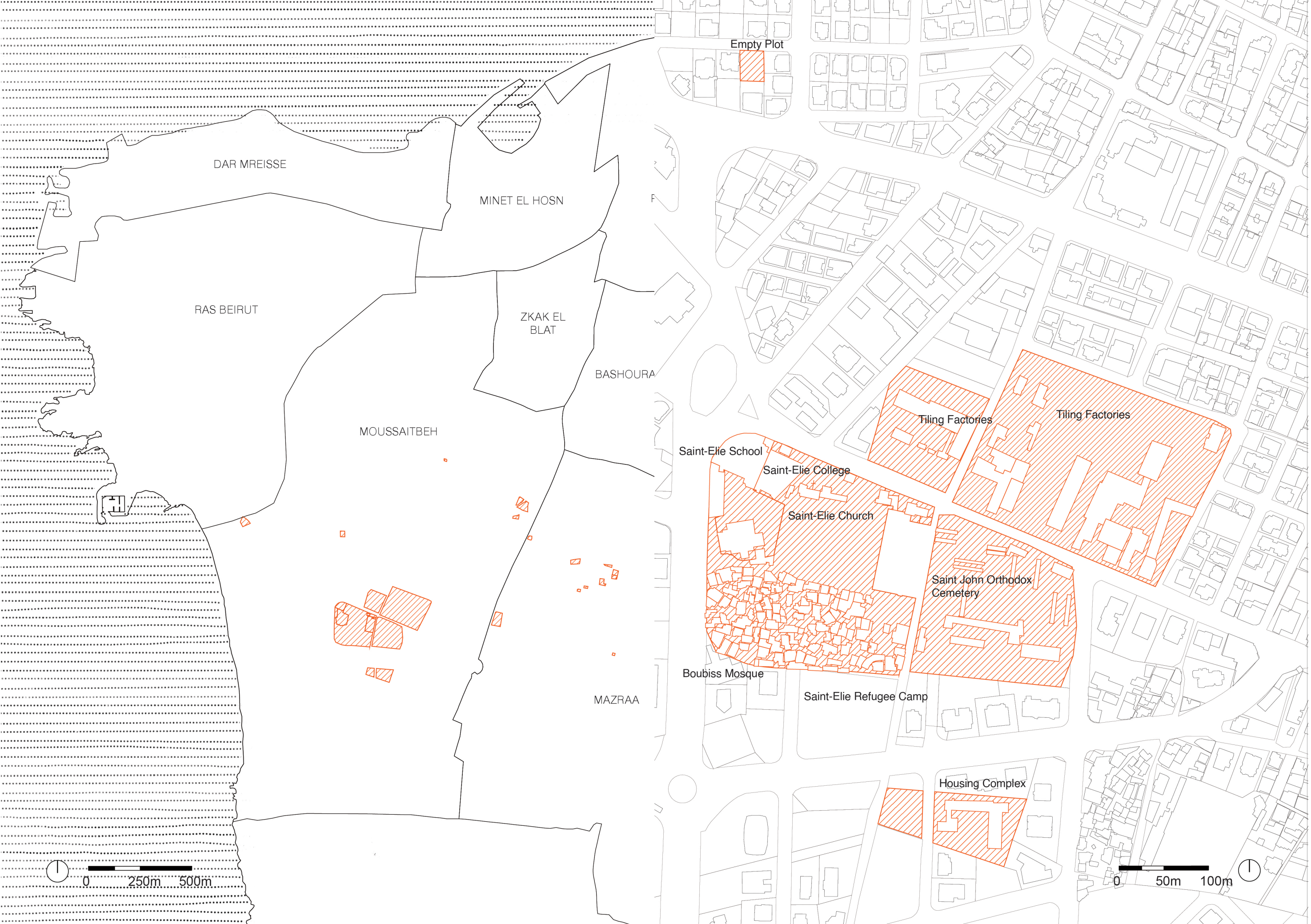
Figure 8
Saint Elie Church
in Mousaitbeh

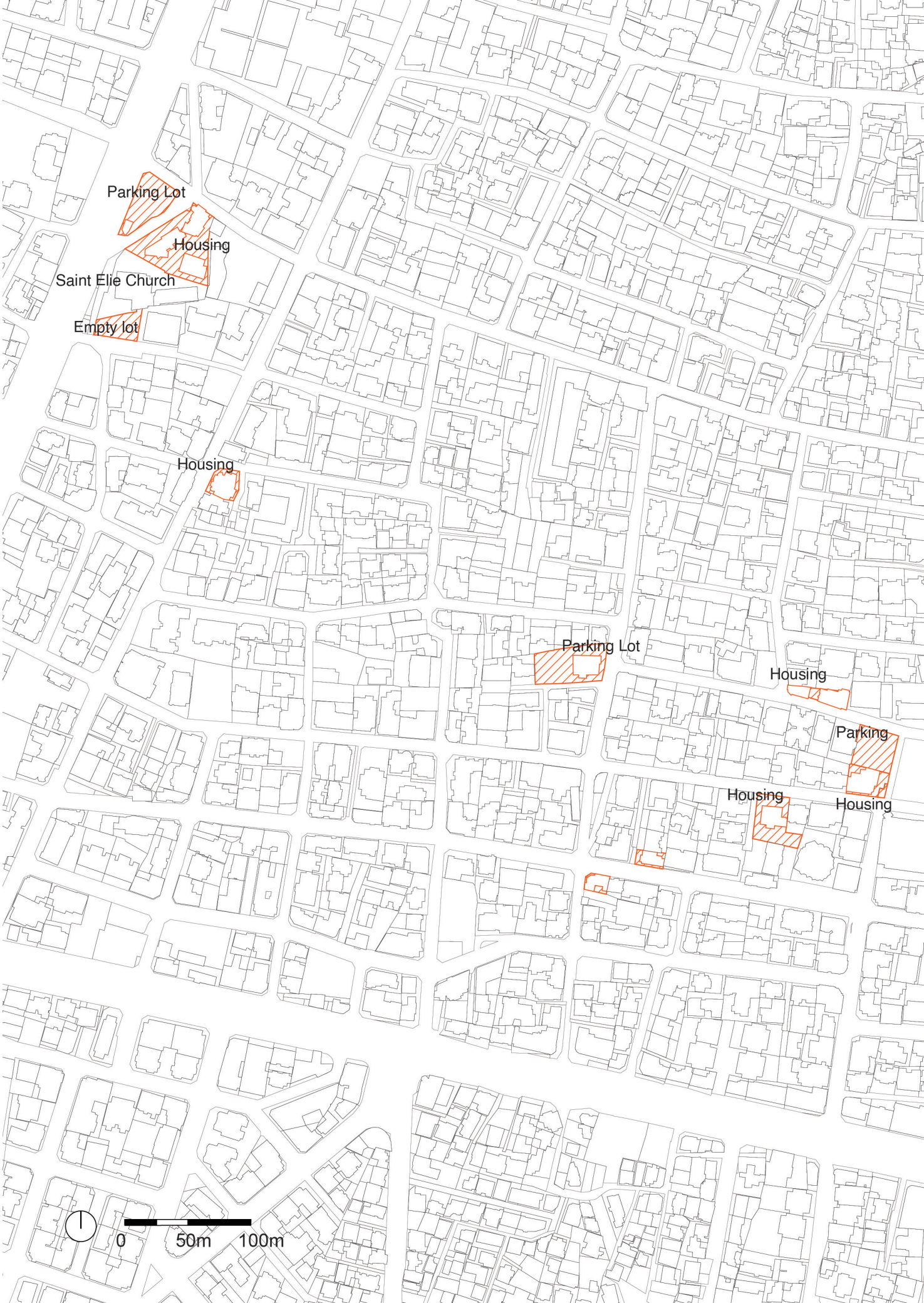


Figure 9
Waqf lands
management office



Figure 10
Waqf lands
management office





Georges, therefore, explained how the church creates channeled markets for housing and services at a meager cost to keep the Christian community in the neighborhood. This was a common mechanism after the war when the government did not plan any social or low housing.²⁷ Shiite religious political organizations also began to help their supporters by providing low-income housing, with the intent of keeping its population base centralized in the city. Hezbollah managed to steer the desired population to new low-cost housing, in addition to sponsoring and encouraging the construction of communal spaces such as mosques, basketball courts for the young, and coffee shops for the elderly.²⁸ Most real estate agents in the southwest suburbs of Beirut are affiliated with the party, creating a monopoly over the market. The creation of these networks thus might allow family members to continue living in proximity and to preserve some aspect of their community. These informal communal agreements lead to homogeneous enclaves and strong kinship systems, with religious institutions playing a central role. Thus, sectarian formations become embedded in the everyday lives of residents through their access to services. There were attempts to legally institutionalize geographic segregation along sectarian lines through numerous suggested laws, none of them being approved.

In 2011, the Lebanese Parliament deliberated a proposed law - the Harb law - prohibiting land sales between Christians and Muslims for 15 years, which was not the first time such a law was proposed.²⁹ The objective was to safeguard religious coexistence by keeping the city's demographic structure untouched. Real estate transactions involving different religious groups were viewed as a threat to Lebanon's national unity, linked to an alleged "Islamization scheme" in the Middle East.³⁰ Over the past decade, discriminatory discourse has become commonplace in discussions about urban affairs and land policies. These sectarian discourses become especially problematic when institutionalized and adopted into quasi-formal practice. Boutros Harb, a Christian member of the Lebanese Parliament, proposed the Harb Law to formalize and address anxieties and fears expressed by the Christian community behind closed doors. While Harb's proposal remained unrealized, the Maronite church persists in seeking amendments to Lebanese real estate and building laws to safeguard Christian-owned land. They propose changing the existing 'haqq al-shufa,' meaning the right of preemption, which demands that property owners give their neighbors the first

opportunity to purchase the property before opening the sale to the market.³¹ The church is considering extending the concept of 'neighbor' to encompass the broader Christian community.

Beirut's sectarian violence today can be seen as a different type of urbicide,³² a slower and more silent destruction done through the voiding or emptying of buildings through self-displacement. Though still not officially institutionalized, land in Beirut is weaponized and given a confession, alienating unwanted people, specifically religious others. From the Statue of the Virgin Mary marking the territory to channeled markets of real estate and service provision to popular discourses of alienation, multiple informal practices reproduce the territorial logic installed during the war by powerful parties. These practices are forged in the everyday life of dwellers, naturalizing sectarian formations within their perception and interaction with the city.

27 Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come: Planning Beirut's Frontiers*, 76

28 Bou Akar "Displacements, Politics, and Governance"

29 Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come: Planning Beirut's Frontiers*, 12

30 Ibid

31 Ibid, 56

32 Urbicide, which translates to the death of the city, is the ordered, premeditated, and explicit destruction of urban areas.

The Story of the Men Watching Internalized Sectarianism

Every day on site, I saw the same men – retailers, building owners, and residents – occupying the one-meter sidewalk, their plastic chairs and products displayed outside, talking, smoking, and watching us collect signatures as if they were keeping that sidewalk safe. Some of the same men sometimes observed the workers on site from their balcony, a few meters above the sidewalk. The balcony’s high position gives the residents a protected observation space, high and unattainable from the street and passers but still visible to the public gaze; surveillance is part of the domestic space. Often, balconies are also decorated with flags, confirming residents’ allegiance to a certain political party. The sidewalk, filled with objects, acts as the shops’ outdoor living room, often with only the man sitting while the wife continues running the business inside. We observed many of these men conversing with parliamentary members who opposed the project, aligning with the dominant party in the neighborhood. Sectarian formations naturalize in the everyday practices of residents, evolving into an internalized sense of duty and control.

For 10 days, we talked to almost everyone working or living on the project’s street. Many people approved the project but feared signing the petition because their landlords were against it and politically affiliated. Some didn’t want to sign before the ‘neighborhood committee’ agreed to the project, a committee that was allegedly formed by residents of the neighborhood, but that never officially issued a unified opinion through a democratic process. A few politically affiliated committee members spoke in its name, without consent, and created the petition against the project, which was signed by “the people of Gemmayze, Mar Mikhael, Rmeil, Mar Nicolas.”³³ This domination of some people through a neighborhood committee can be seen as a hidden surveillance tool by powerful residents holding allegiances to political parties. Indeed,



surveillance and security in Beirut can be seen in many forms, from one practiced by the state and political forces to assert territorial dominance, to one used by residents to reproduce control. Surveillance can translate as a visible apparatus or a hidden and discreet one, going from metal bars, barbed wire, blocked streets, CCTV cameras, and militia buildings to observation coffeeshops, men sitting on street corners, flags and posters, and ‘no photography’ areas. The deployment of security apparatuses oscillates and varies in intensity depending on perceived threats and local and regional tensions. In some politically contested neighborhoods or during international escalations (like for example between Israel and Iran or Saudi and Iran), heightened and visible securitization can dominate the streets, while in others, it can simply manifest through neighborhood committees.

Neighborhood committees are very common in Lebanon, consisting of local residents (mostly male) who appoint themselves as the



protectors of the neighborhood, generally seen as a sectarian territory.³⁴ They are often seen sitting at street corners smoking their *arguileh* or circulating in motorcycles, sometimes questioning and intimidating those perceived as “outsiders” to the neighborhood. Islamic parties, for example, greatly influence some areas through these forms of committees.³⁵ Indeed, they informally help produce the party’s Islamic milieu by decorating city blocks during Ramadan or notifying the party when “improper” activities take place in the neighborhoods.³⁶ The parties forge a sectarian community consolidated around specific moral norms through committees and other groups.

All major sectarian political groups in Lebanon have their own youth wings, socializing through sports, leisure, and cultural events. These organizations can take the form of foundations, serving sectarian-based youth by offering them access to leisure spaces and social services, keeping them hostage to a clientelistic system of service provision. These residents, therefore, internalize sectarian formations and reproduce them in the city through panoplies of sectarian markers such as flags, emblems, posters, political offices, and graffiti. These objects of representation are more visible at the intersection of politico-religious territories, demarcating the territory of one group against another and confirming the allegiance of residents of the area, alienating any outsiders. When new boundaries emerge and a neighborhood goes through a demographical transition, flags and posters affirm the newfound dominance of

Figure 11 (left)
Balcony holding the flags of Lebanon and of Lebanese Forces Party, Ashrafieh

Figure 12 (right)
Barbed wire around the Grand Serail, Beirut Central District

34 Fawaz, Harb, and Gharbieh, ‘Living Beirut’s Security Zones’, 181

35 Deeb and Harb, ‘Culture as History and Landscape’, 15

36 Ibid

Figure 13
Sign of the Kataib or Phalanges party on an intersection, with seating space, Mar Mikhael

33 Public Works Studio, ‘The Mar Mikhael Square Project’

37 Mitchell,
Cultural Geography,
143

38 Khalaf and
Khouri, *Recovering
Beirut*, 27

39 Fawaz, Harb,
and Gharbieh,
'Living Beirut's
Security Zones', 186

a political party. Through these sites, parties construct what Don Mitchell calls “a way of seeing” land and people’s relationship to it. The built landscape becomes a “system of representation – a system of signs” that operates as material and textual means through which a party disseminates its vision of the world and constructs its culture through and within space.³⁷ In politically tense moments, these sectarian demarcation lines harden. Indeed, security systems become much more intense, visible, and oppressive, demarcating borders with armored vehicles, fortified walls, sandbags, barbed wire, metal barriers, concrete blocks, and metal detectors. Securitization translates into dwellers’ daily experiences in Beirut, constraining people to navigate the streets in altered ways to face the different obstacles. Dwellers perceive surveillance differently, sometimes creating a feeling of safety or threat. Security, often gendered and practiced solely by men, can make some feel safer in a space while contrastingly creating strong disincentives for others to get into securitized neighborhoods. Indeed, these measures create what Samir Khalaf terms “geography of fear”,³⁸ configuring residents’ mobility, perception, and experience of the city across political and sectarian lines. Navigating Beirut is inscribed in anxiety and mistrust of maps as navigation tools: A map does not determine the right path according to your identity, religion, or citizenship. It does not recognize lived invisible boundaries, military checkpoints, political banners, or men sitting on a street corner. Migrant

workers report taking longer routes to avoid checkpoints, changing sidewalks when walking in police presence, and asking taxi drivers to take longer routes.³⁹ Untangling these different security mechanisms reveals how the common alienating narratives materialize spatially through social segregation and differentiation between urban dwellers along the lines of sectarian belonging, resulting in emptied-out public spaces and neighborhoods and close-knit exclusive perceptions of neighborhoods.

Figure 14
Kataib or Phalanges
Party headquarter
office in Ashrafieh



Figure 15
Beirut's Central
District, a
highly securitized
neighborhood
slowly turning into a
ghost town

The Story of the Mukhtar

‘Chosen’ Representative

40 Maria Rajha (architect working on the Mar Mikhael Square), interview by author, Lausanne, November 9, 2023.

41 Ibid

As previously mentioned, influential people and politicians in the neighborhood launched a campaign against the project and imposed obstacles through their influence. These people have close relations with the Mukhtar – the elected neighborhood-level state representative – who supported the project but opposed it when objections surfaced. Indeed, the Mukhtar advocated for the project during its conception, visiting the Municipality several times with the late Habib Debs – an architect and planner working on the project – to convince them of it.⁴⁰ The Mukhtar was an important actor to negotiate with because he greatly influenced the residents’ opinion and the municipality’s decision. He later changed his views on the project when a member of parliament, part of the dominant political party in the area, contacted him and told him to side with them.⁴¹ Mukhtars are elected by the people every six years and represent the most local and spatially proximate tier of the Lebanese state structure. They are responsible for local administrative tasks and are considered social leaders, safeguarding relations in the community.

The term *Mukhtar* in Arabic means the chosen. However, the Mukhtar is voted for only by residents originally from the village or neighborhood represented, often called *sukkan asliyyin*, literally meaning original residents. These obsolete policies are relevant for voting laws at all levels in Lebanon, from the municipal council to the parliamentary elections, and specify that voters must cast their ballots in their ancestors’ villages. An individual’s official town of origin is linked to the father’s, for men and unmarried women, and becomes that of the husband when a woman gets married. These gendered administrative-geographic designations were set by Lebanon’s only official census, which was conducted in 1932. Therefore, while a

large percentage of Lebanon’s population lives in Beirut, only a small part is registered to vote there. According to Mermier, the current electoral system maintains the political and symbolic link to the locality of “origin,” keeping communitarian links alive.⁴² In theory, it is possible to change one’s place of registration, however it is extremely difficult in practice, because of administrative obstacles and political corruption.

Despite attempts to maintain a demographic status quo, a neighborhood is an evolving place of social interaction with a changing social fabric, bringing together people of different groups, classes, ages, and citizenship. These policies, like other strategies previously explained, also work against the changing demography of Beirut, denying newcomers like Shiites, refugees, or migrants, political participation. This is one of the reasons for the complexity of representation, maybe its impossibility, in the light of the absence of appropriate representative frameworks.

The Mukhtar, in Lebanon, is considered an employee of the residents, mediating between them and the state. An old member of Beirut’s municipal council (see the story on the municipality) indicated that he always needed the local Mukhtar’s support to be able to implement a project or on the contrary, stop one. Thus, the Mukhtar is a key player in decision-making and is often politicized, supporting the political party dominating his neighborhood. Mohamad Hafeda, in his discussions with different Mukhtars, highlights

the challenges that arise when officials express sectarian sympathies that do not align with the communities they serve. His interviews reveal the potential conflicts that may emerge as these officials try to fulfill their roles as representatives of specific places and people.⁴³ Particularly before the Civil War, Mukhtars were instrumental in promoting certain candidates and helping build a popular opinion for political leaders, as they were strongly tied with local residents. Political inheritance is a common practice in Lebanon, and politicians often come from prominent political families where they inherit their leadership status and the population’s support. Samir Khalaf argues that “kinship, fealty and religion” are the ties and loyalties inherent in the Lebanese political system. Khalaf notes that the role of religion in political life goes back to the collapse of feudalism, where people found sentiment in religion to “sustain identity and communal solidarity.”⁴⁴ Indeed, the Mukhtar’s office, besides being the place to go when in need of administrative documents, is seen as a space for residents to sit, talk and have coffee. These kinship ties through religion are institutionalized at different levels of governance in Beirut, from the Mukhtar to the municipality.

42 Mermier, ‘The Frontiers of Beirut’: 376–93

43 Hafeda, *Negotiating Conflict in Lebanon*, 51-100

44 Khalaf, ‘Primordial Ties and Politics in Lebanon’, 247



Figure 16 Sidewalk project unfinished site, with the staircase leading to the Mukhtar’s office on the left. The staircase is named after the Mukhtar ‘Gholam.’

The Story of the Municipality

Immaterial Borders of Administration

The question of representation can be looked at in the project at the neighborhood scale (see the story of the Mukhtar) and the municipal one. The municipality of Beirut is in charge of releasing construction permits within its administrative boundaries. After issuing a construction permit and halfway through it, the governor asked to halt all construction activities when objections from residents and political representatives were raised. After a month of collecting signatures for the project and altering the design to answer the different concerns, the municipality and the political figures objecting to the project were still not satisfied. Many residents opposing the project questioned its approval by the municipality and did not feel represented by it. Before untangling the municipal governance of Beirut and its dysfunctionality, let us highlight that there has been an ongoing debate on the efficiency of the municipality in representing its citizens rightfully and propositions to split the municipality in two, one for East Beirut (Christian majority) and one for West Beirut (Muslim majority).⁴⁵ This is not the first time this has been proposed and has happened in other municipalities previously. For example, the Christian village of Chiyah and the neighboring Shiite one of Ghobeiri were part of the same municipality; however, as sectarian tensions mounted, the area was divided into two municipalities in 1956.⁴⁶

Administratively, Lebanon is composed of muhafazat (governorates), which are divided into qada' (districts), each of which contains several baladiyyat (municipalities). Thus, municipal governance is the country's third level of public administration. In contrast to the parliament, there are no official sectarian quotas. Beirut's local governance system is peculiar since it is a governorate divided only into one municipality. In this context, the city council, consisting of 24 members elected by the original residents of Beirut and led

by the mayor, possesses legislative authority. Meanwhile, the executive responsibilities are delegated to the mohafez (governor), appointed by the central government. The principal governor is accountable to the Minister of Interior and Municipalities, who form part of the State's governing board. Local representation, central to the practice of citizenship at the municipal level, is hindered, because of the municipal law stating that voting is based on the place of origin. This results in the discrepancy between the 'legal city' and the 'real city', which includes immigrants, war refugees, and migrant workers. Despite the official non-sectarian nature of the law governing municipal elections - the 1977 law - communalism still plagues the municipality, and key positions are allocated according to religious criteria. Since Lebanon's independence, the city governor has been traditionally Christian, typically Greek Orthodox, while the head of the municipality is Sunni, reflecting the main two populations of Beirut. Indeed, the population of Ottoman Beirut historically consisted of Sunni Muslims and Greek Orthodox Christians. Today, the notion that they are the authentic Beirutis is deeply ingrained in the common urban vision. Many residents of Beirut, even those who were born and raised in the city, still consider themselves and are considered (for electoral purposes) to be from somewhere else. Frank Mermier has discussed the "real and imaginary" representation of the city:

The common representation of Beirut's urban life considers the Sunnis and the

Greek Orthodox as two groups which are the only truly urban communities under a so called "right to the city" linked to their urban historical antecedents. Maronites, Druze and Shia are linked to spaces of reference other than the city, such as the mountains for the first two, and the south and the Bekaa regions for the Shia.⁴⁷

When discussing this division of roles with scholars and political figures, many told me their hypothesis that one of the main reasons that the executive power is in the hands of an Orthodox mayor while the Sunni mayor possess legislative power is to avoid having the mayor take over the Sunni prime minister's role as the *zaiim*, meaning leader of the Sunni Beirutis. Implementing urban decisions and projects becomes difficult due to religious divisions in roles. While the municipality theoretically has broad powers in urban planning, it mainly serves an advisory role. Executive power is largely delegated to the regional prefect, causing challenges in coherent urban action, especially when opposing political groups lead the two governance levels, a common occurrence since the 1990s. This structure, a legacy of the Ottoman period and mandate system, was intended to provide a balanced system to avoid the concentration of power in the hands of a single person. To further understand the decentralization of power between the local and the regional governance of Beirut and its influence on the city's planning, an interview was conducted with Bilal Hamade, who held the mayor position from 2010 to 2016.

45 Salah, 'Two Municipalities for Beirut?'

46 Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come: Planning Beirut's Frontiers*, 41

47 Mermier, 'The Frontiers of Beirut,' 377



Figure 17
The idewalk project's unfinished construction site

NM: In practice, how does Beirut municipality function?

BH: The council meets and takes resolutions, and the President of the council (the mayor) finalizes these resolutions and sends whatever is needed for endorsement to the Ministry of Interior. After which, he has to send them to Governor who has no time limit and no obligation to execute these resolutions, the Governor can put on hold any resolution he does not want to implement for as long as he wishes and in the end he need not execute such resolutions. Thousands of files have been sitting in drawers for years, I never saw him touch them. In Lebanon, the President of the Republic has a time limit to approve the resolutions of the council of ministers, while Beirut Governor does not have any restraining limit to endorse or execute the resolutions of the municipality council. To be noted that the municipality council is elected by Beirut citizens as their local authority, while the Governor is appointed by the central government, and is not elected by the people of Beirut.

This conflict between the President of the municipality council, and the Governor is aggravated by the fact that the council President is Muslim Sunni, while the Governor is Christian Greek orthodox, and each one of them is backed up by the religious authority of his/her sect. This conflict puts a lot of projects concerning the development and urban planning of Beirut on hold; and this sectarian protection stops any accountability of these civil servants like what happened after Beirut Port explosion, and the devaluation of the national currency, and in many other issues in the country.

NM: Is this sectarian division between the Christian Governor and the Muslim Council President stipulated in the law?

BH: No, it's not stipulated in the law, but this is a custom and in Lebanon the custom is as strong as the law. Personally, I believe that it's better to have one head of the local authority, whether Christian or Muslim and give him/her all the authority that he/she needs in implementing the task. What is even worse is that the Governor should not be from Beirut city, but comes normally from another city or village, so he/she doesn't know Beirut but is rather a stranger to Beirut.

NM: I know the municipality lost a lot of power throughout the years, what sectors does the municipality really overlook?

BH: The municipality work concerns mainly the streets, the gardens and landscaped areas, the urban planning of the city, and repair and upgrading of streets, infrastructure and buildings. Basically, the problem is that we don't have decentralized governance that gives sufficient power to the City elected local authority which prevents it from developing smoothly local projects and implement them for in the City. This in addition to the sectarian conflict between the President of municipality and the Governor.

NM: Who has the power to do larger projects?

BH: The Council for Development and Reconstruction, or CDR, it was established after the Lebanese Civil War to overlook projects at the national level, like intercity highways for example, but by the law, the municipality can ask the Council to execute projects on its behalf that are financed by the municipality. By resorting to the CDR, to tender and execute projects, the municipality can bypass the bureaucracy of the Governor, the Ministry of Interior, and of the COA. We did many projects in collaboration with the CDR, such as the upgrading of Charles Helou Boulevard at the eastern entrance of Beirut.

NM: *Explains the failed sidewalk project...we got approval from the governor before starting the project, but then the Governor withdrew his approval.*

BH: During my term and in order to avoid such pressures and interferences for major projects, I used to invite the MP's, the religious representatives, and the local stakeholders to a seminar to present to them the project and try to secure their approval beforehand. Because it's frequent in Beirut that the politics and religion interfere in the planning and development of the city, and this should not be the case.

The Story of the Urban Planner

Planning as a Tool for Sectarian Dominance

Throughout the project, the urban planners were constantly negotiating with political and religious important figures, trying to compromise for everyone. Public Works Studio – a research-design practice in Lebanon – describes, in an article released online, the imposed obstacles on the project as using militia-like methods.⁴⁸ Workers on site were even subjected to verbal violence and harassment coming from one of the prominent political figures in the neighborhood when trying to finish the first phase of the project, with the permission and approval of the municipality. Space makers everywhere in the world are negotiators between different actors and stakeholders. In Beirut, they have to engage in non-democratic decision-making processes, where they lose agency in the face of religious-political organizations and become technicians in their service rather than social reformers. Samir Khalaf – Lebanese sociologist focusing on the history of civil strife and political violence in Lebanon – expresses his discontent with architects and planners, in which he had hoped to be the vector of rationality and control but who become “willful participants, often accessories to the very processes despoiling our living space.”⁴⁹

48 Public Works Studio, “The Mar Mikhael Square Project”

49 Khalaf and Khoury, *Recovering Beirut*, 20

Planning schemes during the mandate period and early years of independence, mostly inspired and undertaken by French experts (Danger in 1932, Ecochard in 1944, Egli in 1950 and the master plan of 1963) were never implemented and did little to alleviate widening communal differences.⁵⁰

After Lebanon’s independence and with the 1950s discourse led by Western powers advising development paths for recently independent countries, numerous plans were proposed to address Lebanon’s changing social and spatial networks. Fouad Chehab took the presidency after the 1958 clashes caused by unbalanced

development and huge class differences. A consulting firm created a report on income inequality and poverty in the country while Michel Ecochard was developing a plan for Beirut the same year. While both their recommendations were not implemented,



they show Chehab’s strong belief in the state’s role in development and planning to address inequality. He also pushed for the creation of institutions to guide the country’s planning, placing the profession of urban planning and design at the heart of the country’s official development discourses.⁵¹ The Planning and Development Council was initiated and endowed by the Ministry of Economy in 1953. It was followed in 1954 by a separate Ministry of Public Planning and then the Directorate of Town Planning (DGU) in 1959. The urban plans developed at that time were focused on physical planning and were entrusted with

solving social problems to avoid future conflicts. Indeed, Chehab is remembered as one of the only presidents who addressed the common good with a unified vision of the nation as one entity and not sectarian fragments.

As political crises mounted in the early 70s, the Lebanese government made a last attempt to implement planning through seminars hosting Western experts. One result was the creation of a white book by the directorate of town planning in 1973. The plan, outlining a vision for Beirut from 1985-2000, remained little more than a blueprint as the country descended into conflict.⁵²

During the war, urban discussions amongst urban planners still revolved around policies aiming at national unity through comprehensive planning. However, as the war evolved into a sectarian one, both the discourse of development as well as the tools of planning were redirected by the government, eventually by separate militias, to justify violence against opposite sects and to deploy divisive planning schemes.

Amin Gemayel, head of the most right-wing Christian militia (Kataib or Phalangist party) who took the presidency in 1982, used urban policies and planning as tools of war. A new building law– law 10/83 – provided legal justification for destroying informally constructed buildings. The target was clear at the time since both the Palestinian camps and

Figure 18
Unveiling the proposed new administrative and residential towns in Beirut’s suburbs, designed by Ecochard during Chehab’s mandate. Source: L’Orient Le Jour Archives

51 Ibid, 156

52 Ibid, 163

Lebanon’s Christians Are Building Own Large Airport

SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES

BEIRUT, Lebanon, April 9—About 3½ miles north of Beirut, near the town of Batrun, bulldozers working on a plateau overlooking the sea have gouged a mile long gash through olive groves.

The men working at the site in this Christian district of Lebanon, all volunteers, raced for cover the other day just before a series of heavy explosions sent rock and earth hurtling into the air.

Nearby, a sign identified the site as Pierre Gemayel International Airport. Mr. Gemayel is the head of the Phalangists, the largest Christian faction in the country.

The Phalangist Party is building, at its own cost, a \$2.5 million airport that will have two functions. In time of peace, it will lure traffic away from the national airport in the Moslem-dominated southern suburbs of Beirut. And in the event of renewed civil war, it will give the Christian militias an independent link with the outside world. The Christian forces suffered badly in the last period of the 19 months of fighting as a result of not having access to the international airport.

The Batrun airport will be ready late this summer. The single airstrip, somewhat more than a mile long and nearly 100 yards wide, is built according to international aviation specifications. The electronic equipment and other technical installations were bought in the United States and have begun to arrive. The concrete structure of the control tower and terminal remain to be equipped.

Separate Communications System

The airport is the most telling sign that a de facto partition of Lebanon between Christians and Moslems, a result of the long civil war, is not being healed but is accelerating. The Maronite Christians, members of the largest faction in Lebanon, are determined to give the Christian part of Lebanon an independent economic and transport system as well as an independent political structure.

Construction has begun also on a separate telecommunications system linking the Christian area by radio to Cyprus, with almost 100 channels for telex and telephone. This, too, was planned and paid for by Mr. Gemayel’s Phalangists.

But it is not the Phalangist Party that is pushing the call for “regionalization” most ardently at the present. A backstage dispute is going on between Mr. Gemayel and Camille Chamoun, the former President and head of the Liberal Party, who has emerged as the most vocal spokesman of extremism on the Christian side.

Dory Chamoun, second-ranking official in the Chamoun party behind his 76-year-old father, spelled out the Chamoun philosophy in an interview.

Too Much Tension Between Them

“You can’t force these people [the Lebanese] to live together now; there is too much tension between them,” he said and cited as an example an incident in which a Christian soldier who drowned recently when a Moslem Druse soldier pushed him into a river “when nobody was looking.”

“The tension must be reduced and the only way it can be done is by creating regions that govern themselves under a federal system. It’s the only way to preserve national unity,” Mr. Chamoun continued.

He criticized President Elias Sarkis bitterly as a “unitarian” who along with the Syrians is “trying to impose unity now.”

Mr. Chamoun said that a group of experts belonging to the Lebanese Front—the umbrella organization that groups the Chamounists, Mr. Gemayel’s party and the party of former President Suleiman Frangieh—is working on the details of the geographic boundaries of the “states or cantons, call them what you want.”

He said the most likely recommendation by the experts would be four regions: the Shiite Moslems would be dominant in south Lebanon, with Sidra as their major port; Beirut would be a mixed but predominantly Christian region; the long coastal strip to the north would be Maronite Christian, and the Sunni Moslems would have the northern city of Tripoli and an arch of land reaching into eastern Lebanon.

The elder Chamoun, in a separate interview, said he favored only two regions. The Chamounist plans call for the cantons, “or states,” to have strong autonomous powers, including their own police and army units, the right to collect taxes and spend the tax income within the region, a local elected legislative assembly and a local executive power, or cabinet.

“We have been thinking about this for a long time,” Dory Chamoun said. “We won’t accept anything else. The longer Sarkis tries to impose immediate unity the worse things will get.”

The Lebanese Front has set up a shadow cabinet that is following closely the decisions of the Sarkis Government.

The disagreement between Pierre Gemayel and Camille Chamoun, according to Maronite Christian sources, involves not so much the degree of autonomy for the proposed regions as the tactics by which to have their plan accepted by the Sarkis Government and other Arab regimes.

Phalangist officials, in separate interviews, said they wanted to avoid a confrontation with the Syrians on the “decentralization” issue. Syria, enforcing the truce in the civil war, strongly backs the “unitarian” stand of Mr. Sarkis.

The Phalangists also stressed the need for consultation with Moslem groups.

The Chamounists, by contrast, are clearly intent on moving fast, making use of the political vacuum created on the Moslem and leftist side by the assassination two weeks ago of Kamal Jumblat, the leader of the left and the Druse community.

Figure 19
New York Times published on April 10th 1977 announcing the new Pierre Gemayel Airport in Beirut. Source: New York Times archives

53 Ibid, 166

many Shiite-inhabited suburbs were considered informal. Gemayel sent tanks to Ouzai, one of the main Shiite informal settlements, to clear it in the name of planning.⁵³ A few years earlier, the party started building a new airport in Batroun, a Christian district of Lebanon. The airport, opened in 1976, aimed to give the Christian militias an independent link to the world. In 1983, a new holistic planning project for Beirut was proposed, which took the form of the Schema Directeur de la Region Metropolitaine de Beyrouth. This plan, inscribed within the uncertainty of the war, was shaped by the networks of urban experts belonging to sectarian militias. Therefore, it reproduced the geography of war created on the ground and reflected the spatial distribution of militias’ existing operations, areas of influence, and territorial ambitions.⁵⁴ Similar to previous efforts, the plan stayed confined to paper. Nevertheless, it marked the final endeavor to create a city plan encompassing West and East Beirut. Additionally, it represented the last planning initiative before signing the Taif Agreement in 1989.

54 Ibid, 167

55 Ibid

Hiba Abou Akar describes this moment as the shift to “Planning without Development,”⁵⁵ when planning efforts went from addressing uneven development and inequality to providing a balanced distribution of resources to different sectarian-defined zones. The aspiration toward a national plan that was formerly present, even though never realized, disappeared with the end of the Civil War. In post-war Beirut, territories are delineated into sectarian zones, and it is only within these fragments that projects may be pursued, principally negotiated by religious-political organizations controlling their respective territories. These actors receive and monopolize foreign funds and use them for their own communities. It is commonly acknowledged that investment in public planning happens along sectarian lines, benefiting areas inhabited by certain religious-political groups while ignoring others.

56 CDR: The Council for Development and Reconstruction is a Lebanese public body set up in 1977 to undertake the reconstruction of Lebanon and plan the country’s development. It reports to the Prime Minister and is authorized to receive external grants and loans.

57 Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come: Planning Beirut’s Frontiers*, 117

plays a primordial role in developing areas within its support. Municipalities affiliated with the party receive support in implementing projects like malls or amusement parks.

With that, we can start understanding the residents’ reaction to having architects from the American University of Beirut working on a public project in Ashrafieh. Maria, architect working on the project, questions in an interview published after the end of the project, that architects can only work in the place where they are from. Indeed, planning, and real estate are interwoven with political parties in Lebanon, so we might wonder how and who can create spaces outside sectarian lines. We should also note that the architect in charge of the project was also politically engaged and was part of the municipality elections in 2016 within the non-sectarian campaign *Beirut Madinati* meaning Beirut is my city. Clearly, this created political tension with the local representatives, knowing they were not aware of the project beforehand.

The late Sunni Prime Minister Rafik Hariri pushed for many large-scale projects through foreign aid, attempting to regain territorial power and transform peripheries into Sunni ones in the ongoing tensions between Shiite and Sunni. For example, works in the Sunni periphery of Doha Aramoun, usually done by the local municipality, were executed by the CDR⁵⁶ with foreign aid and loans from donors pushing Hariri’s political agenda.⁵⁷ This allows them to skip the bureaucratic grinder of municipal approval and develop an area deemed ‘in need.’ Another example is Hezbollah, which

The Story of the Parking Spot

Controlled and Divided Mobility

One of the most important objections against the project was the anxiety over moving parking spots a few meters away and the fear that this would create more traffic in the already congested street, even though the project team included transportation engineers specialized in the issues and practicing in Beirut. This reflects the hegemony of the car as the sole mode of transport in Beirut, resulting from poor planning in the post-war years, disregarding the issue of public transport.

In Beirut, sectarianism can be understood within the materiality of urban infrastructure and the networks produced to create and navigate it. The tramway and the railway were implemented in the 1890s with the support of French powers during the Ottoman Empire's decline. Tramway lines were distributed along the seashore and covered the city from south to north, linking Beirut to Damascus. Under the French mandate and during the early independence years, Beirut's road network was expanded, and great attention was given to mobility infrastructures.

The Civil War marked an important shift in the capital's use and vision of public transport and roads. During the war, as previously stated, the city was divided along a Christian East and Muslim West, with a demarcation line following the path of the tramway line. Public spaces, transportation terminals, and main roads like Damascus Road became violent confrontation spaces. The beginning of the war is commonly associated with an incident in which a private bus carrying Palestinians crossed the Green Line and came under gunfire by one of the militia groups; this led to an aversion and an apprehension of buses.⁵⁸ With all urban mobility under the control of various factions, territorial boundaries were redefined through military bases and militia buildings.⁵⁹ With these divisions, two new decentralized hubs became new centers of Beirut, Ashrafieh

and Ras Beirut, which until today take on a central role over the deserted Central District.

Through the re-establishment of transport infrastructure and services, the post-war government continued imbuing the politico-sectarian formations created during the war. Buses, as the only type of public transport reestablished after the war, also became tools for segregation. The main transportation hub, formerly located in the Central Districts' Martyrs Square, was replaced by two transportation nodes in the West and East: Cola and Dora. Contrasting with Ivan Illich's theories on the possibilities of mobile tools for conviviality,⁶⁰ the bus system in Lebanon encourages insular behavior by fragmenting the services. Gradually, in addition to the 22 official routes established in 1996, families with sectarian affiliations also entered the bus transport market, creating what is referred to as unregulated or artisanal transport.⁶¹ This led to a privatization of public services and an infiltration of sectarianism into it. The OCFTC (Office des Chemins de Fer et des Transports en Commun) is therefore in competition with the different private operators, the main one being the LCC (Lebanese Commuting Company), which was affiliated to the then-prime minister Hariri and which operates intercity buses and vans.⁶² The red plates, issued for taxis and buses, are attributed by quotas to politico-sectarian leaders.⁶³ To ensure minimal overlap between zones covered by different companies, syndicates were formed for services, buses, and vans for each political-sectarian community. An informal bus's affiliation can be recognized by stickers, slogans, and symbols. Spatial markers are, therefore, mobile as well,



Figure 20
Pendants with a cross and religious iconography hanging.
Image by Tamara Saade.

also through religious slogans displayed at the front of the taxi or the bus or religious ornaments worn by the driver or rider.

Mobility, which can contribute to a common experience of navigating urban areas, is practiced along sectarian lines in Lebanon. Mobility patterns and the informal public transport systems perpetuate the inherited divide instead of creating transport as a space for interaction. Within division, car mobility is favored, allowing for flexibility in route choice and dissociation from the public through an isolated spatial practice. Boundaries frame people's mobility following their sectarian identities. Residents were and are still mapping out their movements amidst an often violent politico-sectarian landscape, adapting their trajectories to avoid certain places.

60 Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*

61 Mady, 'Exploring Beirut's Instability through Its Informal Mobility', 29

62 Ibid

63 Ibid

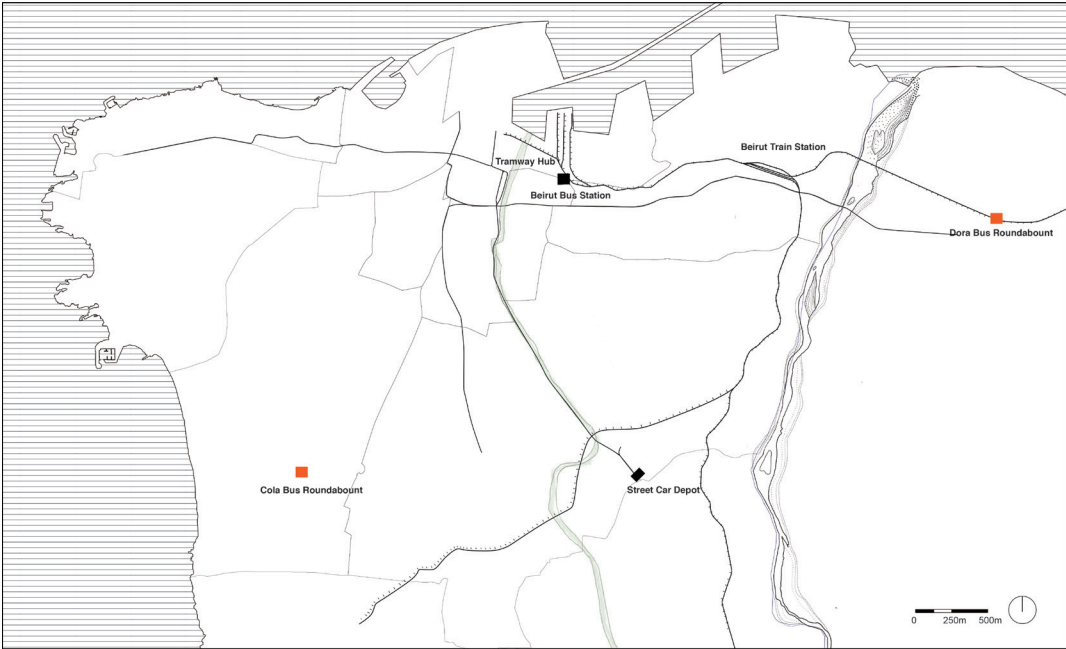


Figure 21
Map illustrating the pre-war (in black) and post-war (in blue) public transport system in Beirut

58 Mady, 'Exploring Beirut's Instability through Its Informal Mobility', 27

59 Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon*, 23

The Story of the Private Water Tank

Clientelist Social Services

Another common objection to the project, also relating to the parking spots, was that there would not be enough space left on the street for the water tank truck to park, to fill residents’ tanks. Indeed, there is an important reliance on private water providers in Lebanon, with the failure of the state to provide sufficient resources after the war. This service, amongst other privatized ones, acts as a governance instrument and is embedded in the logic of decomposition prevailing in the city. The sectarian division installed during the war was reinforced by the use of urban services such as water and electricity as weapons to achieve dominance, with different political-sectarian militias controlling them. For example, water came from reservoirs East of the city, dominated by the Lebanese Forces party. Palestinian progressive forces had authority over the Jiyeh power station and connected it to their sector in West Beirut to achieve some autonomy from the Christian militia-controlled electric grid powered by Zouk.⁶⁴ At the cusp of the Civil War, sectarian institutions served as mediators of state resources. Since the early 70s, they assumed responsibility for basic services like garbage collection and electricity services but also offered resources through sect-affiliated institutions like clinics, schools, and charities.⁶⁵

These practices shaped post-war reconstruction plans, considering how new power stations and water sources could become assets if hostilities were renewed. After the war, the social programs initiated by militias were formalized as welfare agencies with branch offices and networks of social centers.⁶⁶ Since then, connections to political organizations and demonstrated loyalty constitute a vital strategy to obtain welfare in Lebanon. Parties such as Hezbollah and the Sunni Future Movement run large networks of health clinics, dispensaries, hospitals, schools, and social assistance programs. Indeed, a poll



conducted in 2001 asked citizens who voted in the previous year’s national elections to list the two most important factors shaping their vote choice, and over 50% listed the social service of the candidate as an answer.⁶⁷ Thus, in the case of a weak state capacity, non-state providers are primordial in the everyday lives of Lebanese and their access to services. Sectarian welfare providers dominate informal service provision networks, mediating their access along partisan and religious lines. Hence, accessing social benefits becomes a politicized and discriminatory process. Sects are, therefore, partly formed through navigating services and urban infrastructures.



The lack of maintenance and payment for services during the war led to insufficient water and electricity supply and the emergence of an informal supply drawn from illegal wells and electricity produced by private generators.⁶⁸ Dwellers negotiate multiple electricity flows daily, with state agencies like Electricité du Liban providing less than 6 hours daily. For many, this means paying for a subscription to a generator owned by a local who provides electricity for a block. While some people can afford a personal generator, most buy a subscription to use a privately owned generator. This system is known as *ishtirak*, meaning ‘participation.’ The generator owners often have a reputation as a ‘mafia’ that monopolizes electricity provision in much of the country. It is said that they often have to pay local patrons linked to sectarian political parties for permission to operate.⁶⁹

This political clientelism is reflected in many sectors of service provision in Lebanon, such as in the waste management sector, which was privatized with the end of the war. This was done because of the external pressures asking for reform, but it was also suspected to directly benefit Lebanon’s political and economic elite. For example, the company chosen for the waste sector was Sukleen, which many suspected to benefit key members of the Future Movement.⁷⁰ After the 2015 trash crisis, people demanded that the municipalities regain responsibility for waste services and asked for greater transparency and control of it.⁷¹ The CDR, managing municipal funds, tried establishing new dump sites to support the only two operating ones. Municipalities opposed

Figure 22 (left)
Interstitial space used commonly by residents for private water tanks, Mar Mikhail (next to sidewalk site)

Figure 23 (right)
Electricité du Liban building, in ruins after the Beirut port blast (next to sidewalk site)

67 Ibid, 79

68 Verdeil, ‘Infrastructure Crises in Beirut and the Struggle to (Not) Reform the Lebanese State’, 95

69 Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon*, 2

70 Verdeil, ‘Infrastructure Crises in Beirut and the Struggle to (Not) Reform the Lebanese State’, 92

66 Ibid, 93

Figure 24
A view on Ashrafieh’s rooftops, filled with solar panels, water tanks, and generators. With the current economic crisis in Lebanon, and the failure of the state to provide services, the roof becomes a generative space for individualized services.

64 Awada, *La Gestion des services urbains à Beyrouth pendant la guerre*

65 Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon*, 6

66 Cammett, ‘Sectarianism and the Ambiguities of Welfare in Lebanon’, 87

Figure 25
Space owned by the municipality of Beirut, used to store the neighborhood's generators. When working on proposals for this site, planners have to consider them as permanent structures primordial to the residents, Hikmeh, Ashrafieh.

this in parochial and sectarian terms, refusing to accept other communities' waste. Indeed, Bilal Hamad, mayor at that time, shared with me during an interview that the municipality had found a potential landfill in the North of Lebanon, but local stakeholders refused to take Beirut's waste into their region.

These daily negotiation processes involve social arrangements, creating affective bonds between urban dwellers. For many middle and lower-class dwellers, sectarian community networks provide pathways to security, to services, and a sense of stability and belonging. In *Everyday Sectarianism*, Joanne Nucho explores the dialogical loop between the production of infrastructure and the way their materiality shapes changing notions of what sectarian community means. Indeed, notions of sectarian community are produced not only through engaging with sectarian institutions but also through the daily exercise of being within the material landscapes these institutions produce. Through these interactions, sectarian formations are further naturalized and internalized in dwellers' perception of the city.



Figure 26
Private water distributor preparing to park and fill a building's tank, Ashrafieh

The Story of the Unwanted Bench

Common Space of Confrontation

Another objection to the project was against the proposed benches. The initial project added seven benches to the strip, but after many complaints, the altered proposition only included one, placed at the end of a staircase linking the street to another one higher up. This stair is used by many of the neighborhood’s elderly population to reach the main street, noting that the neighborhood holds an important growing population and does not include much green space or sitting space. The main argument objecting to the bench was that it would attract an unwanted population to the district, mainly Syrians or people not belonging to Achrafieh, meaning the East. Trying to explain the importance of public space, especially after a shared traumatic experience like the August 4th Port Explosion, would often come with a blunt refusal. This fear of permanent public amenities is very common in Beirut, which may explain why we love light plastic chairs, ones we can carry, sit on, and bring back home. Of course, these chairs are a symbol of community in Lebanon because you can bring them anywhere and share them, but you can only bring them from somewhere not too far, your house, your shop, not the other side of the city. The conception that the neighborhood and its amenities belong to its dwellers stems from the anxieties regarding the changing demography of Beirut and the common anxiety around who gets to be one’s new neighbor.

A 2011 World Health Organization report estimates that the surface of open green areas in Beirut is one square meter per person, far below the recommended forty square meters per person.⁷² In the common discourse, this lack of urban public space is often seen as a reflection of the state’s failure, incapable of providing for the common good. However, it is essential to understand this within the context of Beirut’s sectarian geographies. Public space was often associated with conflict and military

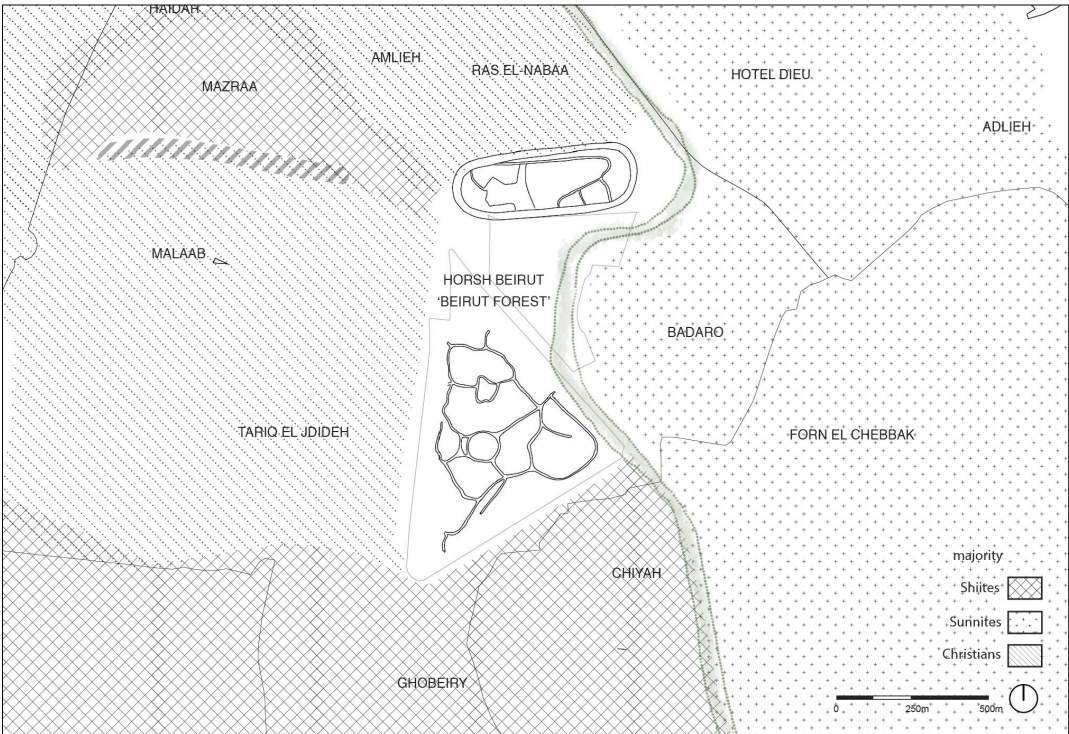


Figure 27
Map of Horsh Beirut (Beirut Forest) with the neighboring districts and religious majority

combat, especially during and after the Civil War. For example, Beirut’s Central District, which was the main multi-sectarian area before the war, was at the foreground of the battlefield. This space, which used to be a melting pot of religions and classes, got deserted and completely destroyed. Until today, especially with the government highly securitizing it in 2019, the area resembles a ghost-town, a public space with no public. Another example is Hursh Beirut, the city’s largest park. The park stands on the edge of three areas, each controlled by a different political faction. To the West is Tariq el Jdide, dominated by the Sunni Future movement; to the Southeast are the areas of Ghubayri and Shiyah, under the control of Shii Hezbollah, and to the Northeast are the Christian areas of Furn el Chubak and Badaro. During the Civil War, the park was part of the Green Line, and in 1982, most of its trees were burnt down by Israeli airstrikes. After its rehabilitation in 1995 by the municipality of Beirut, the park remained

closed to the public for around 20 years, with reasons ranging from the potential threat of a sectarian conflict to people’s lack of civility.⁷³ Indeed, this logic is clear in the interview I conducted with Bilal Hamad, the old mayor of Beirut (see the story on the municipality). During his mandate, he faced many campaigns contesting the park’s closure (See chapter 2), and he answered them by suggesting a consensus on the park’s use. He proposed a probation period allowing city dwellers to prove they are well-behaved and respect the green space. The entrance was restricted to senior citizens, families, and tourists.⁷⁴ By classifying citizens and evaluating their behavior, the Municipality demonstrates a classed, sexed, and racialized view of what an acceptable public should be.

The city and municipality, which are the usual providers of public spaces, appear to be at war with them. Indeed, public space is seen as disrupting the divisions in which

73 Ibid

74 Bilal Hamad interview by author, Lausanne, November 2, 2023



Figure 28 (left)
Horsh Beirut



Figure 29 (right)
Beirut's Central District, devoid of any activity

72 Saksouk-Sasso, 'Making Spaces for Communal Sovereignty', 296

the Lebanese operate, creating inhabitable thresholds within or between conflictual areas and challenging the sectarian geographies produced and reproduced in the city. The idea of public in the sense of belonging to everyone is not a common vision in the Lebanese imaginary. A common space or object is often seen as a possible space of confrontation or an invitation of unwanted people and ideologies. With the different displacement patterns and the increasing anxiety over the Islamization of the country (see story on the Religious Memorabilia), a bench can be seen as a common space to be appropriated by an alien or new cultural system. The meaning of a bench and of common spaces become part of a contested territory. The process of producing the other has been described by Edward Said in his critique of Orientalism as “imaginative geographies.” He describes space as full of meaning with imaginative and figurative values, in which distance and difference are dramatized. The artificial lines between the East and West, in Said’s work, the Occidental and the Oriental world, here turned into East and West Beirut, are fabricated and reproduced. The “other,” the Orient in Said’s narrative and the Muslim in this context, or more precisely the Shia figure, is often imagined in the negative as primitive and barbaric in contrast with the Occidentalized Christian, pictured as civilized, advanced, and rational.⁷⁵

75 Said, *Orientalism*

In this context, where official public spaces drawn on maps are highly securitized and perceived as problematic, other spaces are found for collective appropriation and collectivity in the city. In the second part of this work, let’s look at practices negotiating common spaces, resources, and narratives within these sectarian geographies. Looking at their tactics can help to start thinking outside the private/public duality when talking about commons in the city.



Figure 30
Abandoned space in
Mar Mikhail, used
by residents to sit
outside on plastic
chairs



Figure 31
Beirut’s Central
District, devoid of
any human activity





To Stories of Commons Resistance through Place-Making

To Stories of Commons: Resistance through Place-Making

1 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

2 Lefebvre et al., *Le droit à la ville*

3 Springer, 'Public Space as Emancipation', 537

This attempt to untangle Beirut’s sectarian geographies helps situate the context in which space-makers operate in the city. Looking at practices negotiating common spaces, resources, and narratives within these sectarian geographies can help find and understand tactics that can be salvaged in a project for a common Beirut. Michel de Certeau distinguishes between tactics and strategies: strategies are practices defined by those in power – experts, state agents, developers – that organize a place. On the other hand, he defines tactics as every day, clandestine ways people who are not in power use, lending a political dimension to everyday practices.¹ He describes strategies as the science of space-making and tactics as the art of spatial practices. In Beirut, spacemakers use different tactics to patch common spaces, resources, and stories into prevailing sectarian networks. These tactics can be seen as a form of resistance to overcome domination techniques through collective action ranging from silent infringements to appropriations and violent protests. In a context where the usual provider of public space and resources, the state, seems disinterested or openly at war with them, a new understanding of public space can emerge. Indeed, we can see a large gap between the locations where dwellers gather versus the state’s location of public space in official maps. In this, we can return to Lefebvre’s Right to the City, where he distinguishes public space that the government controls and regulates and public space that social groups use.² This distinction draws attention to the power to deem particular spaces official, a power “concomitant to the power to exclude certain groups from such sites based on this very ascription.”³ Indeed, within these sectarian geographies, we might question which spaces and resources we qualify as public and start looking at alternative forms of commoning generated by users’ spatial practices. Communal bonds and agreements can offer lessons on negotiating secure and

inclusive commons. Tactical and critical practices resist and negotiate these sectarian geographies by exploring borders differently, as a potential space between public and private, as a space of confrontation and defiance, or as a space of artistic exploration.⁴

By creating common spaces or resources, these practices contribute to dismantling constructed narratives and creating new, unifying ones. Lebanon is often called an ‘NGO state,’ known for multiple civil society groups well-mobilized toward various public issues such as education, health, and the preservation of

the environment. Until recently, urban issues were absent from the agenda, and people were mostly unaware of urbanism as a professional practice.⁵ In recent years, an increasing number of youth groups have been involved in the production of urban space and policies via organizations, associations, or looser types of informal networks. Mona Harb describes these forms of activism as exploring “interstitial openings for seeds to grow into potentially disruptive mobilizations.”⁶ In exploring some of these groups and their work, I aim to look at how these collectives operate, organize their work, and fund it outside established systems.

4 Hafeda, *Negotiating Conflict in Lebanon*

5 Harb, ‘Public Spaces and Spatial Practices’, 4

6 Harb, ‘New Forms of Youth Activism in Contested Cities’, 75



Figure 32
Ramlet el Bayda beach in Beirut

Civil Campaign to Protect Dalieh of Raouche

7 Saksouk-Sasso, 'Making Spaces for Communal Sovereignty': 303

8 Ibid, 305

9 Ibid, 317

10 Dictaphone Group, The Sea Is Mine

Dalieh is a site on Beirut’s main coastal promenade, part of the landscape of Raouche (pigeon rocks). Only in the 1950s did building activity start in the area, which became attractive for tourists and high-end developers. Representations of Beirut in the 1960s are dominated by imagery of modern edifices, luxury hotels, and private beach resorts, with the background of the rock. During the Civil War, merchants from the old Beirut markets in the Central District, at the foreground of the battlefield, were relocated to Raouche. However, in 1982, during the Israeli invasion, Beirut’s mayor demanded the destruction of the merchant kiosks for the capital’s touristic image.⁷ Today, Raouche is one of the most expensive neighborhoods in the city. Dalieh, a bit further west, does not appear in this pictorial representation of the city; it is, however, an important space for the city’s public life, even though it is privately owned.

According to cadastral registry documents, over ten families owned property on Dalieh either through direct sale or inheritance since Ottoman rule.⁸ In 1995, three real estate companies owned by the late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri purchased most of the property shares. At the same time, new legal structures encouraged construction along the coast. Until 1995, construction was banned or restricted in zone 10 of the master plan of Beirut, where Dalieh lies.⁹ Yet two new laws, issued in parallel to the land purchase, allowed owners of lots on the coast with an area larger than twenty thousand square meters to multiply the exploitation factor and allowed for the private exploitation of the public domain.¹⁰ In 2004, the representatives of the real estate company negotiated with the fishing community squatting in Dalieh over the compensation they would accept to vacate the site. In 2014, the demolitions of fishermen’s homes and the news of the planned construction of a private seafront resort in Dalieh triggered the



formation of the Civil Campaign to Protect Dalieh of Raouche (CCPDR).

The CCPDR is an all-volunteer coalition of activists, residents, architects, legal experts, and organizations able to halt the project with protests, media campaigns, and a legal inquiry demonstrating how the site has served historically as a common.

Indeed, despite the history of private ownership, Dalieh is understood and used as a shared space in the city. Challenging the conventional notion of public space as tied to state ownership, this example can allow us to understand how negotiations and community building can categorize a space as common outside the private/public dichotomy. Dalieh, along with other places like Ramlat al Bayda beach, are considered *manatiq al tanazzuh*, or places of strolling. These spaces are commonly used for family picnics on holidays, with food, beverages, and the common family musician

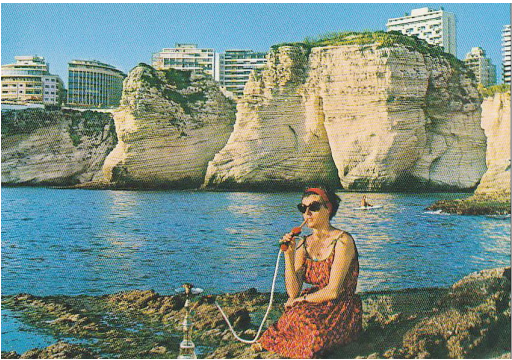


Figure 33,34 Postcards capturing the luxurious lifestyle of Raouche Source: Beirut Design week website

who plays the *oud*, *bozog*, or *tawla*.¹¹ The area holds numerous seashore kiosks and local fishing ports offering boat rides. On the 21st of March, the Kurdish community gathers by the thousands and transforms the space, which becomes a “space of appearance” for the Kurdish minority in Lebanon.¹² It is a space of encounter for a variety of social groups, such as Beirut’s fishermen, corniche visitors, suburban dwellers, Iraqi and Syrian refugees, migrant workers, and the Kurdish community.

CCPDR launched a public campaign in 2014 entitled “Lift your construction site off our Raouche,” mobilizing local and international media outlets, universities, and NGOs to publicize the campaign. A letter was also published addressing Rem Koolhaas, whose OMA office was commissioned to design the resort.¹³ Many demonstrations and protests were also held, and campaigners continued to organize events every Sunday, although the municipality deployed security guards

11 Saksouk-Sasso, 'Making Spaces for Communal Sovereignty': 306

12 Ibid

13 Jadaliyya, 'Open Letter to Mr. Rem Koolhaas'



Figure 35 Dalieh on a regular Sunday during the 1970s Source:-Al Safir Archive

and barbed wire to limit access to the site. Participatory planning research was also used as a tool, with a competition urging urban designers, planners, and residents to imagine an alternative plan for Dalieh. The coalition's main achievements include a drafted decree deeming Dalieh a nationally protected area by the Ministry of Environment. The campaign also aimed to disseminate knowledge about Dalieh's legal developments that were otherwise not accessible to the public and draft planning maps for public use.

This is one of the multiple campaigns that have emerged in the past year to fight against the many waves of coastal privatization in Beirut, with 75% of its administrative shore closed to the public. Thus, The Campaign to Protect Dalieh provides an example of a grassroots urbanist organization and how to fight for the right to the city while stimulating necessary public discourses around it. The dwellers' different spatial practices defy the language of private property by activating shared space outside the sovereign state's provision through communal management.

Figure 36
Campaign poster
with slogan
translated "lift your
construction site off
our Raouche"
Source: Civil
Campaign to
Protect the Dalieh
of Raouche



Figure 37
Group of friends
playing cards and
enjoying public
access to the rocky
shore with their
plastic chairs

I learned about Nahnoo through a conversation with Mohammad Ayoub, one of its founders.



Figure 38
Horsh Beirut

NM: What does Nahnoo mean?

MA: Nahnoo in Arabic means us. As its name reflects, it's about everything common. Unfortunately, we live in a country that is divided by sectarian interests. We want to challenge this system through interventions in public space, governance systems, and heritage protection. Institutions are malfunctioning because of the sectarian situation. Any subject we work on gets influenced by sectarian issues.

NM: What types of subjects are you thinking about?

MA: Why can't a Lebanese mother give nationality to her children? This is to keep the balance between Christians and Muslims. Why don't we have a new census in Lebanon? Not to show that the Christians have become less in number than the Muslims. Why can't I vote in the district I live in? Not to change the demographic balance or have a certain sect dominating another sect in a certain region. Why is there no accountability for politicians of certain sects? Because the religious class will object, saying that this is a conspiracy on our sect.

NM: How did the organization start?

MA: Any issue related to women's rights or minority rights has turned into a religious one. In our opinion, this has made the whole system dysfunctional, and this is why we founded Nahnoo back at school to search for common grounds for all Lebanese. Back at university, all club activities that were supposed to gather students were divided among various sects; even in University elections, the sectarian issue was dominant. So, we tried to create a common space for all students from different sects. After graduation, we hoped to live in a secular country, so we founded Nahnoo in 2009.

NM: True, sectarianism also manifests in university, that seems so crazy to me, being in a very non political academic setting. And from there, how did you get into public space?

MA: The first issue we worked on, neglected by all NGOs, is urban planning and using it in a way to unite people; this is how we got interested in public spaces. Of course, people are interested in urban planning and public spaces, but projects are usually particular to a specific community or sect. I studied psychology, urban planning is not my speciality, but I know the importance of urban planning and public spaces in the psychology of communities. At the city scale, we know that people living in Beirut are divided on a sectarian basis, so we thought of how we can unite them, help

them to meet and break stereotypes, to build bridges among people, respond to the children's needs to find spaces where they can play and do activities. That's how we got interested in public planning and started working on common spaces.

NM: I know you held a big campaign for the reopening of the Horsh Beirut park, can you tell me the reasons behind it?

MA: I've been living in Beirut my whole life, and I wasn't aware of the availability of such a public park in the city. I think this is common to the whole young generation in Beirut. Despite its importance, it was forgotten from the common public memory of Beirut residents, it's normal after being closed for 20 years. Even if you pass on the road by the park, you won't notice a park there available for the public, it's hidden. So when we noticed its existence on the map, we visited it and started studying it and discussing the issue with the municipality. We asked, if it's available for the public then why is it closed? The municipality manages public spaces, but they are owned by the people. There's a difference among state properties, whether they are to the state or public, so the assets that are owned by the state, it can do whatever it wants with them however there are assets that are owned by the people and only managed by the state or the municipality.

NM: And how did the campaign go?

MA: The campaign was called 'Beirut Park for All.' The first challenge we faced was that the concept of public spaces was not common in the Lebanese vocabulary. So we had to explain why are public spaces the right of the people. This issue of public spaces was not a common debate topic between people, it was more of an academic debate, but not a public issue. The second challenge consisted of showing the fact that Beirut Park was actually a need for the city, for residents who leave it every weekend in search of green areas in the mountains outside, whereas such a green area is available within their town.

NM: In an interview with Dr. Bilal Hamad, the previous mayor, he told me how he tried to open Beirut Park but with restrictions. How did you work on this issue with the municipality?

MA: This is how the campaign started, we recruited around 25 young people, we trained with experts on how to do a public campaign, legal research, and other types of studies. We met with the municipality and listened to Mr. Bilal Hamad and why he believed access to the park should be restricted. We offered

him roadmaps and management plans for the park. We worked scientifically on the issue and gave the municipality the necessary arguments to open it. To attract people to us and get support, we launched an awareness campaign sharing the existence of the park; we explained the meaning of public spaces, and we started talking about the characteristics of this existing park. We also went to schools and universities, organized trips inside the park based on special permits, and admitted people inside the park to make them aware of what they were missing. We arranged visits for students and organizations, preparing the ground so that people would know about the park's existence. The visitors took pictures and spread the word about the park's importance. After this awareness exercise, we launched our campaign and officially requested that the municipality open the park.

NM: How did the municipality respond?

MA: The answer was positive, but we needed a management plan, so we provided them with a management plan. We felt that the municipality was not taking the issue seriously, so we started to go public, doing events and actions in the streets, like graffiti, sit-ins inside the park and other of Beirut's public spaces, and in front of the municipality. Also, we did media and social-media campaigns sharing that the municipality is reluctant to open the park. The media was interested in what was happening because it was a new topic and a hot topic at the same time. We escalated the pressure in so many ways, including closing the roads in Beirut till the time when the municipality council and the governor were changed, and after a lot of pressure, we agreed to open the park. Currently, the municipality is managing the park, but due to the economic crisis, we're not satisfied with their work.

NM: How is your work funded? Is it all volunteering?

MA: We have three ways of funding: first, there's a lot of volunteering; second, we have income from some projects we are running; and third, we obtain some funding from international organizations.

In addition to different campaigns, Nahnoo works with municipalities to help them create transparent and participatory frameworks with their citizens. Mohamad explained why he thinks the municipality of Beirut is failing (see the Story of the Municipality) and how they are trying to support them. For example, they created a document for a new understanding of the role of Lebanese municipalities regarding public spaces. In it, they outline the legal expectations of a municipality and give recommendations for it to achieve them. By creating civic knowledge of the existing laws on public space and the municipality's role, the paper explores advocacy options for citizens and the prerogatives of the mayor and the municipal council. They organize participative workshops to discuss the park, its role in Beirut's collective image of the city, and how it could be used as an inclusion tool. When discussing the different initiatives done by Nahnoo, Mohamad told me the importance of negotiating with everyone in Lebanon and having a good relationship with them, even if you disagree with their values. He was critical of the Mar Mikhael Square project because, in his opinion, the planners did not take enough time to discuss the project with the residents and with the political figures governing the neighborhood. For him, if one wants to succeed in a public project, one cannot avoid or actively reject talking with them:

I think, honestly, the mistake is that of the planners who were not participatory. They only met a few of the residents who were around the place, but when you do such a project, you are doing it for the whole city, and you need to involve the full spectrum of stakeholders. Were the political leaders who influence the local community well-informed? The planners are creating a public space; they need to be more inclusive. The fact that the local political leaders were excluded from the project triggered them to oppose its construction. When you work in

urban planning, you must talk to all influencers and stakeholders. You cannot ignore some of them because of ideological disagreements. The urban planners who do a project should separate themselves from politics and personal attitudes and work as urban planners only; unless they are doing it to sell it later in elections.



Figure 39
Horsh Beirut

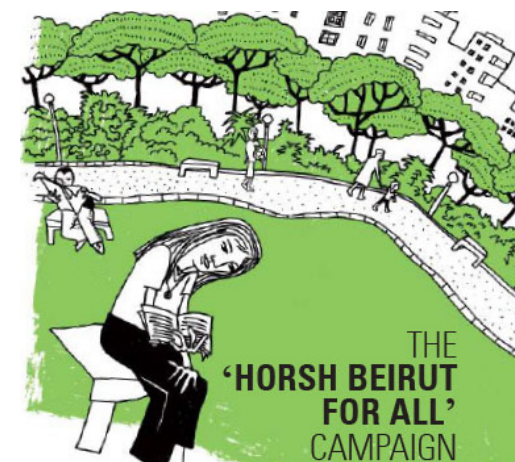


Figure 40
Poster for the
"Horsh Beirut for
All" Campaign

Laziza Park

Figure 41
Construction site
for the residential
building replacing
the Laziza brewery,
Mar Mikhael



Laziza Park was founded in 2020 when friends cleaned and revived a plot in the heart of the Mar Mikhail neighborhood. The site was originally home to the Laziza Brewery, said to be the oldest brewery in the Middle East. Its building was demolished in 2017 after long debates and campaigns to preserve it to build a new housing complex. Three years after its demolition, the luxury housing project was halted, and all that was left on the site were the foundation works and, facing it, a forgotten area with trash piling up. The group of friends started cleaning the space, next to which they resided, and slowly transformed it into a park. The group is GRO Beirut and came together following the Beirut blast in August 2020 to help fix windows in the affected areas and give out supplies. Through interviews conducted



Figure 42
Laziza Park
including greenery
and benches

with members of GRO, as well as residents living around the park, I learned more about the evolution of the site, the challenges faced to sustain it, and the actors involved in its persistence. Samer, one of the founders of GRO, explained how they started creating the park in a very informal way. A group of young people, mostly non-Lebanese, cleaned the plot, slowly regenerated the land, planted trees, added benches, and organized activities with kids from the neighborhood. Slowly, the team of volunteers grew to 40 of 30 different nationalities.

The plot, which is privately owned, was left empty for years and forgotten about by its owner. GRO negotiated with that owner and agreed to help them keep the plot clean and maintain it if they could transform it into a common space and use it for community gatherings. Samer explained how the idea of a group volunteering and cleaning other people's trash was shocking to some of the other neighbors.

"We're trying to create this culture and mentality of saying that this place is yours. There's no idea of volunteering here, people just use the space but can't imagine helping it, There's this idea that if this bag of trash is not mine, I can't throw it."

Through this initiative, GRO was able to create a common space and participate in creating a common narrative around Laziza. By organizing Sunday meals, yoga classes, and children's activities, and inviting the neighbors, they could bring together people of different

citizenship and class. Most people participating were of lower income, and most of them did not hold Lebanese nationality. CG, a Lebanese resident living in front of the park, explains how they partially chose their living location because of it. They explain how the creation of the park was an ongoing process and happened naturally between the people involved and the residents around, it created a community of people who took care of the space and maintained it. The process was a negotiation between the residents and the owner of the plot, as well as amongst residents. Even though most of the park's users were Syrian families, kids, and Westerners spending some time in Lebanon, some "Wled el hay", as CG says, meaning kids of the neighborhood, still used the space. CG describes them as the typical men acting like the neighborhood's security, sitting in the park and smoking their *arguileh*. In another talk with Grace, another member of GRO, I learned more about the different initiatives taken in the park.



Figure 43
Laziza Park
including greenery
and a little library

Excerpt from an Interview with Grace Landsberg (member of GRO), interview by author, Lausanne, October 20, 2023.

NM: Were you engaging with residents while installing things? How was the residents’ participation in this project?

GL: Yes, one of the residents is a carpenter, and he built all the wooden structures for the projects. We engaged heavily with him because he was directly involved in the construction. This helped build trust with neighbors, who saw other neighbors participate in the park-making. When we arrived, I think people weren’t used to these kinds of projects; the neighbors would come and ask, “What are you doing? This idea will never work”. But they didn’t mind it as much when they started seeing the garden materialize, and actually using it.

NM: Was there much resistance from people around?

GL: Some people really appreciated the park and some resisted. Mainly it was because they don’t like strangers coming into the area because of the park, like it’s an attraction for outsiders. The residents really consider themselves like the sons and daughters of the neighborhood, and they don’t like that there are many strangers coming there. I think especially foreigners, Syrians, and Europeans.

NM: Were there any local people who ended up appreciating the space?

GL: I would say foreigners come in and out since it’s a cool neighborhood and there’s a coffeeshop right next to the park. The children coming were mostly from Syria, we would have english classes for them. Every Sunday, we had activities, we would make lunch all together, clean the park, maintain it. We also started building a manoucheh oven so we could hand out free manoucheh for people, the same carpenter started building it, and then the police stopped us. It was sad ...

With time, locals also used the space during the day, and especially at night. We would go knock on their doors when we had activities and with time, they started coming down on their own. The neighbors would make a little supper there every night, bring their argileh and some coke or share a meal. They were actually there every night. They’re always sitting in Laziza at night, just enjoying being in a garden in an open space, like just smoking and talking to their neighbors. So they really use the space every single day, but particularly they use it at night, maybe also with the lack of electricity, it’s nice to be outside.

NM: How did you fund it, and did you ever consider becoming an NGO?

GL: No, there were actually conversations about how we didn’t want to become an NGO. And it was like a reaction to frustrations about how many NGOs in Lebanon do a lot of meetings, planning, and talking, but they never actually do anything. We believe that it works better as just a community initiative because once people start to be paid and there are power hierarchies, that less will get done and it will feel less legitimate, coming from the community and for the community. We don’t want to impose projects somewhere, it comes naturally. We didn’t need big funds, we had one fundraiser once and that’s it, sometimes some money came out of our pockets, people living around the park, the ones maintaining it.



Figure 44
Laziza Park site
before it was
cleaned.
Source: GRO



Figure 45
First trees planted
on the site.
Source: GRO



Figure 46
Laziza Park.
Source: GRO



Figure 47
Laziza park.

CG also believes the park grew informally with the residents around it and acted as a common space responding to local need, before more light was shed on it and it was taken over by an official NGO. Later, in March 2021, UN-Habitat, in collaboration with a local NGO Rashet Kheir, used part of a fund for Laziza Park. According to members of GRO, the funds were used to install street lights powered by solar panels, add a few benches, and replace the graffiti drawn by another one. This led to a lot of publicity for the park and different interviews, which made the space more popular and known. CG believes this was when neighbors started officially complaining to the landowners because the space became too official.

This is a neighborhood garden, not a public garden, it has to grow naturally with its community.

Indeed, the more popular the park got, the more trouble it got with the landowner and the municipality. A few nearby residents complained to the landowner, claiming that some 'unwanted' people were coming to the park at night and making noise. The landlord even contacted the NGO to make a lawsuit because people were coming into the garden at night, kissing, and engaging in 'improper behavior.' Many people involved in the park since the beginning believed it would not have gotten to this point if the NGO did not get involved and formalized the work. This led to the municipality's intervention through the police, who removed any permanent installation installed on the site. Today, the park still holds trees and greenery but has lost the active use and gathering of the last three years. However, the park is engraved in the collective memory of the neighborhood and followed the legacy of the Laziza brewery.



Figure 48
Laziza park.





Conclusion

From Sectarian Geographies
to Geographies of Commons

Conclusion

From Sectarian Geographies to Geographies of Commons

Unlike it is often represented in Lebanon, the sect is not an ancient category frozen in time. It is a constructed entity that evolves through processes entangling individual, municipal, national, and transnational institutions. Indeed, as we saw, sectarianism is produced in the materiality of the city, its services, its governance, and administration. As Beirut's demography shifts, sectarian borders and quotas engraved in its history are replicated in an attempt to maintain a demographical status quo. Just as sectarian discourses exclude groups from various services or spaces, they are also used to connect and mobilize communities, which reproduce them in the urban realm through symbols and actions. Sectarian formations naturalize through the everyday practices of residents, the spaces they use and reside in, and the resources they access. Through seeing the Virgin Mary statue every day, relying on politico-religious institutions for social services, voting only in their place of origin, or taking a bus that actively avoids some neighborhoods, dwellers are constantly within the material landscape of sectarian geographies and internalize them.

With a failing state, reliance on sectarian groups for social services and spaces creates kinship ties, linking members of a sect through need, common benefit and care. With this, any attempt at creating a common imaginary for the city is fogged by differentiated images of Beirut by different factions. However, these ties could be forged into other types of communities, connected by a common drive to resist these sectarian narratives. With the few stories of commons explored, we can recognize a new narrative that wants to dissociate itself from the fragmented vision of Beirut and try to define a unified one. Needs unmet by the state for resources, services, education, healthcare, and public space can be salvaged into other types of collectivity. With this, new sovereignties can be created, negotiating within the established systems we tried to untangle.

These narratives and spaces might be minimal, smaller than what you would imagine, but they can balloon through time and grow with the communities. These stories of new common can attach themselves for now, like a parasite, onto the sectarian geographies and create space for the people who are ready for them.

Tactically, these spaces must be many, patched onto the city and ready to perpetuate and reproduce. Beirut holds many unfinished or unbuildable plots: Unfinished because of the economic crisis, because of policy change, or urban violence, or unbuildable because they are too small and awkward in shape to be constructed by law, like anomalies in the urban fabric. These anomalies could be salvaged and transformed into a network of non-sectarian spaces, available to anyone in Beirut who needs them and would maintain them. We could start imagining new geographies of commons through these left-over spaces, inserting themselves into the prevailing sectarian geographies.



Figure 49
Tag found in
Beirut's Central
District, translates
to "Beirut is ours"

Bibliography & Iconography

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Iconography:

Photography:

All photographs, in the exception of those citing a source, are the author’s, taken in Lebanon between June and December 2023.

Cartography:

26: Map of the Levant during the Ottoman Empire, showing the roads and railways linking coastal cities to interior ones. The map highlights Mount Lebanon, which acted as an autonomous *Wilaya*, or province.

28-29: Map of Beirut. The map uses collage to incorporate names of roads and institutions from a historical map, showcasing the colonial toponyms remaining. *Mar* means Saint, for example Mar Nkoula is Saint Nicolas. It also shows the Green Line, separating West Beirut from East Beirut. The sidewalk project site is highlighted with a star.

36: The map highlights the lands owned by the church in the form of *Waqf lands* or endowments, in orange.

37-38: The map shows the Waqf lands with the buildings on each plot and its program.



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