

# MADE TO FALL APART

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF OLD HOUSES AND URBAN RENEWAL IN BEIRUT

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ABSTRACT

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

## MADE TO FALL APART

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SAMAR KANAFANI

*Since post-war reconstruction, Beirut has been experiencing a building boom, which spread rapidly outward from the city's historic and war-torn centre to the rest of the Lebanese capital. In the process, old houses and buildings have been systematically demolished to make space for large towers, excluding much of the urban population. State policies and market forces converge to make real estate a pillar of the neoliberal economy, while offering no housing, social or economic policies to redress its gentrifying effects. This thesis scopes the conditions that produce decayed residences since the mid-1990s. It asks: What have these circumstances prompted urban dwellers to do with their houses in decay? How are dwellers in different positions of entitlement to property differently enabled to respond to decay and impending renewal, in the quest for continued dwelling in the city? What sentiments and strategies emerge from this interplay? And how have social relationships and notions of dwelling, and of decay been reconfigured in the process? From fieldwork among downwardly mobile tenants and landowners, urban practitioners and a cultural collective in neighbourhoods where urban renewal is approaching, I propose, "institutionalised neglect" as a concept to capture the circumstances that expedite the decay of old houses. I argue that this neglect keeps land available for real estate profit making while making urban renewal inevitable. In chapters that deal with inheritance, eviction, material decay, nostalgia and the exceptional conditions of a commoning experiment, I reveal that dwellers' sensibilities are oriented towards prolonged dwelling close to the city centre, whether by endurance of the neoliberal building regime or attempts to extract gains from its straining conditions.*





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*For Nadja, Dounya and Walid*



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That's true and for me that was Walid. Thank you, my love, for inspiring me to labour for what I want steadily and calmly, without pomp or fuss, as you always do, one step at a time. Thank you for being there in actions not just in words, and for carrying alone a load we should have shared during a very untimely period for you. I'm also grateful to our precious girls, Dounya and Nadja, who endured my absences over the years. You have surprised and blessed me at every turn with your patience, strength and understanding and picked up my spirits with wisdom beyond your years. Special thanks go to my parents-in-law, Hanan and Pierre, for their support and affection. I wish Pierre were still here so I could tell him in person but he remains always in my thoughts. Much gratitude goes to my parents, Mona and Nabil, for having taught me to cut my own path even if it means some sacrifices. I'm touched by their genuine interest in my research. Thanks particularly to my dear mother for caring so carefully for my family during my

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## INTRODUCTION

*In what follows we shall try to think about dwelling and building. This thinking about building does not presume to discover architectural ideas, let alone to give rules for building. This venture in thought does not view building as an art or as a technique of contraction; rather it traces building back into that domain to which everything that is belongs. We ask: 1. What is it to dwell? 2. How does building belong to dwelling? (Heidegger 1971: 143)*

The low-rise house or building that stands abandoned or almost, now ever more concealed and dwarfed by new high rises, is still a possible sight on Beirut's urban landscape even as it continues to change fast. By winter, the house may be leaking water whose drips, splatters and gushes may be heard, while soggy moss and mould glisten and grow on its walls. In summer, an unkempt hibiscus might be left to spread its mound of blossoms - yellow, orange, and fuchsia - making for an island of radiant colour amid the vastly dull shades of tarmac, concrete and stone of adjacent scenes. Across seasons, it could become enfolded in untended greenery like an unwieldy ficus tree whose bark and roots have been left to burst through walls and tiling, as mangled balcony railings, cracks and crumbling parts suggest total neglect. From the outside, such a place bespeaks an arrested time for human life and a vibrant time for nature's work on matter. Yet this impression is deceiving. For behind such tangles of vegetation, sprawls of rot and seemingly irrecoverable dereliction are the intricate recollections, social relations and competing intentions of the people who once dwelt in or continue to own the place. When a site is still partially inhabited, one might glean a light shining through a solitary window or notice laundry hanging on one of the balconies, a give-away of human presence. That "someone," whose light and laundry one sees, may be an owner, a tenant, a squatter or house sitter, representing but a fraction of the full scope of social intents and actions affecting the place. While the remaining decrepit properties in Beirut may appear in an equal state of neglect and material decay, indeed of social and economic disinvestment, they are erstwhile places where multiple stakes intersect and stakeholders are poised to take claim. Before such a sight, the questions linger: whose place is this, why was it left this way, what is likely to happen to it, and why?

This doctoral thesis ponders these questions about decaying houses and buildings in neighbourhoods that are at the southern fringe of Beirut's redeveloped central

district, where several of them still stand albeit with the likelihood of impending renewal (Figure 1). I did fieldwork among middle to lower income tenants and landowners in the neighbourhoods of Basta, Bachoura, Zoqaq el-Blat, Moussaitbeh and Ras Beirut between 2013 and 2014, having already inhabited and worked in the Lebanese capital for more than three decades, including in homes that resembled those I explore in this ethnography. This study also draws on my involvement as researcher on projects that sought to intervene on parts of the city while critically engaging the processes by which urban actors and stakeholders are shaping its development and the consequences of such processes on equitable access to urban space and to quality of life. Therefore, in addition to drawing from lived experience and intellectual curiosity, by this thesis I hope to contribute to existing critical voices in the city, which seek to redress the multiple difficulties that its dwellers face, while trying to live adequately in it. While decaying houses are my ethnographic objects, the thematic threads of the thesis are occasions to discuss such issues as gentrification, entitlement, intentionality, ruin and ruination. Thus, while the experience of life in Beirut under the city's and Lebanon's economic policies are persistently labelled "neoliberal," I hope my thesis will show what that really means on the intimate social and interpersonal levels, as well as its effects on the sensibilities and sense of wellbeing of urban dwellers.

The central problematic of this thesis can be expressed through the following sets of research questions. What circumstances have converged to produce the decay of old Beiruti houses and residential buildings since the start of the post-war reconstruction era in mid-1990s? What have these circumstances prompted urban dwellers to do with their decaying houses? How are tenants and owners differently positioned and hence differently enabled to respond to decay, impending renewal and the need for continued housing in the city? What sentiments and strategies emerge from this interplay, and how are notions of the ruin, of dwelling and of relationships between city dwellers reconfigured in the process? In this thesis I propose the concept, "institutionalised neglect," in order to capture the circumstances, including laws, policies, trends, practices and perceptions, which expedite the decay of Beirut's old houses, as a means to privilege urban renewal over any other mode of spatial reconfiguration. Institutionalised neglect is also the disregard for urban dwellers' need for housing, social care and economic opportunities, that get side-lined within the neoliberal state and its competing actors'



bids to keep real estate development a profitable enterprise. Navigating the consequences of these forms of neglect on the material, moral and aesthetic aspects of their lives, urban dwellers devise various deliberations, manipulations and strategies to prolong their stay in the city, endure its exclusionary conditions, and extract benefits from it if they can. This introduction contextualises my field in time and space, providing a brief historical and narrative description of Beirut's urban growth and my fieldsites. I discuss the laws, policies and socio-political trends that pertain to construction, heritage preservation and neoliberal economics of building, which have a direct bearing on the types of houses and neighbourhoods I studied and the questions I ask about them. These “types” of houses in fact constitute an archetype that I will call the “Beiruti House.”<sup>1</sup> I elaborate its attributes as part of the context because of the position I believe it has in dwellers' imaginations of urban dwelling, the built heritage and their relationship to it. After this contextualisation, I discuss the central themes that run throughout my thesis chapters, including the theoretical debates and terms that relate to these themes and the ways I am using them. A breakdown of the five chapters that make up this thesis follows, before the introduction ends with a short reflection on my fieldwork process, including my own position as “native” within the city and its decaying residential spaces.

**Figure 1: Basta's old and new buildings.**




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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to go with this nomenclature, although literature and common parlance also attribute the terms “old,” “Lebanese” or “old Lebanese” to such houses.



**Figure 2:** Beirut skyline, southwest to northeast.

## SETTING THE SCENE

The circumstances surrounding Beirut's rise and growth as a capital city are necessary for understanding the forces and accumulations that have shaped the context where this ethnography unfolds.<sup>2</sup> This section briefly frames urban renewal and urban decay within fraught political dynamics, structural processes and continuities, thereby riding the bandwagon of accounts that interconnect war with urban development. Documented to be merely 200 years old as a city but over 6000 years old as a human settlement, contemporary Beirut experienced building surges, population changes, and master-plans, both partially implemented and still-born. The urban tangle we see today was formed through top-down policy extending its political history, through Ottoman rule (1516-1918), the French mandate (1920-1943) and pre-war restructuring in the 1950s-1970s (Corm 1996, Davie 2001a, Tabet 1996) (Figure 2).

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<sup>2</sup> Also see Appendix 1 for a brief political history of Lebanon.

Beirut's landscape was further shaped by its notorious Civil War (1975-1990),<sup>3</sup> and subsequently the post-war reconstruction era (1994-2009). My ethnography unfolds in the subsequent time period, a sort of post post-war reconstruction era, which I consider Beirut still to be in. Meanwhile, though my fieldwork and dissertation took place in this present moment, interlocutors' recollections and my own observations of material remains and processes extend back to times before reconstruction, before the pre-war era and before the Civil War. Indeed, the most emblematic form and architectural variability of the Beirut House and the lifeworld, which produced it, date back to at least the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, from where it casts its reflection onto more contemporary concerns and imaginaries in the fringe neighbourhoods of my field. This section explores this historical background of Beirut's recent building boom and elaborates the structural circumstances that undergird it. I imply by these circumstances the types of state (private/public) arrangements that relate specifically to this ethnography, namely building regulations and heritage policies. Within particular chapters, I further elaborate additional circumstances, such as rent control and its liberalisation, the commodification of housing, and inheritance laws and practices, particularly Islamic ones, which apply to the sectarian belongings of most of my interlocutors.

#### BEIRUT: A VERY SHORT URBAN HISTORY

As early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the Ottomans, the priorities of Beirut's administrators were a combination of military and mercantilist economic interests of the empire and its local affiliates. This left its mark on the spatial production of the city, particularly as security measures relied on a logic of agglomerating smaller properties in order to consolidate surveillance of the city (Davie 2001a: 23). The French Mandate persisted in the combination of spatial and security paradigms of urban development, this time using aerial photography intended to fine-tune their cadastral surveys and large-scale urban projects, as well as military policing of nationalist revolts (El Hibri 2009: 122). The cadastral survey reconfigured relations to property across the country, transforming them from feudal forms of entitlement, through common or estate usage for example (particularly in agriculture and industry), to a private one-owner-to-a-property system. This was intended to make land more economically productive in ways that befitted the global economic scale better. Meanwhile, new infrastructural works

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<sup>3</sup> From here on capitalised as "Civil War."

such as widening avenues, upgrading the railroads and enlarging Beirut's port aimed to propagate Mandate Lebanon into a vibrant and competitive global and regional maritime trade (El Hibri 2009: 124). Though it was the Ottomans who first set up Beirut's municipal council in 1867 (Shareef 1998), the French Mandate wished to leave its own mark by eradicating traces of Ottoman rule, which it "considered inferior in the cultural and economic hierarchy" (El Hibri 2009: 125).

Beirut experienced four main master planning attempts since the birth of the Lebanese republic in 1943. These were either a part of national economic and social development master plans, or more narrow city planning studies. Yet, disagreement within French ranks and between the French and local leadership mired the process of any comprehensive master plan for the city, or indeed the country. The global capitalist agenda of the French nuanced with a local drive for complete *laissez-faire* economy already made real estate speculation a rampant practice in the young republic, further frustrating efforts to plan the city's growth. Today, under very similar circumstances, no master plan has reached its fruition, being aborted at every turn with changes of political power or fresh waves of war (Verdeil 2003). In El Hibri's view, the post-war reconstruction of Beirut's central district, which Prime Minister Rafik Hariri championed in 1994, is the only state-led master plan that has been implemented (2009: 133). However, the "state" here refers to a special private-public partnership materialised in the contracting and planning company, Solidere, which carried out the reconstruction and which the Hariri family (in "public secret" manner) owns most shares in. While pivotal to any story of urban development in contemporary Beirut, Solidere's reconstruction of the central district has been amply documented and debated, and has in classic fashion also been controversial and politically divisive (Makdisi 1997 & 2010, Nagel 2000, Sawalha 2010). Suffice it to say for the present account, that by a virtually unobstructed top-down operation of clearing war rubble (under Israel's siege of Beirut in 1982-3), and with cheap expropriation of property, Solidere rebuilt the historic central district into an exclusive residential, financial and commercial area. This building activity inaugurated Beirut's most recent urban renewal boom that proceeded from the mid-1990s until the present, booming at least until 2010 and plateauing thereafter.

#### DESTRUCTION AND CONSTRUCTION

An insightful observation is that even during the fiercest phases of the Civil War, Beirut's transformation was as much through construction as it was through destruction,

particularly through a “sectarian territorialisation” of the city (Yassin 2010: 71). This consisted of a flurry of low-income construction that went on mainly in the southern suburbs of the city, which constituted a “misery belt” and included Palestinian refugee camps and informal settlements of internal migrants from Shiite rural areas and foreign migrant labourers.<sup>4</sup> Already under the French, these misery belts had begun to grow from rural-urban migration resulting from the impoverishment of the agricultural sector as the elite mercantilist economy was being nurtured. The advent of the Civil War meant additional economic difficulty for rural areas, compounded by the perils of violence and material destruction. Segregation according to sectarian and political lines constituted another important urban spatialisation of the war, and again like rural-urban migration, it predated 1975, starting with brief sectarian revolt in 1958 (Tabet 1996). Thus, the Civil War may have punctuated Lebanon’s history as an event, yet on the urban spatial level, as on others, it was an accumulation of various continuous trends, many of which linger in Beirut’s present landscape today.

A reflection on these long-standing political and historical dynamics in the trajectory of Beirut’s growth reveals a strong imbrication between war and construction, which resonates with comparable histories and political economies of urbanisation. While the most widespread global reputation of Beirut is of a culturally and economically thriving city reduced to chaos and destruction by internicide, at various turns in the city’s development the impression that destruction is the opposite of construction, war the opposite of peace and economic prosperity (for some) becomes implausible (Hermez 2012, Khayyat 2013). More nuanced analyses of the political, social and spatial regimes hint at a delicately calibrated and securitised neoliberal economy based on remittances, finance and construction, which appears to be working wonders for an established political and economic elite, and which continues to boom under war and war-like circumstances. After all, “[v]iolence is required to build the new urban world on the wreckage of the old” (Harvey 2008:33). What Harvey gleaned from urban growth and renewal in 19<sup>th</sup> century urbanisation in European cities and beyond still holds. Urbanisation is the by-product of a need for surplus capital to be absorbed in the absence of other avenues of surplus disposal such as military expenditure (Harvey 2008: 24-6). In most places of the world today, urbanisation is a deeply violent, socially

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<sup>4</sup> For more on Beirut’s informal settlements from an urban planning perspective, see Mona Fawaz (2004) and Bou Akar (2005).

oppressive, environmentally hazardous phenomenon, that “played a crucial role in the absorption of capital surpluses, at ever-increasing geographical scales, but at the price of burgeoning processes of creative destruction that have dispossessed the masses of any right to the city whatsoever” (Harvey 2008: 37).

A related set of propositions about destruction and construction in Beirut understands the various mechanisms of Lebanon’s conflict-ridden political milieu after Foucault’s formulation of “politics as a continuation of war by other means” (Foucault 2004: 414). This includes competing spatial configurations wrought through scrambles for cheap developable land between developers of rival political/sectarian allegiance, gentrifying entire areas. Where these were war-torn areas with sectarian segregation already in place, such war by other means finished off the dispossession that military war left undone (Bou Akar 2011). So, although the canons may fall silent, the construction drills become the new sounds - among others<sup>5</sup> - of civil conflict. Meanwhile, the widespread fortresses and road blocks of concrete and steel that surround public institutions, lucrative private enterprises and politicians’ private homes are another index of war in the city, albeit of elite fears of being targeted that translate into visual and public materialisations of fear. Imposed as necessary spatial measures of protection in perpetual if by now normalised “uncertain times,” they constantly remind city dwellers of whose lives and interests the state will secure from violence, through violence. These are most conspicuous in security barriers and apparatuses that permeate the city and concentrate on zones of elite political and economic interest (Fawaz et al. 2012), but also include tight security measures around new high-rise and luxury residential developments (Alaily-Mattar 2008).

#### BEIRUT THESE DAYS

At least since 2004, coinciding with a new building law that I discuss further down, Beirut has been experiencing an unrestrained flurry of building. Much like most cities of the global south and many of the north - with particularities and nuances - such construction has been variously termed “post-war reconstruction,” “urban regeneration/renewal” and “gentrification” (in English). In Beirut, a pattern of land sale/purchase, demolition, agglomeration of small adjacent plots and new construction of

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<sup>5</sup> See Hafeda (2011) for work on religio-political chants blaring demonstratively from the sound systems of passing cars in neighbourhoods dominated by rival factions.

(mostly) high-end residential blocks, has become institutionalised in various ways, up-scaling the urban landscape in scale and glitz, as well as the class of people who can afford such dwelling. This direction of change was promoted mostly by a collusion of public and private stakeholders drafting and passing laws that cater to the growth needs of an increasingly renegade neoliberal building regime (Krijnen & Fawaz 2010: 251), and shelving those that do not. According to Marot, the city has become an “urban growth-machine” of elite actors and institutions that have free-reign to strategically drive real estate interests that secure and guarantee the continuation of their financial gains (Marot 2014). With a high public debt, however, Lebanon’s economy would have been expected to collapse, if it were not for the seven billion US dollars that the Lebanese diaspora and other Arab investors pump annually into growth, keeping it “resilient” (Tierney 2015).<sup>6</sup> Thus, since the mid-1990s, building activity took centre stage in Beirut’s economy, feeding an array of other affiliated sectors like banking, transportation, engineering, advertising and perhaps most importantly the manufacture and trade of building materials, of which cement is key (Soueid et al. 2016: 10).<sup>7</sup>

Lebanon shares the key traits of unbridled free-trade and an outwardly-oriented economy with the so-called “Asian Tigers,” the four most advanced areas of Asia, namely Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea (Khater 2000). What it lacks to gain place and recognition amongst them, however - if this would indeed be beneficial (to whom?) - is more immunity to surrounding political turmoil. What is striking, however, is that it could have achieved this had the Lebanese government nurtured the agricultural and industrial sectors, rather than disinvesting from them and impoverishing and deskilling its labour force (Khater 2000). By privileging only the infrastructural needs of elite mercantilism, of which grand-scale urban developments have become exemplary, Lebanon’s sectarian power-heads jettisoned the country and the city into a neoliberal abyss.

For that reason, the definition of “neoliberalism” that I find best relays the Beirut context incorporates more than the retreat of state intervention and the regulation of social life by free market forces and interests (Harvey 2005). While the latter conditions are certainly fulfilled, Beirut’s urban development is mostly forged in private-public

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<sup>6</sup> Like many nations around the world, the Lebanese currency is pegged to the US dollar, which is used along side the national currency, the Lebanese Lira or Pound. This is why interlocutors often quote or conceive of monetary value in dollars.

<sup>7</sup> Also confirmed in an interview with Usama Farshukh, Mazra’a Branch Manager at Bank of Beirut, on December 12, 2014.

partnerships, like Solidere, which is a common model of intervention in Beirut and other cities that strive for global economic recognition (OECD 2006: 348-9). Arguably the state - preoccupied though it may be with extracting private gains out of public resources - is very present, indeed particularly (if not exclusively) when elite interests are concerned or under threat.<sup>8</sup> Wacquant's definition of neoliberalism is a more precise representation of what it here entails. He calls it "the making and redeployment of the state as core agency that actively *fabricates* the subjectivities, social relations and collective representations suited to making the *fiction* of markets real and consequential" (Wacquant 2012: 68, my emphasis). Such fabrications and fictions come through in the work of several commentators on Beirut's spatial politics. The depiction of Beirut as a growth-machine is one instance, implying that its growth is induced (Marot 2014). Another is the deliberate concealment of government officials' ownership of significant shares in the same banks to which the government itself is indebted (Chaaban 2015). Intimate to these fabricated fictions, is the prevalent wonderment (in scholarship and common discourse) about how Beirut's real estate market and Lebanon's economy do not crash when all the ordinary econometric indicators suggest it ought to (Tierney 2016). As Tierney shows, remittances mainly from Lebanese in diaspora are propping everything up, and though she does not explain *why* these migrants continue doing so despite looming political uncertainties, I interpret her work as insinuating that their "belief" in Lebanon is manifested through a trusting investment in its neoliberal fiction. The most well-established and well-heeled amongst them have yet to be disappointed.

To this end, a private-public collusion of interest groups that constitutes the state (including at Parliament but also at the Beirut Municipal Council) have helped install legal arrangements to ensure the smooth-sailing of the real estate market. Lebanon's Building Law 646 of 2004, amended from Law 148 of 1983, is most frequently cited as the legal bedrock of sweeping renewal of old properties and the subsequent construction boom in Beirut that lasted until about 2010. This law permitted further increases in the area and height of high-rises, as well as the exploitation ratio, or what volume of a property can be built up. It also created incentives to agglomerate various smaller parcels of land for high-rise construction. Meanwhile, it placed higher buildings outside the jurisdiction of the Higher Council for Urban Planning, which would otherwise regulate

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<sup>8</sup> Take as a very visible example the government forces' violent quashing of demonstrators who in summer 2015 protested its failure to collect garbage countrywide.



the set-back of building from the street (Ashkar 2014a). Drafted and passed unanimously by parliamentarians who have substantial private stakes in real estate (whether as developers, investors or “silent associates”), the law provided enormous incentives primarily for mogul-scale real estate institutions, but also all property owners seeking to make a killing in the real estate market. One obvious way to do so was to redevelop ageing properties, which being of short height and often surrounded with unexploited land like gardens, emerged as under-exploited treasures within this permissible code.

Meanwhile, it has been impossible to pass and decree any urban heritage law on the preservation, restoration or otherwise creative reuse of ageing properties, despite the repeated efforts of local heritage lobbies and their political allies.<sup>9</sup> The only binding law is Law 166 from 1933, which mandates the protection of built structures dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century and prior, thereby protecting the city’s 6000 year-old archaeology - perhaps - but not its recent architectural remains. Property that falls under this category is barred from demolition, in principle, although numerous violations exist. Yet, all late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century houses, as well as modernist buildings of the city’s nation building or “Golden Age” (1950s-1970s), are susceptible to demolition to make way for new high-rises. Only in 2010, following increased public outcry over the state’s disregard of built heritage, was a committee put in place to bar the demolition of architecture from these periods. Approximating a heritage preservation policy, however, this mechanism rests almost entirely on the discretion of the Culture Minister and the Beirut Mayor. Only existing as a ministerial decree, it is not legally binding and disapproved demolition orders can be appealed - and often are - at the Nation Council (*majlis al-shura al-dawla*) where with some string-pulling, demolition of salvageable buildings is often permitted.

My thesis does not address heritage preservation per se, although the question of which notions of heritage get privileged is a topic I would consider taking up in future research. In the present ethnography, from the perspective of those who dwell in decaying old houses, heritage preservation intersects with gentrification. One way this occurs is when an economic sector starts paying attention to old neighbourhoods, capitalising on the cultural value of the past, which in turn brings land prices up and pushes out people who dwell there unceremoniously (Herzfeld 2009). And because efforts to curb the real estate market’s exclusive building practices have largely failed, the

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<sup>9</sup> For more detail on Lebanon’s heritage lobby, policies and laws, see Appendix 2.

heritage claim emerges as a well-meaning plea to rescue at least material remains even if equitable distribution of urban dwelling must become beyond rescue. Thus, my thesis returns the focus on urban renewal's disruption of social life in ageing residential properties and neighbourhoods, and inhabitants' efforts to continue dwelling there or in the city generally. Ethnographically, a notion of heritage gets deployed in some instances to such an end (see Chapter Two and Chapter Five). In other instances, I show that heritage is clearly secondary to inheritance as a principle of transference of value from the past to the present (see Chapter One and Chapter Two).

Yet one image from heritage discourse that has presence in this ethnography is the iconic Beirut House, whose position I believe is important in city dwellers' imagination of urban authenticity, and their memories of and relationship to it (Figure 3). Like the object of nostalgic discourse in Chapter Four, such a house is made typically of sandstone walls and red-tiled roof, with triple arches, tinted windows and an interior architecture centred on the reception area or *liwan*. This archetype emerged around the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century as distinct from other house typologies of the same era in other parts of the region while having shared elements (Davie 2003a: 64-67). It combined Arabo-Ottoman features with neo-gothic decor, and represented economic and political bonds between Beirut, the region and beyond. Typically built just outside the central district, over-looking it from through its triple arches, the house was intended to meet hygienic needs of ventilation, light, and new sanitary infrastructure, while adapting to contemporary aesthetic tastes and needs (Cerasi 2003). Such houses were primarily built and inhabited by the urban elite, but through a subsequent "democratising" effect, were emulated with variations depending on class distinction: more subtle simple features

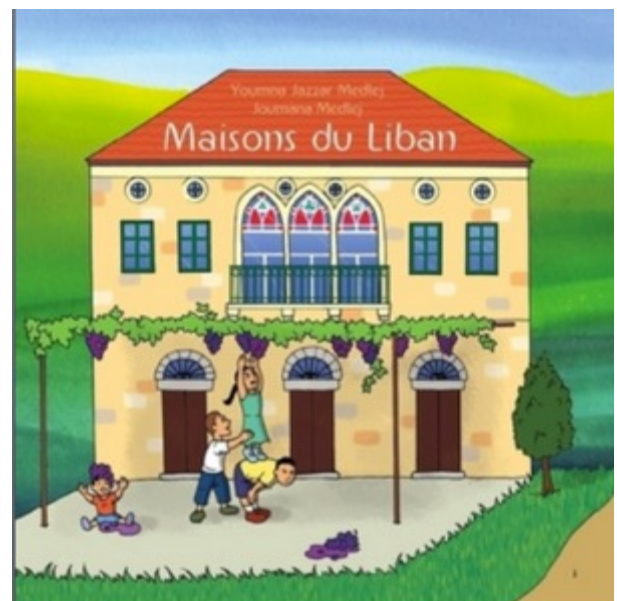


**Figure 3:** Solidere promotional photograph of Beirut Houses in Wadi Abu Jamil.

among the *petit bourgeoisie*, more plush and ornate ones among the more wealthy still (Davie, 2001b, 65-6). For that reason, it was a contagious architectural style that affected institutional buildings such as schools and hospitals as well. Despite - or indeed because of - all the forces working towards the extinction of decaying houses, this stereotype has acquired a fair amount of positive symbolic value, aided by heritage preservation discourse, which often relies on a restorative nostalgic view of the past.

On the one hand, the dual pull of such discourse frames these buildings as the epitome of authentic Lebanese and Beirut identity. On the other, their endangerment in the face of urban growth renders the otherwise ordinary abodes of my interlocutors into exceptional and rare museum objects. Throughout the decades when such houses were being fast disappearing, their image was simultaneously becoming popular in public representations of the city, such as in advertisements, storybooks, and film sets (Figure 4). The typical variant, featuring triple-arches and tiled roof, printed sometimes on restaurant napkins, has become a floating signifier, dislodged from its troubled structural circumstances and pretending to be a stable and consumable object. This is also the form that is favoured in the Culture Ministry's preservation attempts.

**Figure 4:** The Beirut House in children's literature (Medlej & Medlej, 2013).





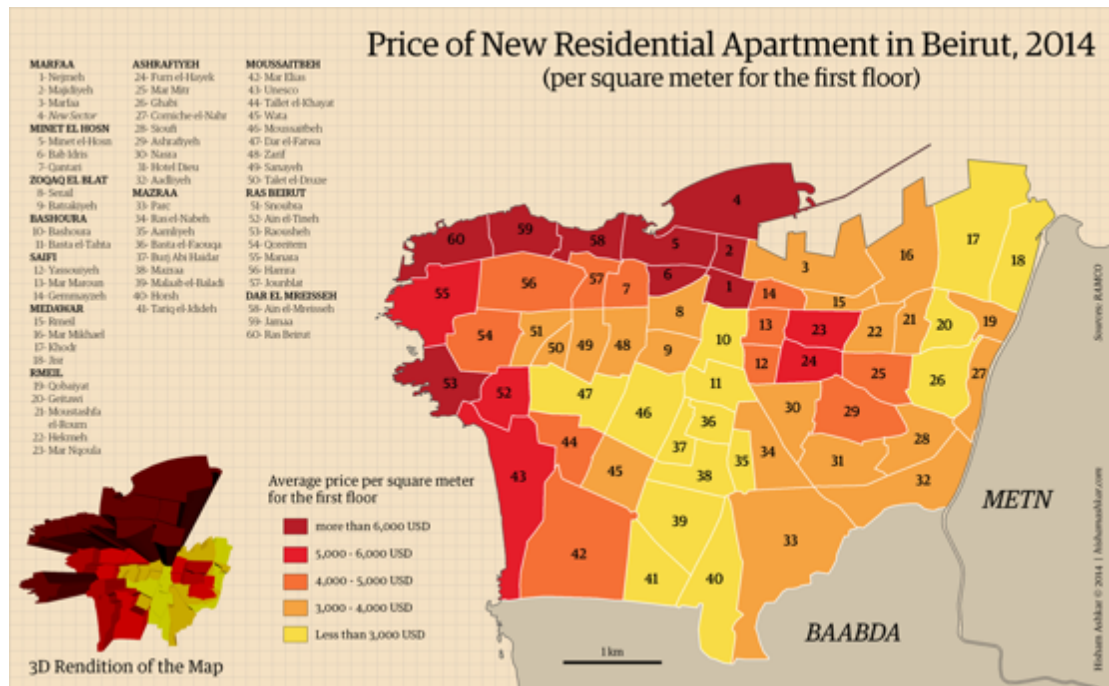
**Figure 5:** Municipal Beirut with fieldsite neighbourhoods.

## MY FIELDSITES AND FIELDWORK

My field research has been loosely concentrated around a single street in Basta/Bachoura,<sup>10</sup> which I call Khalid Street, and a single formerly derelict villa turned into an cultural collective in Zoqaq el-Blat, where I rented a small office (Figure 5). Both are located at the south-westerly fringe of Beirut’s reconstructed city centre. Although situated right around this renovated, highly exclusive and densely built-up central district, these neighbourhoods have to some extent remained at the boundary of gentrification (until now). As a result, they have Beirut houses and residential buildings still standing in them, though in relative and increasing decrepitude and abandonment. They also contain decaying low-rise apartment buildings that do not conform to any particular architectural influence or style (except perhaps faintly the modernist one), and which are often labelled Beirut’s “Yellow Houses.” In his exposé of urban renewal in the

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<sup>10</sup> In the cadastre, the name of the neighbourhood is Bachoura, with Basta being an adjacent and overlapping area. I use both or either depending on the specific reference.



**Figure 6:** Map of apartment prices in Beirut, RAMCO 2014.

1950s and 60s in popular neighbourhoods south of the city centre, especially Khandaq al-Ghamiq, Tabet described these buildings as “nondescript” (1996: 9).<sup>11</sup> According to one interlocutor, such a label amounts to an elitist classification of hastily or cheaply built construction, which was available within the means of the lower-income population.

Although these two main fieldsites are very near one another, each has its social and historical particularities. Like other neighbourhoods in Beirut, they were known to be far more mixed before the Civil War according to the sectarian belonging of their inhabitants (Gebhardt et al. 2005), but war-time segregation rendered them predominantly Muslim, mainly Shiite and Sunni (Davie 1993). While they are not part of Beirut’s “misery belt,” they remain eclectic in the class belonging of their inhabitants, something which is rather typical of Beirut, where a low decrepit house whose dwellers are on rent control may stand adjacent to a new residential tower (Alaily-Mattar 2008: 266). As such, they both contain pockets of poverty, although Basta/Bachoura more so than Zoqaq el-Blat in recent years.

During my fieldwork, from September 2013 to September 2014, the apartment prices in Basta/Bachoura remained the lowest in municipal Beirut (Figure 6). Yet in mid-November 2015, billboards advertising real estate developments, the first I had every

<sup>11</sup> This is my approximate translation of Tabet’s exact words, “without form nor character.”

seen, mentioned the neighbourhood as opportune for investment. Until then, the neighbourhood's development was advertised strictly at actual construction sites. Meanwhile, land prices in Zoqaq el-Blat were among the highest in the city, partly due to its proximity to the centre and the prestigious Ras Beirut district.<sup>12</sup> Yet Zoqaq's elite history, which also better documented, plays a role in its popularity and real estate exclusivity - or indeed the ability of developers to market it as such. It was the first neighbourhood outside the ancient city walls to get paved streets and was inhabited by some of Beirut's largest and most politically influential merchant families, who wished to live close to the commercial centre in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to being very residential, famed for grandiose villas many of which have either been torn down or stand derelict today, it was an important centre for Beirut's participation in the Arab cultural and intellectual revival (*Nahda al-'arabiyyah*), where important educational institutions flourished (Hanssen 2005: 143). Whereas historically less elite, Basta/Bachoura had its heyday before the revolts of 1958, when it also enjoyed sectarian diversity and good infrastructure. Oral histories revealed that it contained more commercial usage along side residential homes, its population being more petit bourgeois and working class, yet like Zoqaq they sought to live near the Beirut port and central commercial hub where many had employment or small businesses.

My field research included encounters with several types of people involved in decayed houses: the long-term residents (owners and tenants, particularly on rent control), recently departed residents, non-resident owners of such houses, heritage activists, public heritage officials, urban scholars, *mukhtars*,<sup>13</sup> real estate developers, bankers, and real estate brokers working at various degrees of formality. In my concentration on the first group, I returned regularly as a visitor and researcher in their homes. My interaction with some of them fell into step with the routinised mode of encounter pertaining to houses, namely the *ziyara*, or visitation, with its codes of comportment and communication. Carried out in the more public living rooms of houses, which interlocutors sometimes opened up for me specifically since they rarely used them, we enacted preludes and niceties while drinking coffee or eating cake. Reaching deeper levels of divulgence and sometimes friction came with repetition and

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<sup>12</sup> Ras Beirut refers to the western peninsula of the city, including Manara, Ein el-Mreisseh and Hamra areas mainly.

<sup>13</sup> *Mukhtar* is an elected official who governs at the neighbourhood level and has the power to issue such things as birth, death and residency certificates.

familiarity, which occasionally had extensions through telephone exchanges, encounters in public places and even visits to my house. Tuning into people's conversations amongst each other as well as interviews, I collected narratives and reminiscences through guided tours of houses and neighbourhoods. The interviews I did were of various degrees of structure, including life histories, events histories, residential histories, and anecdotes about the houses in question. I inquired about inheritors' aspirations and deliberations over the sale, demolition, and redevelopment of their family houses. I explored the terms of tenant-owner agreements, including tenants' short- and long-term plans and aspirations, as well as expenditures on housing. At times I had access to supplementary documents pertaining to the material conditions of houses, eviction notices and residents' legal status of habitation. I also generated rudimentary sketches of buildings and annotated cadastral maps during the course of interviews with interlocutors, which often dealt with neighbourhoods' changing demography and form.

Throughout this aspect of fieldwork, my attention was keyed in on dwellers' practices and experiences in the houses and its surroundings, such as how they use domestic space, including maintenance and repairs, and the conditions and oral histories of abandoned sections of these houses and their furnishings. Thus, I took special interest in the relationship of people's daily lives with the material conditions of the various architectural structures they inhabited. After all, the main criteria for including a site and its inhabitants in my exploration was their visible state of decrepitude, as evidence that conversations or deliberations about renewal had begun taking place among their inhabitants or owners. The temporal framework of my fieldwork in these sites was predominantly before tenants were evicted, or owners had taken any decision or gotten the opportunity to sell, demolish and rebuild. One sign of such deliberation was often the partial abandonment of these structures - a floor, an annex or section of the house. Wherever a story about dereliction and deliberation over departure or endurance presented itself to me, I pursued it. This meant that while my fieldwork gravitated around particular sites, it often took me elsewhere, to Hamra, Verdun, Achrafieh and Mazraa, where I followed stories, interviews and tours, including ones that lead me to the familiar sites of my own habitation (See Figure 5). My fieldwork has also taken me through other forms of data that had relevant themes, like movies, photos, websites, lectures and popular idioms about houses, dwelling, selling, kinship, and other moral and material concerns.

My extended ethnography in Mansion, the abandoned villa turned cultural

collective space in Zoqaq el-Blat was significantly different from other sites in form and in stakes, leading me to dedicate Chapter Five to it. Having office space in the three-story villa, where I prepared for field visits, took fieldnotes, and wrote a significant part of this thesis, I consider that aspect of my fieldwork to constitute participant-observation more intensely than anywhere else. This is not just because by condition and inclination, I became a member of the cultural collective that runs Mansion, attending internal meetings and participating in internal discussions. It is also because I experienced daily life in the house for over a year. Short of sleeping there, dwelling there entailed all kinds of individual and collective interactions with the house as a material space and the collective as a social group. This included cooking, eating, cleaning, sorting garbage, collecting and throwing garbage, stocking firewood, repairing things, rearranging spaces, furnishing, gardening, doing yoga, running children's recreational activities and feeding the cats. As becomes clear in the thesis, Mansion is distinct from other fieldsites mainly because of its exceptional conditions of possibility (a house borrowed from its owner) and its mostly non-residential usage.

My own positionality and biases in the field pepper the depictions of fieldwork throughout the thesis. The attributes of my identity, which must have mattered most to my interlocutors' perceptions of me, shaping the course of fieldwork, are worth mentioning here. The fact that I come from Sunni Muslim decent gave me more access to the negative views of Sunnis toward Shiite inhabitants, but left the latter cagey toward me either because they could not place my sectarian belonging or presumed I was not "of them." While I share the same surname with a famous Palestinian author and my father is of Palestinian origin - making me Palestinian by dominant patriarchal notions of national belonging - interlocutors' recognition of the Beirut-branch of my family gave me more purchase because this extended branch prospered in trade including some real estate. When I was getting to know interlocutors, I was invariably asked about my marital status and if I have children. That my husband is Lebanese of Christian descent was variously met with silent disapproval, curiosity or posturing eulogy to "sectarian cohabitation" and tolerance. That we have two daughters but no son also frequently drew a response, namely that we have no good excuse not to try to have one, despite my best efforts to relay our satisfaction with things as they are. My socio-economic position and trajectory, as member of an educated middle class who emigrated during the Civil War, acquiring foreign language proficiency and connections abroad, seemed to be the most recognisable set of positioning factors in my field. Without having accumulated



wealth, my higher education and affiliation with “the West” converted nevertheless into cultural capital wrought in colonial cultural hierarchies and forms of domination, earning me license to pursue my “important scientific endeavour” in most places, but drawing suspicion and disdain in others. Finally, I believe the fact that I inhabited two decaying houses in Beirut, experiencing first hand the moral and material qualities of such dwelling, seemed to reassure my most trusting interlocutors of the empathy I could foster in my written accounts of their lives.

## CONTIGUITY WITH OTHER URBAN ETHNOGRAPHY IN BEIRUT

I distinguish my thesis from the few existing English-language book-length ethnographic studies on Beirut, which also focus on neighbourhoods at the frontier of the reconstructed city centre. One is a multidisciplinary edited volume titled *History, Space and Social Conflict in Beirut* (Gebhardt et al. 2005). It combines studies on the urban fabric, architectural typologies, material condition, historical significance and social characteristics of Zoqaq el-Blat from its “belle époque” in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century until the present. The plot-by-plot mapping and interviewing provide census-like identification of the neighbourhoods’ demography, especially noticeable by the naming of houses (Ziadeh Mansion, Farajallah House, Jiday Palace etc.). With most of these sites now demolished, abandoned or otherwise about to be, interviews revealed the disposition of the few remaining and ageing landowning class to further disinvest from the area. In the meantime, the significant arrival of Kurdish Sunni and Shiite migrants, contributes a social history of cultural marginality and conflict that resembles dynamics in adjacent neighbourhood like Khandaq al-Ghamiq and Basta/Bachoura. What remains unexplored in this volume, and which my thesis brings out is what circumstances would need to be in place - but are not - to enable the few remaining resident landowners to remain in their ageing villas.

Martin Boekelo did his neighbourhood study *Of Citizens and Ordinary Men*, in Khandaq al-Ghamiq, taking political subjectivity and sectarian contestation in reconstruction-era Beirut as his focus (2016). Khandaq, which is sandwiched between my fieldsites of Zoqaq and Basta/Bachoura, is exemplary of war-time sectarian segregation and internal and informal migration and settlement. Starting from the 1950s, the predominantly Christian and Armenian inhabitants fled violent clashes and

intimidation, as Shiite Muslims and some Kurdish rural migrants moved in. Several of the new inhabitants formalised their dwelling statuses, by leasing or buying properties, amid other properties that still stand derelict. While the urban politics are present in Boekelo's account, his main interest is how Khandaq's inhabitants perceive their subjective belonging within a dominant sectarian framework, while remaining at a critical distance from the overall sectarian political order, of which their identity category is an integral part (2006: 6). I believe Boekelo's study reveals an ethnographic instantiation of the tensions to be found within Beydoun's notion of the "shame of the sects" characterisation of Lebanon's political fiction (1989).<sup>14</sup> This tension is basically between a critical and somewhat self-denigrating sectarian subjectivity that chafes against an idealisation of secular and modern citizenship. While the former is the ambivalent subjective experience of the "ordinary man," the latter is the discourse of developmental civic society. Boekelo makes present the class-based material and spatial imprints of these divergent political positions on the city. In my own ethnography, however, such a divergence is highlighted by another tension: that of the irreconcilable differences between the people with limited means who dwell in or own decaying houses, and mostly middle class activists who aspire to salvage them as heritage.

A third study, *Reconstructing Beirut* by Aseel Sawalha, is the study that most relates to my thesis thematically, with its focus on urban dispossession and gentrification, but is distinct in its object of analysis (2010). Based mainly in Ein el-Mreisseh, a seaside fringe neighbourhood west of Beirut's city centre, this ethnography takes memory as primary site of exploration, in order to explore the disputes and negotiations over private and public property. She makes a very useful interconnection between Solidere's reconstruction of the city centre and the subsequent building boom ripple effect this has had on fringe neighbourhoods such as Ein el-Mreisseh, but arguably other sites including my own. This flurry of building activity ensuing from post-war reconstruction at a particular time and place, and outward and beyond it in spatial and temporal terms constitutes that "post post-war" era I mentioned earlier. Analysing the signification that disenfranchised residents of the area construct about their rapidly changing home and neighbourhood, she argues that the spatialised memories of those who are dispossessed

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<sup>14</sup> Beydoun argues that the Lebanese state was founded on a fiction resulting from the "shame of the sects" (*khajal al-tawayif*). He claims the various religious sects and their feudal hierarchies are ashamed of their own sectarianism perceiving it as pre-modern. They defer to (the fiction of) the state in order to resolve that shame and join in the fabrication of modern statehood.

constitute a form of resistance to elite domination, domestication and exclusion. Such social, spatial and symbolic exclusion is from economic opportunities, decision-making about dwelling, the process of urban change and the general socio-political order, which powerful local and transnational elites continually try to maintain control over. Memory becomes an enactment of political negotiations in spatial and social relations through inhabitants' experience of the city (Sawalha 2010: 14). Like Sawalha, my thesis is interested in how spatial regimes shape social relations (2010: 11) including symbolic registers, in my case within the family, between tenants and owners, and affectively throughout the city. Memory does not become an ethnographic object in my thesis, even if my fieldwork drew on interlocutors' remembrances. Even in Chapter Five, where my focus is nostalgia, and therefore memory of central concern, such narratives are valuable to me for the way they perform particular dominant discourses on the architecture of houses and domestic space (Bahloul 1996: 126). Thus, prompted by my research questions, the past is analytically put to the service of understanding material decay as strategies that interlocutors orient toward the present and future, in their bid to maintain a hold on or claim stakes in existing political and spatial arrangements. I also take a less optimistic stance regarding the resistance potentials of such strategising, much less of remembering. I regard the sensibilities and strategies of disenfranchised populations trying to maintain place in the city as framed within a neoliberal market logic that produces aspirations after its own likeness. In my field, all but the most privileged interlocutors strive to benefit from, rather than subvert, such logic and its power structures.

I have taken the decayed house, its dwellers, their strategies and sensibilities as the epicentre of my own ethnographic research, motivated by the notion that these are the socio-spatial nodes where urban renewal begins to unfold, while recognising that the conditions of possibility for such renewal extend beyond their own spatio-temporal frames, to other national territories and into the past. Dwarfed in size, scale, material condition and market value by new high-rising towers, I consider these spaces as the kernels of standardised cycles of renewal. As such, this ethnography was based not so much on a "neighbourhood study" type method but on a network type method, where the exploration follows the circumstances that produce decay and dwellers responses to it wherever these might arise in Beirut. The spatial contiguity of my own fieldsites with the fieldsites of other urban ethnographies confirm common structural conditions that govern Beirut's urbanisation today, despite nuances between neighbourhoods. However,

the particularities of my inquiry and the ethnographic journey it lead me through, produced its own concerns that required engagement with another set of concepts and analytical frameworks.

## THEMES, THEORIES, AND TERMS

In this section, I elaborate the theories, themes and terms that have guided the interpretation of my fieldwork as well as the propositions and contributions of this thesis. I organise them around four analytical domains: urban renewal, ruin and ruination, the aesthetics of decay, and strategies of endurance and social mobility. These emerged from my ethnography and guided the interpretations proposed in this thesis.

### URBAN RENEWAL

Urban “renewal,” “regeneration” and even “renaissance” are sometimes used interchangeably in scholarship on the city’s transformations, with “urban regeneration” being the most widely used. In that scholarship, mainly in urban planning, these terms refer to the physical reshaping and restructuring of urban clusters or entire cities, as a part of contemporary state policies of economic revitalisation (Porter & Shaw 2009). In comparison to “urban renewal,” “urban regeneration” comes with bigger baggage from its extensive usage in global urban settings where state-led economic and spatial strategies have historically come as correctives for poverty-stricken, run-down, and derelict neighbourhoods. As such, the word “regeneration” indexes a decline, which is often associated with class and/or ethnic discrimination, and believed by its advocates to require remedy by new urban design, planning and restructuring. The outcomes are extremely mixed on the global scale. Porter argues that success measured on a socially progressive versus a fiscal bar as the improvement of the lives and livelihoods of people who stand to be most affected by it, depends to a large extent on grass-roots participation in the process that strategically channel market prescripts to meet dwellers’ desires (Porter 2009: 252). Meanwhile, Shaw shows that except for singular and exemplary cases that dot the world map, the predominant regeneration track record in global cities and especially the global south are excluding, depriving and gentrifying (Shaw 2009: 257, Porter & Shaw 2009: 2-3). This is very clearly the case in Amman and Istanbul to mention but some of the better-documented examples from this region (Candan &

Kolluoglu 2008, Daher 2005, Karaman 2013). It has also been an issue in South American cities, which although incomparable to Beirut in their size and large populations as well other significant socio-political factors, nevertheless resemble regeneration's unbridled neoliberal economic effects on the wellbeing of dwellers (Lees 2011, Leite 2015).

Agreeing with their scepticism about "renaissance," I opt to use "urban renewal" to signal also a critical distance from some of the connotations of "regeneration." Even the most critical policy makers and urban planners, who recognised its varied and sometimes gentrifying effects, often use it as if in principle it is an intervention that could have public benefits. I think while "renewal" implies that that which is intervened upon is old, the subtext of "regeneration" is that that which is intervened upon is "degenerate," aversively degraded in both social and aesthetic terms, beckoning its subsequent regeneration. Meanwhile, *al-tajdid al-hadari*, the classical Arabic term for these phenomena literally translates into "urban renewal," another reason influencing my usage. Interestingly, however, outside very scholarly circles, this is not the term that people use to describe their changing city. My interlocutors, including inhabitants and real estate practitioners, used the words "building" (*amar*) or "construction" (*bina*) or "new construction" (*bina jadid*) for urban renewal (Figure 7). These terms connote the activity and technology of building as well as its outcome, the actual built structure or product. This aptly reflects that the more dominant forms of urban renewal in Beirut entail the demolition of old dilapidated buildings and their replacement with new (and usually bigger) construction, rather than other forms of rehabilitation such as restoration or adaptive and sustainable reuse (Saqfahait & Judeh 2015).

Against this backdrop of meaning that regeneration scholarship conjures up, I use the term "renewal" to summon the reference to the fact of the new (*bina jadid*) displacing the old (*bina qadim*). "Creative destruction" as new construction has in this sense triumphed over other strategies (from Schumpeter's celebratory usage and then Marx's condemnation of it) (Gordillo 2014: 80, Harvey 2006: 156). Deploying the building industry and the mass production of housing units for commodification in a global market, Beirut's spatial restructuring comes without any intention to effectuate economic – forget about social – revival. I would join my voice to others in contending



**Figure 7:** New construction beside old house in Achrafieh.

that residential building in Beirut today is not at all the production of new houses for the purpose of dwelled, but primarily for the sites of expending surplus capital, as studies that adapt David Harvey's work to Beirut so aptly show (Harvey 2008: 25, Marot 2014, Tierney 2015). In the downtown area whose reconstruction by the company Solidere following the Lebanese Civil War still invites controversy, up to 80 per cent of housing

units are sold but remain uninhabited.<sup>15</sup> As such, the classical definition of gentrification, the devaluation of property and impoverishment, followed by its strategic revaluation and the displacement of its lower-income population by a high-income one, may need slight revision for Beirut. Arguably, as far as dwelling is concerned, a financially disenfranchised “someone” is being replaced by the financially powerful “absentee,” the category of house is not just commodified but completely abstracted into surplus value for exchange. The typical process of “urban renewal” of residential property in Beirut entails the following pattern: the mutually constitutive decay of and disinvestment from a particular residential property (dereliction), the restructuring of the property’s ownership (partly through sale or joint investment ventures), the demolition of any existing structures on the property, agglomeration with adjacent plots, and the subsequent design and construction of new taller buildings. My thesis contends that this is more than just the typical trajectory. Rather, as a result of the structural circumstances outlined in the context section, it became a teleological one. By this I mean that all things equal, most old properties that are en route to dereliction are poised to be enfolded in this process. The lens of my ethnographic apparatus is set on the frame that comes after decay has set in but precedes urban renewal, so before inhabitants have disinvested from and moved out of their homes. This is a tense moment when, given the likelihood of this gentrifying type of renewal, the building’s decay already begins to insinuate its own demise, the dilemmas of its inhabitants, and imminent demolition long before it is actually demolished.

#### PRACTICE, STRATEGY AND ENDURANCE

The thesis is heavily influenced by the theoretical frameworks of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly his formulation on practice and *habitus*, as well as his attention to social trajectory over and above social position. I weave other related parts of his theoretical legacy, such as his analysis on social distinction and taste, in the context of particular chapters. While I do not use the term *habitus* in the thesis, a *habitus*-type understanding of my interlocutors’ lives is everywhere present in my data presentation and analysis. Bourdieu’s oft-quoted definition of *habitus* is that it is a system, which is:

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<sup>15</sup> From an interview with Guillaume Boudisseau, property consultant at RAMCO, a real estate advisory and research company in Beirut, on July 22, 2014.

“A durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them” (Bourdieu 1990: 53).

A number of aspects from the concept of *habitus* can be mined from this thesis. An important one is its role in transforming passivity, the “structured structures” (including what is inherited, historicised or regularly embodied), into activity or into one’s projection, orientation, and investment into a present and future lifeworld. Closely related to this transference is the desire for “fit” in this world, is feeling at home in it and in the fantasy of a past perfect fit following an inevitable “rupture.” Bourdieu elaborates these ideas from Freudian psychoanalytic theory on desire and fusion with the primary object of desire (the mother). In my thesis, I articulate this “fit” mostly through interlocutors’ aspirations for continued dwelling in their neighbourhoods, in Beirut, and in the face of likely rupture of dwelling through gentrification by exclusion or eviction. When I speak more generally about affective timbres that bleed from intimate settings and struggles onto the broader field of deliberation over renewable urban property, I rename that “fit” a “sense of place” after Howes (2005). Heidegger’s work on dwelling and building influences Bourdieu’s own practice theory and the concept of fit in ways that permeate my own understanding, and my usage of the word “dwelling” in the thesis as well. In theorising the relationship between being and dwelling, Heidegger argues that building does not preclude dwelling. People do not build in order then to dwell. Rather, we dwell in the world - we fit in the world - *through* constructing it, not *once* we have constructed. (Heidegger 1971: 148). The notion of “fit” as closely related to “dwelling,” has the ability to capture people’s attempts to deploy themselves “efficiently” in an environment that is constantly being transformed (“structured”) in ways that evoke uncertainty, possible rupture, and the constant loss of their objects of desire. The insatiability of that drive, which in itself sits well with the disenchantment of modernity, is reflected in building as dwelling, taken to be the construction of cities as well as the conditions where dwelling seems possible.

The context I put forth in this ethnography is one where dwelling is becoming more difficult, because urban property and by extension homes in municipal Beirut are not accessible except to the few. In addition to depicting the availability of dwelling as a



condition of being in the world after Heidegger's understanding, this ethnography substantiates the struggles that fitting entails. Bourdieu calls such struggle, which is manifested in practice and discourse while leaving its mark on the structuring structure, "strategy," as do I. When I talk of the sensibilities and strategies of my interlocutors, such as what internalised, accumulated and habituated bodily and affective conditions engender in terms of actions and perceptions, I am in effect talking of a sort of *habitus*. This theoretical framework also reveals that the seeming inevitability of urban renewal has to a great extent structured the aspirations of inhabitants who, in search of fit (meaning and wellbeing), try to deploy that logic to make their own gains.

Using the word strategy in combination with sensibilities, I also borrow the nuance between "tactic" and "strategy" that Michel de Certeau proposes in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), drawing on the Foucaultian reformulation of Bourdieu's practice theory (De Bruin 1999: 1). I have outlined in *Setting the Scene*, what I called the structural circumstances of my field, including a neoliberal building regime and long-standing mercantile economic culture that renders urban renewal inevitable. While I take these to be the structuring structures from which my interlocutors' sensibilities and strategies emerge, I also recognise De Certeau's distinction between tactic and strategy. This distinction attends to the modes of domination that permeate structures as well as practitioners' abilities to creatively affect them. De Certeau defines strategies as "proper" practices that have the power to consistently shape urban life and space. He calls tactics the practices that succumb to strategic discipline but only constitute "makeshift" outlets, through which people "make-do" and temporarily gain by "poaching" some degree of desired ends without altering the status quo (De Certeau 1984: 34-39).

"A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances. The "proper" is a victory of space over time. On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing." Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into "opportunities" (De Certeau 1984: xix).

There is a continuum between De Certeau's strategies and tactics of situated and variously intentional practices. Depending on the amount and sort of capital in a given situation, as derived from particular trajectories, and how this predisposition aligns with

existing structural circumstances and established hierarchies, interlocutors' practices amounted to proper "victories" or mere "poaching" of time and space. That said, much of the situated practice revealed in my thesis is of the order of De Certeau's tactics as regards influencing the course of production and construction of urban space. Most of my interlocutors, by virtue either of class, gender, sect or cultural (including educational) background, are undervalued within dominant material and symbolic contexts. As regards property ownership, for instance, my main interlocutors are what Marx would call "the miser" or small property owner for whom property is a practical entity, and not the mega real estate developer with one foot in parliament and the other on the committee that drafted the building law. This latter fits Marx's category, "rational miser," or the bigger capitalist who strives to alienate property in order to generate more surplus capital (1887: 105). For Bourdieu as for Moors, private property for the first category is also a relationship, not just a resource (Susen & Turner 2011: 67, Moors 1996: 70). Yet within the evermore encompassing logic of real estate speculation for capital accumulation, materialised in the commodification of housing that I outline in Chapter Four, dwelling in the city is increasingly a luxury, while a former practice of dwelling in older houses declined with the decay of houses themselves.

What De Certeau's quote above captures beautifully is the differential role of time between the tactics of the relatively "weak" and the strategies of the relatively "strong." This resonates throughout my ethnography, in details such as waiting for prices and reliable investors (Chapter One), an intentional lack of maintenance or "deliberate debris" (Chapter Two), or indeed nostalgically associating the passage of time with loss (Chapter Four). Take also as example the predicament of divvying up inheritance when the years implicate more inheritors, who must then be disentangled for property to be renewed. Thus, I tackle the classic structure-agency conundrum using the term strategies combined with De Certeau's model because it addresses modes of practice to do with spatial politics in an urban context. Mostly, however, it enables a nuanced reflection of what potentials people on the cusp of experiencing gentrification have to creatively refashion or reproduce the moral, material and symbolic circumstances of their urban environment. At every turn, however, I emulate Bourdieu's attention to social trajectory in addition to social position, by integrating socio-economic, migratory and professional histories in my analyses, noting how they changed interlocutors' lives over time while producing differential sensibilities and strategies. This nuances interlocutors' recognition of their own sense of decline, as well as their potential for tapping into opportunities or

struggling - indeed enduring - the kind of demise that urban renewal threatens to instil around houses in decay.

#### RUIN AS RUINATION NOT REIFICATION

I turn now to a theoretical discussion of the decayed house and to notions of decay, the very objects at the centre of this ethnography and the scenes where its dramas unfold. I take first cue from work that recognises that social experience is wrought *in*, and indeed is, an extension of spatial configurations and politics (Lefebvre 2003, Massey 1994, Sawalha 2010). Such politics are not just about differential powers to tap the spoils of urban economies, but also about the variegated capacities on the one hand to experience living in decay, and on the other hand to imagine and represent decayed houses. The field of lived experience is of course not entirely cut off from imaginaries, such as about heritage and memory. Indeed, my interlocutors occasionally participated in such imaginings, even if somewhat perfunctorily, to signal that they also could. But there is a significant divergence in stakes involved in dwelling inside a decayed house versus representing and thereby objectifying it from some distance. Following is an overview of the theoretical frameworks that influenced my analysis of how decay and the decayed house are constituted both symbolically and experientially in my field.

To begin, a word about the lexicon of this theme is in order, given the many terms available and the nuances in their meaning. In English, the attributes and their connotations include amongst others: decayed (from an organic process), derelict (from neglect and emptiness), decrepit (weak and about to crumble), and dilapidated (in total disrepair). Some literature refers to decayed built structures as “ruins” (Edensor 2005, Roth 1997, Bou Akar 2011) while others criticise the term for its reificatory effect (Gordillo 2014). Others speak of “urban decay” or dereliction, using them interchangeably in places where decayed buildings are also abandoned. At the emic level, I found the terms that resemble “ruin” and “decay” such as *khirbah* or *talal* only used within more literary or scholarly discourse. While Sawalha’s interlocutors used the term, *buyut Bayrut al-taqlidiyyah* (meaning “traditional Beirut houses”), most of my interlocutors who lived in or around such houses simply referred to them as *bayt qadim* (“old house”), which I consider to be the most common term for them, and which tellingly insinuates they are also decayed. While my intended meaning is closest to “dilapidated,” I have chosen to use “decayed” and “decay” even though I challenge the centrality of natural processes in the production of such houses. The polemics of usages

of these and other related terms is elaborated further below.

A wealth of cultural production and literature has focused on spaces in Beirut that were destroyed during the Lebanese Civil War (Sengeurie 2008), leaving spatial destruction and decay from disinvestment to a more recent domain of “ruin” fetishism. Examples of the former include intriguing novels (Khoury 1995) and artistic works, as well as work that straddles disciplines such as anthropology and visual media (Féghali 2009), installation and sound (Hafeda 2011), and sociology and architecture (Gebhardt et al. 2005). However, the bullet riddled facades and dramatic destruction depicted in the images so heavily circulated by the media during and after the war, continue to populate people’s imaginaries of the urban ruin, and over-signify the notion of dereliction and decay (Cooke 2002). The impression one gets from this latter form of representation is that civil conflict is the only form of violence that the city has experienced - and periodically continues to experience - in its recent history. This leaves virtually unaddressed the violent effects of sectarian contestation played out economically and spatially, or the structural violence that global financialisation has exacerbated, making life in the city increasingly difficult.

I draw inspiration from a number of propositions made in other ethnographic contexts that problematise particular representations and symbolic renditions of decayed spaces. Implicitly or explicitly, this work challenges Georg Simmel’s influential treatise in an early text entitled “The Ruin” (1958), in which he reflects on the relationship between nature and architecture, identifying the two as opposing if complementary forces. According to this text, wherever humans settle, nature, the unwieldy and indiscriminate force encounters architecture, the physical embodiment of man’s rational and structural intentions. And the twain constantly compete in their conquest over matter and space. Where architecture is abandoned, nature steps in and ruination ensues but with it comes a loaded aesthetic regime of art and archaeology. Millington finds this conceptual separation of cities and nature problematic too (2013: 280). He argues that it renders both of them opaque and elevates ruins to the status of aesthetic and sublime objects of consumption, while eclipsing the historical and political processes that produce them and the complex human and ecological dimensions that ensue (2013: 286). His study of photographic representations of derelict spaces in post-industrial Detroit-USA critiques the growing genre of “ruin-porn,” or forms of representing urban dereliction that mourn urban decay while “celebrating its picturesque aesthetic”

(Millington 2013: 283). "By writing out residents from the story," he convincingly claims, "Cataloguers of Detroit's decay effectively construct Detroit's decline in almost purely architectural terms" (2013: 284).

Beirut's decayed houses are also profusely fetishised in visual representations, which arise in conjunction with the overarching domain of cultural heritage that posits the necessity to preserve old houses and buildings as repositories of memory and perhaps more politically consequential, as material history. Yet *whose* history is rarely problematised, least of all in light of the fact that the revered houses most often belonged to a wealthy merchant elite. Discourses on heritage preservation - if not practices, since their margin of operation is so structurally constrained - are increasingly thriving in opposing directions. On one hand are the agents of the neoliberal commodification of old houses, which once preserved as they occasionally are, are turned into valuable real estate for entertainment hotspots, commercial enterprises most notably banks, and more recently urban palaces sold on the market at exuberant prices. On the other hand, a genealogy of activists who helped identify buildings and social clusters worth preserving in the 1990s (mentioned in the context), finding their struggles defeated, seem to claim that preservation and restoration of old houses still does constitute a resistance to the neoliberal urban regime. (One site where this polemic gets complicated is when a grassroots art/culture initiatives, such as Mansion, moves into a previously derelict house, an exceptional case I elaborate in Chapter Five) For the purpose of this discussion, however, I contend that both types of heritage discourse, the capitalist agent and the middle class activist have conceded - the first through capitalistic ambitions, the other under the duress of compromise and remorse - to "writing out [the] residents from the story" (Millington 2013: 283). In reifying the decayed house to the order of material and aesthetic value that survives from the past, they constitute the house as separate from the spatial and social mobilities, as well as war-like and economic forms of violence that continue to shape the city in the present. There are two lines of analysis from which my claim derives. The one is that heritage discourse, in fostering opportunities for heritage industries and the commodification of culture, invariably creates gentrifying effects on the ground (Herzfeld 2009, Leite 2015). The second is that reifying the ruin, by attributing its decay to a discrete object (the "Beirut House") and to a distinct time (the past, the Golden Age perhaps), overlooks processes of destruction that bear upon the lives of marginalised people wherever they might have dwelled, in the past as much as in

the present (Gordillo 2014).

In his book, *Evicted from Eternity: The Restructuring of Modern Rome* (2009), Michael Herzfeld shows how attention to the heritage value of the old Roman neighbourhood of Monti has the effect of expediting the evictions of tenants on rent control and gradually gentrifying the area. He shows the way rent control, urban zoning, and other urban building laws and heritage listing frameworks temporally bracket off and set the stage for postponed evictions, resulting first in lowered land prices that dissuade development. But when big development money becomes attuned to “heritage” and starts coming in, the neoliberal market forcefully incentivises restoration, and these frameworks start to fall away. Through political intervention (in Herzfeld’s case the collusion between Catholic church, developers, the city council, and other local party coalitions), the exceptional interstice of continued dwelling for working class people on lucrative land starts to give way to eviction and gentrification (Herzfeld 2009: 253). If under different circumstances, the case of places like Monti is comparable to Beirut in so far as rent control has until now worked to “preserve” old houses, which will be in further demise once this rent is liberalised. What is relevant to the present discussion on discourses is that the restoration of old buildings in Herzfeld’s ethnographic context has the same exclusionary effect as urban renewal, something which has appeared true of Beirut as well. A prominent example is the boom in elite recreational and creative design sectors in the neighbourhood of Mar Mikhael, which expedited the eviction and sell-out of its ageing population, and which took the physical form of both restored old houses and expensive new residential towers.

In *Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction*, Gastón Gordillo takes issue with the term “ruin,” arguing it is inadequate to designate places where waves and layers of destruction, of people’s lives and their abodes continually occur. He rejects the fantasy of ruins as discrete and positive objects from the past after Adorno’s “logic of disintegration,” to highlight the disruptive powers of spatial production through Lefebvre’s Marxist critique of “abstract space” which renders the “multifaceted textures of place” ready for commoditisation (2014: 8, 79).<sup>16</sup> Instead, he proposes a theoretical and political concept, “rubble,” to speak of these remains and their encompassing landscapes. With connotations of “discarded broken matter,” rubble “disintegrates” and “deglamorizes”

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<sup>16</sup> At a City Debates Conference in May 2004, Lebanese-Australian anthropologist, Ghassan Hage, called Solidere’s abstraction effect “spatial necrophelia” - the love of dead spaces, to reference the emptiness of the district.

decay and dereliction, while privileging people's textured and sensed experience of accumulated destruction upon which present-day landscapes are created (Gordillo 2014: 9-11). He draws from Ann Stoler's proposition in *Imperial Debris*, that decaying urban settings are the material fallout of failed imperial projects, and the traces of the disruptive effect of such transformative projects (2008). Quoting Stoler in order to discredit the term "creative destruction" even by its critics, Gordillo writes: "Capitalism, indeed, creates vast amounts of wealth, objects, and places, but does so through what Stoler calls a ruination that 'lays waste to certain peoples, relations, and things'" (Stoler 2013: 11, cited in Gordillo 2014: 81). "Ruination," a term that sometimes figures in this thesis (especially in Chapter Two), is thus one way to represent the entanglement between decaying houses and the social, political and economic processes that bear upon the lived and textured experiences of people who dwell there.

In taking critical distance from the association of decayed house with senseless Civil War, and from their "glamorisation" with gentrifying heritage salvage-operations, I have said what this thesis is *not* doing. Time to say what it *will* do. Faced with the risk of disappearance, the decayed house is readily captured and utilised by such renditions. Since these renditions of decay are politically consequential to discursive practices, then attending to the experiences *in the present* and *for the future* of people who dwell in decaying houses is political as well. On an experiential level, they are the pent up sites of intimate family relations with their domestic frictions and affections, secrets and confessions, pleasures and pains, all deeply emotional experiences that leave lasting marks on people's sense of wellbeing and in their memories. They are the private places of family reproduction, production and stagnation, while also the headquarters of kinship, the normative institution from where social, cultural, moral and political reproduction are expected to happen. For the ethnographer, they have the potential to reveal as much as they conceal. Most importantly, however, their dilapidation, which insinuates their imminent disappearance in the particulars of Beirut's landscape, is the occasion through which to explore notions of home and house, and reflect on the conditions of possibility of dwelling in Beirut today.

#### AESTHETICS OF DECAY AND MISANTHROPY

I have discussed in the previous subsection how practice theory, by way of strategies/tactics, inform my understanding of what people *do* with and *in* their decayed houses, while dwelling and striving to "fit" in the city and derive gains within their

lifeworlds. I turn next to the analytical frameworks of my analysis on the sensibilities and affective timbres that tinge interlocutors' tactical manipulations to endure or thrive. Stemming from ethnographic experience, such an interest also responds to a call within the anthropology of the house to go beyond Levi-Strauss's category of the "house society" (Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995: 19). This category has kicked up debates about what the centrality of houses in such presumed societies reveals about kinship and social organisation. Are house societies more centred on continuity through inheritance and kinship descent versus alliance (Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995: 6) or are they just societies where the house is a dominant site of social organisation regardless of hierarchy (Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995: 10)? Hoping to take house anthropology beyond these generalising debates, Carsten and Hugh-Jones in their edited book *About the House: Levi-Strauss and Beyond* invited anthropologists in 1995 to pay more attention to the material and moral entanglements between the physical features of the house and the bodies of those who inhabit them (Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995: 42, 45). They also challenged the depiction of houses as permanent in relation to the impermanence and cyclic attributes of human ageing, mobility and mortality. In the contributions to their volume, "Houses may be said to be born, to grow, to mature and die, to move and walk, to feed and be fed, and they may even be said to marry and copulate" (Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995: 42).

I would call the moral and material entanglement an "aesthetics of decay," distinguishing it from the aestheticisation of decay, which resembles the reification of ruins discussed above. Rather, I take aesthetics here in its literal, Greek etymology *aisthanesthai*, meaning to "perceive (by the senses or by the mind), to feel,"<sup>17</sup> "the qualities of feeling" or "subdued motional activity" (Freud 1919: 339). This could be construed as placing the sensibilities of dwelling in the decayed house under analysis that draws at once from an ontological framework and a sensory or phenomenological one. Scholarship dealing with object-centred ontologies and its intersections with the anthropology of the senses has produced a lot of propositions about the relationship of humans to the physical world and objects that populate it. These include ideas of non-human agency and subjectivity (Navaro-Yashin 2009), depictions of diverse sensory embodiments of the world (Basso 1996, Howes 2005) and non-representable affective experiences (Thrift 2008) to mention a few. Of this vast and various domain of inquiry and interpretation, I find most relevant to my field, and this discussion in particular,

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<sup>17</sup> [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)



Ingold's suggestion that the physical world and the objects in it "recruit" particular actions upon them and activities around them (Ingold 2010: 95).<sup>18</sup> For example, the house as material object of dwelling is constantly beckoning us to repair and maintain it. "Like life itself," Ingold writes, "a real house is always a work in progress, and the best that inhabitants can do is to steer it in the desired direction" (Ingold 2010: 94). In this proposition, objects do not have agency; there is no direct causation between the grain and behaviour of matter and what we humans do. Yet materiality summons particular human responses. My ethnographic data has consistently inspired such an interpretation. For instance, I argue in Chapter Three that the decay of houses in Basta, where gentrifying forces are fast advancing, summons from its owners the response first to allow decay to work upon the materiality of their houses, and second to claim they did this deliberately towards particular ends.

While belonging in the realm of the moral and material, such deliberateness exists within fields of emotional sentiment, in this case in the face of impending crisis including the chronic yet normalised anticipation of it within a protracted war context (Hermez 2012). This brings me to the component of affective timbres in my analysis, for which I draw (selectively) from Thrift's discussion of "misanthropy" and the city. His proposition is that: "[I]t is not only the images of war and disaster flooding in from the media that have generated a pervasive fear of catastrophe but also a more deep-seated sense of misanthropy which urban commentators have been loath to acknowledge, a sense of misanthropy too often treated as though it were a dirty secret" (2005: 134). This misanthropy is a fundamental dislike of fellow dwellers and antisocial sentiments, behaviour and communication that emerge from a sense of imminent doom (Thrift 2005: 139). He argues that the Western cities' complex infrastructural capabilities to cope with and indeed recover from actual catastrophes and adapt to disruptions are underestimated and more predictable than they seem. He concedes that "cities in the South" are more likely to be in "a recurring state of emergency" citing Palestinian cities as an example (2005: 136-138). Without factoring Beirut's or any southern city's adaptability into my analysis, I only concur with the notion, made in this vein, that infrastructure is more than just the physical channels and abstract technology of resource distribution. It is the conduit of domination and deprivation, which whether planned or

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<sup>18</sup> He developed these ideas while convening a handicrafts and anthropology workshop at Manchester University in 2002, publishing about the experience in 2010.

accidental, encompasses people's expectations, disappointments and informal interventions while implicating the bodies and affects of urban dwellers (Harvey & Knox 2012, Larkin 2015, Thrift 2005).<sup>19</sup>

Manifestations of imminent catastrophe and its technological redress in my field are noticeable, for instance, in the fast urban reconstruction and recovery (human life not included of course!) of Beirut and South Lebanon following the devastating Israeli air strikes in 2006 (Al-Harithy 2010). They are meanwhile ever-present in uneventful though daily power cuts, water shortages, traffic jams, road blocks, internet failures, pollution, garbage accumulation, not to mention political deadlocks that impinge on people's daily lives giving them a sense of vulnerability. To be more faithful to a Bourdieusian analysis, these give people who are not well buttressed by surplus capital and political connection a sense of vulnerability. These issues arguably arise more intensely in the context of dwelling in decay. Faced with a looming sense of neglect and inefficiency (by the state), of defeat in multiple spheres (not exclusively in wars, and not just symbolically), and of failure to accomplish desired ends. These translate into diffused affective concerns, understood as a "nexus" between communicable emotions and what the body can do (Thrift 2005: 139) or in Bourdieu's terms how it deploys itself in the world. Insecurity about continued dwelling, access to affordable housing, evictions, unemployment, disinheritance, lawsuits, discrimination, and the unending drill and dust of the construction sites of luxury towers exudes a "misanthropy" (Thrift 2005: 134) rather than desensitisation (Tonkiss 2004: 204). Suspended in problematic relationships with neighbours, kin, tenants and landlords over issues whose temporal end is unpredictable, the dwellers of this ethnography are not "blasé" before the experience of modern living (Simmel 1903: 179). They are fearful, suspicious, angry, resentful, remorseful, disappointed and sometimes desperate. Ending on such a bleak note, I should clarify that of course my interlocutors were not consistently miserable and inconsolable by anything in this world. The point I am making is that within the field of deliberation over their properties and concerns over continued dwelling where they feel at home, the chances of which seem pending and sometimes unpredictable, such

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<sup>19</sup> In the Lebanese context, Obeid explores such expectations through the desire for inclusion in and negotiation with historic marginalisation from the nation-state in the border down of Aarsal. (Obeid, Michelle. Unpublished Paper. "Of Sewage and Roads: 'Infra-Citizenship' and State-Society Relations." In *Beyond State Failure: New Anthropological Perspectives on the Everyday State in Lebanon*, edited by Sami Hermez and Michelle Obeid.)

affective timbres dominate. From this spectrum of sensibilities emerge tactics of endurance, aspirations for accomplishment and interpretations of others' actions that garner fantasies of deliberateness, wilfulness and clear intention in the face of uncertainty.

## INSTITUTIONALISED NEGLECT

The conditions within which urban houses from the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century have been left to decay in Beirut has been a central area of exploration in my thesis. As part of this focus, I propose the notion of “institutionalised neglect” to refer to the collusion of legal and bureaucratic frameworks, economic policies, as well as practices of dwelling and the devolution of private property, which encourage - indeed make almost inevitable - the material neglect, decay and eventual dereliction of old houses. Some of the “institutions” I have explored, which contribute to this inevitability - which I will only mention here but which are elaborated in my thesis - include the following: a rent control act that pits owners against tenants; building regulations that incentivise renewal with enormous margins of profit and tax cuts for builders; nearly non-existent heritage protection policies that are systematically undercut by powerful real estate interests; economic policies termed neoliberal or renegade capitalist that are rooted in a long history of mercantilism and routinised collusions between private and public stakes; a financial system whose stability is heavily dependent on the real estate industry and the Lebanese diaspora; and religious inheritance laws and kinship dynamics that fragment ownership between large groups of kin. Drawing on research from urban planning mainly, the single-most prolific discipline to interpret critically the regimes of political influence underpinning Beirut's urban transformations, I contend that neglect is thus institutionalised by and for a powerful political convention (if not an explicit intent) to drive old properties to such degrees of unchecked dereliction that demolition and renewal become the “inevitable” outcome.

Because of institutionalised neglect and the neoliberal regime that undergirds it and for which it serves as material elaboration, circumstances that promote renewal over repair make these spaces *insinuate* the abandonment that the building regime somehow condemns them to before their actual demolition. Even where people continue to inhabit them, these houses have been relegated to a moment beyond repair.

Irrecoverable, they are in many senses derelict before the last of their occupants deserts them. Within this conceptual frame, I delve into and explore contending practices and perceptions understanding them as strategies that dwellers in decayed houses have recourse to in their quest for various property-related benefits, as well as social, relational, economic, political and affective ideals. Situated at the intersection between notions of decay as material remain, which are continuously being produced within abrasive economic and social conditions, institutionalised neglect, I argue, is a concept that encompasses the conditions that decay the materiality of houses, while structuring dwellers' intentions, aspirations and aesthetic sensibilities as they attempt to maintain a home for themselves under Beirut's neoliberal building regime.

## CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

This thesis opens with a chapter on relations between the co-inheritors of a decaying property, set against the backdrop of the imperative for urban renewal. Focusing on the way diverging priorities within families unravel decayed houses materially and morally, I reveal how patriarchal power dynamics, inheritance law and its manipulation, and kinship reciprocity transform such property from home into profitable asset. I argue that in requiring the unification of owner decisions and actions, this transformation summons the monopoly of patriarchy to expedite its results, while manifesting the ambivalence at the heart of kinship and gender relations. Taking its cue from the local idiom, "clean real estate" implying land that is ready for sale, the second chapter explores the requisite of removing unwanted dwellers to achieve renewal. Focusing on tenant-owner relations this chapter reveals the intersection between ascriptions of dirt and cleanliness in the process of neoliberal property renewal, and a "hierarchy of value" that orders dwellers' lives and bodies in the city. Together, I argue these prisms of value reconstitute entitlement to the city while privileging private ownership over any other mode of dwelling. The third chapter grapples with the role that material decay and maintenance play in the mediation of relationships between dwellers who compete over lucrative urban property. Depicting the aesthetic experience of living in decrepit houses, I propose the concept "deliberate debris" to signal how owners use the neglect to repair in order to stake claims over property or postpone "ruination." I argue that decay is not the passive disintegration of materiality at the

hands of nature, but a strategy for deterring and evicting competing dwellers' access to property. Attending to the nostalgic narratives about old houses from the past, the fourth chapter looks at older interlocutors' sense of loss within the increasing commodification of housing, changes in the construction industry and their own socio-economic trajectories. In particular, I reflect on the role that decreasing spatial magnitude and material durability and intensive sociality play in nostalgia for a past "good life" - what I call the "magnanimity of life." I argue that these attributes for domestic space are valued as markers of wealth, status and sources of aesthetic comfort, befitting a sense of social wellbeing. The final chapter is a case study of Mansion, a formerly abandoned upper class villa in the heart of the city that a non-profit cultural collective borrows from its present owner, as a place governed by an exception to the rule of real estate development. Exploring first the conditions that make possible this arrangement, I analyse the collective's internal debates over prolonging and propagating its experience, while articulating its potential as alternative to run-of-the mill urban renewal. I argue that the exception of "Mansion" arises from the benevolence of its owner whose surplus, social trajectory and disposition toward cultural production, enables him to speculate on the property's market value while accumulating symbolic capital.

Thus, the analysis in this thesis is framed around discrete social and spatial categories such as inheritance, infrastructure, material decay, domestic magnitude, the body, and cultural production, which exceed particular urban locations or time periods. The ethnographic portraiture emerges at the level of decaying Beiruti houses (where they were most prevalent) and their dwellers. In what should become clear by the end, its ethnographic toolkit and theoretical compass were mobilised toward a nascent anthropology of disinvestment and gentrification at the interstice before it occurs (Gibson 2007, Raleigh 2013).



## CHAPTER ONE

## INHERITANCE AND THE AMBIVALENCE OF KINSHIP

## INTRODUCTION

“The shelf-life of any house is about 100 years. After that, you can’t fit everyone in. They have to move away, and the house starts to fall apart. It’s natural that an old house should be torn down and new ones built in its place.” Such were the words of Ibrahim one 90-something year old florist, one of the oldest most well known merchants in the Hamra neighbourhood, where over the past two decades or so, old buildings are fast being replaced by tall residential towers of various sizes and standards of luxury. A flat in this neighbourhood sells at no less than the equivalent of between £380,000 and £760,000. Ibrahim has his shop and residence in an old dilapidated low-rise structure facing several large development projects, which he is pleased with for the additional business they are sure to bring him. Surely the new well-to-do inhabitants will have occasion, happy or sad, to buy flowers. The florist co-owns his property with his paternal cousins, who keep flower shops adjacent to his. That none speaks to the other over a long-standing dispute is a staple of gossip among their regular clientele, who buy exclusively from one of them. Despite the dishevelled condition of the property, the building still stands, not least because it continues to be in use as shops and homes, but also because the inheritors have not yet agreed on common action. Prices being so high in this neighbourhood, and judging from observation of nearby plots, one expects there to be a tipping point at which the prospect of significant financial gain would trump any intra-familial animosity no matter how staunch. For the moment, however, that point has not been reached, the building still standing as something of an anomaly in its renewing surroundings. Waiting too long to take action means the numbers of its potential inheritors will multiply in the meantime, and as their individual shares shrink, as prices remain steady if they do not rise (Soueid et al. 2016, Tierney 2015). Meanwhile, the decision to wait it out is also a form of “active passivity,” which in Hage’s conception signals some agency, but moreover one that reveals a hierarchy of renewal’s temporality within the family (Hage 2013: 2). In this hierarchy, those who wait do so because they can and/or must(afford to), and in so doing speculate on land prices. If they are able to consolidate shares into clusters of inheritors or to “buy people

out,” they stand only to benefit from the wait. But those who will not wait, will not because their situation does not permit it, and the need to benefit from their property is urgent and connected to calculations about reinvestment that yield immediate benefits in security or abode.

This chapter focuses on the perceptions, intents and practices that co-inheritors espouse and imagine about their jointly owned decaying houses and the real estate upon which they stand. It is also about frustrations and variations in the ability to implement such imaginings, which reveal the underbelly of kinship relations. Observing and listening to my interlocutors’ wishes, efforts, precautions, frustrations and regrets over the outcomes of their co-inherited land, I attend to value in two intertwined senses of the word: the material worth of co-owned property *and* the morality of kinship relations. Against the backdrop of my thesis inquiry into the structural circumstances that engender derelict spaces in Beirut, I focus in this chapter on material and moral value. I propose that the relationship between these types of value is key to understanding the ways that inheritance disagreement expedites the decay of houses and contributes to institutionalised neglect. This line of inquiry is couched in residents’ worries about and prospects for affordable dwelling in the city, and reveals the affective landscape wherein such concerns unfold.

Contributing to recently growing interest, if well-preceded in anthropological classics, to study kinship by focusing more on the relationship between people and their houses as material possessions, I draw upon ethnography that depicts interlocutors’ varied notions of time, power and action surrounding the sale and/or development of jointly owned property (Carsten 2004, Gudeman 2002, Pottage 2004, Strathern 1999). These include the eagerness for imminent and optimal development, the strategic stalling of land development for speculation, the remorse over the sale of a family property and the present hardship that ensues from disinheritance and intricate forms of debt and dependency. I look at what actions and concerns most preoccupy people who were dealing with their co-inherited property, asking: How does the logic of urban renewal in Beirut shape how inheritance is perceived and managed? How does the fragmentation of material property relate to moral frameworks such as religious and customary social ideals of family solidarity and care? What affective timbres emerge within kinship relations when stakes over property diverge? I ask these questions with the proposition that the occasion of inheritance distribution has the potential to make such issues apparent in Beirut’s urban social milieu city and shapes family relations.



In what follows, first I set the stage with a discussion of the relationship between kinship and property, including the possibility of manipulating existing religious codes, and the economic incentives that might drive these arrangements. Then I talk about the position of power of attorney, or any other less formal usually male category in a co-inheriting kin group, who is given or takes charge of decisions about shared property. Under this section, I discuss the case of Abu Amir and of Yusuf Rida and his family.<sup>20</sup> In the following section, I take up the discussion from the other side of power, namely of those who defer to it, sharing stories from Zina, Majid and Dana Rida, as well as Hiba Muallim. By this point, the complex nature of patriarchal relations should become clear, namely its reliance not only on gender, but on seniority (Joseph 1994, Joseph 2012), as well as wealth and profession in the consolidation of decision-making powers over shared property.<sup>21</sup> Finally, I conclude by proposing that the ambivalence of kinship relations that unfolds in deliberations over co-inherited decaying property, are manifested in dual material and moral registers. One is the ambivalent (sometimes multivalent) priorities among co-inheriting relatives that get subsumed under the requisite of univalence, which urban renewal needs for its perpetuation. The other is the dual love-hate sentiment, which while inseparable from kinship relations despite ideals of the warmth of the family hearth, gets accentuated by deliberations over shared property.

## SETTING THE STAGE: FRAGMENTATION AND MANIPULATION

A house that is tending toward dereliction deceptively suggests the emptying out of the sociality that prevailed there when the physical house was in better condition. Rather, the decaying old properties in Beirut, before they are sold-demolished-redeveloped, are still embroiled in the complexities of family relationships, and particularly around the transfer and distribution of material and moral value, or inheritance. Imposed through the automatic division of property, the presence of multiple inheritors in a sense expedites the dereliction of a property since it multiplies

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<sup>20</sup> I have given pseudonyms to most of my interlocutors, while retaining names or titles that are so generic they cannot be recognised. In this case, *Abu* makes up the Arabic standard title of respect, “father of,” followed by the name of the eldest son. Its feminine equivalent would be *Um Amir* (mother of Amir). I have invented all surnames wherever they figure. I have also followed the Latin script spelling that are conventional and prevalent in my fieldsite, be that for the names of people or places.

<sup>21</sup> In her 2012 article on Arab women’s subjectivity, Joseph modifies her earlier definition of patriarchy, positing that it is constituted primarily in the family, building on theories of relational subjectivity and contextualised intentionality.

the number of wishes and needs. At the same time, ironically, it encourages renewal over preservation since the most facile way to flatten these multiple desires is to sell for redevelopment, in a context that already favours such a course of action, indeed a market poised to subsume any remaining property for that purpose.

In the neighbourhood of Zoqaq el-Blat, where many abandoned houses from the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be found even as the present wave of urban renewal gradually takes hold, *al-waratha ghaybin* (the inheritors are absent) or *al-waratha ktar* (the inheritors are too many) come as ready answers if you ask a neighbour why a particular house or building still stands derelict.<sup>22</sup> The image of many people who are unable to agree, are in staunch disagreement or who do not even know each other, crops into the mind, not least because the narratives nearly always have the same components: a family house that once thrived with inhabitants (often times its founders); the outbreak of episodes of civil conflict leading some inhabitants to internal displacement, others to the diaspora, still others to linger; waves of departure and return, including of informal squatters and welcome guardians; and all the while the generations multiplying. Somewhere in the story are inter-familial disagreements if not outright conflicts of interest, and the absence of the human care that the disinvestment from property entails. The house that was once abustle with social life falls into disrepair before total dereliction, in a combination of crowded states and abandonment.

In Lebanon, religious law organises most facets of personal and familial life, including inheritance, with variations between religions and within religious denominations.<sup>23</sup> The division of inheritance shares between all entitled heirs are very specifically codified in Islamic law, with variations between Shiites and Sunnis, and Christian-owned property is also divided between heirs, unless other arrangements are made in either religion, such as testation (the disposal of property by will) or bequests *inter vivos* (between the living). Having done fieldwork in predominantly Muslim neighbourhoods,<sup>24</sup> where Islamic law in principle dictates how property is divided into

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<sup>22</sup> For the transliteration of Arabic words or phrases, I approximate the guidelines of International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (IJMES), but without diacritics.

<sup>23</sup> It is outside the purview of this chapter to describe the intricate rules of inheritance under all religious laws in Lebanon. Generally speaking, however, Christian inheritance codes entitle spouses and offspring only and make no gender distinction, even though custom sometimes does. Meanwhile, Islamic inheritance law usually differentiates between genders and entitles siblings and parents, with various adjustments and exceptions made according to particular circumstances.

<sup>24</sup> While these neighbourhoods had a mixed religious population before Lebanon's civil conflicts (markedly in 1958), their religious demographic change is due in great part to the 1975 Civil War, which

prescribed shares between multiple inheritors, the fates of properties I did fieldwork on are necessarily tied to many inheritors, whose shares depend on their gender and their proximity through blood or agnatic ties to the deceased. This age-old and “impractical” tendency of Islamic law to fragment land has often created tension in family relations (Mundy 1998: 3). This is particularly the case since few are the co-inheriting kin groups that have gone to the trouble and expense (or indeed succeeded in attempts) of divvying up their property into separate cadastral plots corresponding to each inheritor’s share (*farz*), especially on properties whose owners have emigrated. As such, these shares remain connected through a past when the plot housed an ancestral kin group, as a nuclear or extended household, which outgrew space with the marriage and birth of subsequent generations. Moreover, the fact of leaving a single plot of land undivided for several generations, results in the association by default of an intricate web of relatively dissociated and possibly disparate households on most decaying properties. Some may have lived there for many years and harbour a strong emotional attachment to the place, while others may not know the address.

Decaying properties may withstand the wave of urban renewal when inheritors have not reached the consensus needed to sell or develop collectively, and this either because they are in disagreement or because inheritors are absent having made their lives elsewhere. Such internally diverse co-inheriting kin groups are also likely to contain households with varying socio-economic positions and therefore varying stakes in the property and its fate. Some are strapped for cash and housing and want to sell immediately, while others have money and therefore more time on their hands to wait. As more and more urban space gets consumed in new construction and the demand for developable land rises, derelict spaces in Beirut are however not “abandoned.” Far from being forgotten or left behind, such houses are incubators of value waiting to be activated. Although inheritors may have different experiences of and desires for the shared property, more often than not persons in powerful positions within the family work together towards streamlining these divergences. Hearsay on lucrative land prices, and the real show of interest from urban actors like agents, developers and contractors, including their exponential inflation of land prices, participates in urban renewal, while aligning inheritor differences and rendering property redevelopment something of an

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displaced most non-Muslims, particularly Christian residents, to predominantly Christian neighbourhoods, and saw the in-migration of many Muslim Shiites who were displaced from other war-torn regions of the country.

inevitable end (the teleology mentioned in the thesis Introduction). Behind such aesthetics of decay, keen (and sometimes cunning) inheritors wait and search for lucrative offers, watching carefully as regeneration waves penetrate more deeply into their neighbourhoods, and scrutinising real estate developers' offers to ensure optimal benefit for themselves and their dependents.

Although Islamic law in principle applies to my interlocutors' inheritance rights and responsibilities, precisely how inheritance is shared among kin is effectuated by interpretation, adjustment and subversion of the sacred dictates in worldly ways. Interestingly, whenever I tried to discuss how inheritance would be distributed with small land-owning men who regarded themselves as the natural spokespeople for a given property they co-own which has typically not yet been subdivided, the issue was waved away as meriting no discussion because, I was told "Islamic law takes care of it." Indeed, *mukhtars* of Basta and Zoqaq el-Blat were quick to wave the topic of inheritance distribution in their neighbourhoods aside when I broached it, claiming, "Shari'a is just applied." Beneath this front of faithful adherence to inheritance as religious institution, lies a plethora of exceptions and manipulations practiced within the folds of the family and in conjunction with the state judiciary.

There is much room for flexibility in Islamic inheritance law, whether through *inter vivos* bequest or other informal arrangements (Hann 2008: 151, Moors 1994, Mundy 1988: 6-7, 50). Such flexibility is not new to contexts where Islamic law applies, having been well established while the Middle East was dominated by agrarian economies (Mundy 1988). Meanwhile, in Beirut such flexibility and manipulation of available codes is perpetuated through the city's typical contemporary urban features, like a rise in job insecurity and gendered divisions of labour, and the production of urban space increasingly through the logic of private gain and growth (Fawaz 2008, Marot 2014). Here people may call upon civil laws for symbolic sales (*bay' shira*), in which the "buyer" is a favoured recipient and does not need to pay for the land, to accomplish transfers that exclude others, or increase someone's share beyond what religious law might entitle him or her. According to the assistant of one public notary (*katib 'adil*), where such transfers are legalised, "More than ninety per cent of our work comes from officiating real estate transfers within families: wives who want to cut out their husbands, husbands who want to cut out their wives, siblings dividing up property, parents writing their properties to their children."

The decay of houses in my field often accompanies the illness and death of its

primary owners or founders, and the unravelling of a particular configuration of familial dwelling. By the intermediary of inheritance, a new moment is born from this death and decay, when the fate of the house, its furnishings, and dwelling arrangements undergo transformation. *Who* will take this over is as much a question about the fate of a home as material object as it is about what will happen to the bonds between relatives. The moment of inheritance distribution is most telling about the conditions and futures of such bonds. In his article about the inheritance of spirit mediators within Mayotte families off the east African coast, Lambek found that while inheritance may be defined by scripted procedures and predictable codes, the actual practices of inheritance distribution are negotiable and conflictual (Lambek 2011). Distinct as his research context is from mine, the observation that “[t]he natural ‘facts’ are never sufficient for kinship but always subordinated to social ‘acts,’” rings true from my analysis of inheritance in Beirut, where “[e]ven normative practices can be overturned by contingent acts” (Lambek 2011: 5). So this passing on entails both sharing and hoarding, including and excluding, two seemingly opposing types of acts that are equally constitutive of kinship. This distinction resonates with Bourdieu’s notion of “practical kinship,” where:

“... the kinship that is put on display is opposed to practical kinship as the official is opposed to the unofficial (which includes the secret and the scandalous); as the collective to the particular; as the public, explicitly codified in a magical or quasi-legal formalism, to what is private, kept implicit and even hidden...” (Bourdieu 1990: 169).

Such a perspective is supported in other literature that is specifically on property inheritance and kinship relations generally (Carsten 2004, Miller 2007, Mundy 1988). In a study on women’s inheritance of property in Palestine, Moors shows that although rural and urban Palestinian women may forfeit their property inheritance rights to their brothers contrary to religious law, this is widely practiced to incentivise brothers’ long-term material and moral support to their sisters.<sup>25</sup> This ideal – for brothers’ role as their sisters’ protectors is also an expectation within Islamic morality – is erstwhile fraught with practical complications and disappointments, and negotiations within varying circumstances (Moors 1994: 72). On the other hand, Miller reveals the rift between

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<sup>25</sup> Moors’ article more generally argues that a) property is a social relation rather than just a resource and b) having property does not always translate into having power in Palestine because sometimes power comes from relinquishing property. This is particularly the case when women (sisters) forfeit their inheritance shares in order to stay under the protection of male cognates, and thereby come to their marriage alliances with the backing of male kin, and better positioned vis a vis their in-laws.

expectations and practice, to be a staple of kinship relationships generally, with expectations and norms hardly thinning even as practices diverge from the ideals (Miller 2007). In matters of real estate in the contexts I studied, the acts of even the most pious of men (for they were mostly men), flex the word of God in a bid to optimise benefits from property that stands destined for radical transformation by renewal.<sup>26</sup>

## POWER OF ATTORNEY

In this section, I discuss the case of men who have decision-making positions within their agnatic groups, focusing on their plans for the renewal of their decaying properties and some of the strategies they adopt to achieve these, including bureaucratic and material practices and their associated perceptions. I explore how these strategies are garnered to ensure a single decision from a disparate inheritance group, in the expressed interest of maximum benefit including the hope for continued dwelling in the city. From fieldwork done with male interlocutors who either have power of attorney or some less formal mandate to act on behalf of co-inheritors in a shared piece of property, I show how manipulation - both as skilful handling and as controlling - index the personal commitment such men invest in this position, and the high stakes it involves. Navigating the secrecy surrounding the terms of inheritance distribution, and neighbourhood rumours about violent family disputes over property, I reflect on how hierarchies and inequalities that arise in inheritance transfer make apparent the tensions at the heart of kinship relations generally.

Abu Amir believes he sits on something of a gold mine, or at least the closest he will ever get to one. He expects that as soon as construction finishes on the boulevard that runs right by the 1200 square-metre property he co-owns with five siblings in Moussaitbeh, he will have the chance to make a big investment. Then he wants to tear down the 1970s “nondescript” three-story apartment building where he and his brother still have a flat each, as well as the sealed off derelict traditional house, and clear the surrounding gardens from fruit trees and shrubberies to make way for a new and profitable development project (Tabet 1996: 9). Situated on the outskirts of Basta, where land prices are still the lowest in the city, Abu Amir, a divorcee in his late 70s with four

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<sup>26</sup> For more on the manipulation of real estate by Sunni religious institutions, see Nada Moumtaz’s doctoral work on the sale of inalienable Muslim charitable property (*awqaf* - plural for *waqf*) during the Solidere reconstruction of Beirut’s central district (2012).

children three of whom lived and worked abroad, lives alone (Figure 8). With power of attorney over the property, he is at once waiting and scheming over it on his siblings' behalf, keen to catch the opportune moment to make an investment. He sees this as his best chance to secure himself with a flat in the neighbourhood where he grew up, to have some income stability in his older age as additional flats to rent or sell, and if possible to bequeath something to his children. The responsibility looms heavy over him to make good of this, and his suspicion is high against an imagined other (the upwardly mobile Shiite immigrant from other parts of Lebanon) who he believes can jeopardise his chances, or beat him to a better deal. But he considered himself best suited within his family for the task. His older brother is chronically ill and periodically absent, going to Dubai to be cared for by his children there. His sisters he waves off as "married," and tells of having consulted his brothers-in-law occasionally but remains unconvinced of their proposals for the property's future. Most of all, he deems himself ideal for the job based on his previous life-time employment as forwarding agent at the Beirut Port, a job requiring an astute knowledge of public procedure, and a knack for negotiating the ins and outs of a labyrinthine bureaucracy.



**Figure 8:** Abu Amir's building.

Throughout my fraught encounters with Abu Amir, he seemed suspicious of me too, and cagey about all the terms of his family's inheritance plans, such as how many people will actually inherit in the property, and whether everyone was in agreement over his plans. When someone called him enquiring about the property he associated that with the belief that I must have leaked the plans he was sharing with me to them, despite my sworn secrecy, and our meetings ended there. While I was in contact with him, however, Abu Amir had very little to share about his relatives, always redirecting my questions about them to the fact that he was the sole decision-maker, entrusted with the property's fate. "I'm in charge here," he would say. He could make such a strong claim of control because he had invested so many years and much effort (possibly also funds) disintricating the property from what he perceived as politically backed squatters who had over-stayed their welcome. He also claimed to own one third of the property shares, although he is one among six siblings, three men and three women, which would entitle him only to 22 per cent of the total, under the Islamic law for the Sunni denomination to which he belongs. If he acquired a third of the total (approximately 33 per cent), this implies that some other *intra vivos* transfer of inheritance took place between siblings. Accessing the details about this was as unlikely as finding out what someone (a relative stranger) has in his or her bank account. Given his heightened state of suspicion (bordering on paranoia), I never risked asking of course and Abu Amir mostly wanted to speak documents with me anyway, presuming this to be the stuff of social science research, which he must have approximated to statistics or urban planning. He was therefore glad to tell me about his multiple visits to the Beirut Land Registry department (*dawa'iri al-'iqariyya*) to gather the records of every property adjacent to his, several of which had recently been sold to new owners and presumably slated for redevelopment. "I want to know whom I'm surrounded by," he explained showing me one of them and reading out the names. On several other occasions, he elaborated his plans to fit six 14-storey buildings on the property, where he envisaged having a flat in a shared-ownership development, a common business formula whereby he (and co-inheritors) provide the property, while the contractor provides the construction and they split the gains proportionately. According to an architect friend of mine, six buildings on a plot that size is too many and "would not work" from a structural engineering perspective. But this is what Abu Amir is striving for.

Abu Amir kept numerous photocopies of the property's cadastral map and records, as well as the glossy brochures of other building projects around the city that he collected



from developers who had approached him (sometimes through his brothers-in-law or friends). Building specifications in hand, he also had the names of developers who he contemplated approaching because their buildings appealed to him. All the while, he scrutinised every renewal scenario for a trustworthy partnership in a playing field where fraud is reputedly rampant. He also kept photographs as well as faded photocopies of photographs of the property, and how it was before he demolished his parents' war-damaged sandstone house, which also stood on the property. He kept these in coloured cardboard folders stacked on a living room chair and in ordinary plastic bags amid the rest of the things he hoarded in his over-stuffed apartment.<sup>27</sup> Among these documents, there were numerous slips of paper on which he had tried to account for every detail of the project by scribbling down calculations of surface area, exploitation rights, the cost and the profits he needed to make so that his plan added up. Retired and sustained only by the modest offerings of hard-working children abroad, this is Abu Amir's best chance to remain in this neighbourhood and which he perceives as slipping away from him to be taken over by strange, imposing and intimidating others.<sup>28</sup> His awaited development plans and his sense of insecurity in the way the neighbourhood was transforming around him were also what Abu Amir wanted to talk to me about. Time and again, he mulled over his documents, brochures, photographs and photocopies, repeatedly showing me the property's specifications, reading the building dimensions and re-fitting the six dream buildings into the plot of land. "I've thought of everything" he once told me, "There may be six buildings, but I've accounted for enough room to fit a passage way for the loading trucks that will need to bring concrete and construction materials on site." I wondered whether that passage way could later serve as the entrance driveway to the impossibly dense building complex. It sounded like to Abu Amir's mind, access for the purpose of *construction* seemed to take precedence over access for the purpose of *dwelling*. The challenge of finding a trust-worthy business partnership preoccupies Abu Amir more than any fantasy of life thereafter, in whatever abode the partnership produces, because such opportunity comes as a precursor for the possibility of such a life. The responsibility of making good the power of attorney he held over his relatives' shares, of bequeathing something to his own children, and of maintaining his frail health long enough to accomplish these, tugged at him to find a resolution for renewal. In matters of

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<sup>27</sup> In Chapter Two, there is a detailed description of Abu Amir's flat, the debris and cluttered house.

<sup>28</sup> In Chapter Two, I discuss the sectarian implications of contest over real estate, with Abu Amir as Sunni, espousing xenophobia against the "encroaching Shiite," be they developers or war-displaced families.

real estate in Beirut, good things come to those who wait, as land prices are regularly under speculation. Thus he wanted his renewal to happen, but not too hastily so as not to miss out on better offers that come with ever-rising land value, and to safeguard being duped by developers and contractors should they sense his enthusiasm. At the same time, nor did he want the renewal to come too slowly lest he should grow too frail to manage the enterprise or see it bear fruit in his lifetime, and this left him in this dual state of waiting and scheming, withholding and seeking.

In understanding documents as practices and artefacts of modern knowledge, such as Abu Amir's need to ascertain who his new neighbours are or that my own research enterprise required him to share his documents with me, one must also interrogate what truth they purport to tell as ethnographic objects of interest and how they organise interlocutors' relationships to the state and to notions of modernity (Riles 2006: 7). Abu Amir treats his documents as objects of bureaucratic and scientific reliability in the face of a fast transforming urban space and the dubious profession that organises it. They are also the records of his work toward a transformation of his own crafting, following decades of a sense that reality impinged itself upon him in ways he despised and had little control over. He produces, collects and reproduces documents in a ritual of securing his place against the threat of loss, including his anxieties about failing to catch or witness "the right opportunity" to renew his property in time, and in a sufficiently beneficial way in his eyes. Moreover, the document belonged very much to his own disposition as transferring agent, making him adept at official procedures through documents, and buttressing his claim to represent his siblings' shared property. Although occupying another position to owners and inheritors in the property development dance, several of the independent real estate brokers who became my interlocutors also shared in this disposition, relying on, prizing and guarding documents in their everyday practice. Faris, an independent real estate broker, merchant and self-styled financial and legal adviser, is one example. Working out of his rented car, he kept his trunk full of documents on the various properties he was dealing with or sought to deal with, including (the most valuable) court legal documents from his self-cultivated specialty as property-owners' legal representative in court. As a result, he never accepted to park his car in a "dodgy place" or give it to parking valets or attendants, in order to keep them safely locked.

Yet just as such documentary aptitude and inclination is intertwined in Abu Amir's case with the deeply informalised state bureaucracy that is the Beirut Port, so too

does accessing the power to speak on behalf of a fragmented family group involve informality: of agreement, transaction and transference. This intertwining of informality with documentation challenges the facile association of documents with state formality, and indeed of scientific truth (Heimer 2006). It reveals claims to power to be constituted socially and sanctioned through contested values of patriarchy, namely of maleness coupled with seniority. Abu Amir meets only one of these two criteria, since his ill brother is older than him. "I've falsified my age on my identification papers," he once avowed to explain why he and not his brother has power of attorney. Thus, not only are religious laws routinely manipulated in matters of inheritance management, but also well-established social norms, and this in contradiction to the imperative of seniority, but not of gender. Indeed, in my fieldwork all those with power of attorney or other informal though equally effective forms of power to decide on behalf of co-inheritors were men and often the eldest of a particular kin group and if not, then they had accumulated status by virtue of their profession (Herzfeld 2007: 215). This is often and mistakenly explained as a feature of Islamic inheritance laws and practices, particularly under the Sunni denomination, where men are entitled to double the shares of their sisters, and more than women in most other instances as well. However, inheritance privileges based on male seniority exist amongst non-Muslims (and non "exotic" people) as well, being historically embedded in Western legal systems and frequently reaffirmed by colonial rule (Herzfeld 2007: 315). In principle, as it governs other social relations in Lebanon, patriarchy enters into the analysis of this situation for sure, particularly in constituting sister-brother relationships but also in conceptions of the state (Joseph 1994, Joseph 1997). Yet, I would argue that a combination of components of subjecthood, of which patriarchy is significant but not unique, are privileged in the practice of power of attorney: professional occupation, financial stability, social status and/or direct involvement or dwelling in the said property.

The Laqis family, established merchants who I discuss in more detail in Chapter Four, sold their large old villa in Qantari after the father passed away. One of his sons, Maher, was not the eldest but as bank manager, he was better employed and more financially stable than both male siblings, making him better connected and perhaps endowed to manage the costly procedures of property management and transformation. Also, throughout the fierce fighting that took place around the family home during the Civil War, he never left his father's side, this latter refusing to flee the house as other family members did, for fear of surrendering it to the militias who

controlled the neighbourhood at the time. Faris and his independent real estate broker friend, Abu Abed Laqis, took me to see the latter's distant cousin, Maher, to inquire about his family's villa on the grounds that he was the legitimate spokesperson for the house. In that same vein, Majid Rida took me to see his older brother, Yusif Rida, a self-important hoarder of personal titles: A certified sheikh, a doctor and university professor of theology, a judge in matters of marital disputes at the Sunni religious courts, and once a high-up functionary at the Sunni *awqaf*, or association of charitable properties. On introducing him to me, Majid, who has a more modest income from employment in a news agency, instructed me in all seriousness to address the 60-something year old as *Fadilat al-shaykh wa samahat al-qadi, al-professeure al-doctor Yusif Rida*. This loosely translates into, "Your Grace, Sheikh, Justice, Professor, Doctor Yusif Rida." Under the pretext that I could not remember the string of adulations, flagging my diasporic identity that trails with it a sanctioned lack of proficiency in classical Arabic and local codes of decorum, I got away with calling him *Fadilat al-shaykh* tout court. The Rida house, inherited from their mother who inherited it from her mother,<sup>29</sup> is on Khalid Street, a quiet side street of Basta. A two-storey classical triple-arch and red-roofed house with seven-metre high ceilings on the first floor, and five-metre high ceilings on the second, the house appears in a severe state of disrepair from the outside (Figure 9). But Majid and his wife, Zina and their teenaged son and daughter inhabit the first floor that stands atop a row of small shops, which are located in the arcades on street level. If it were not for the laundry often strung up on the balcony of the first floor, the house appears uninhabited, barely uninhabitable. Yusif and his wife, Dana, and their four daughters, who are practicing lawyers, live in a more modern apartment building just down the road, where Dana's parental home once stood: a splendid "large old Lebanese house" with gardens in her words. "Every day I regret that we sold that house," she tells me when I first meet her, seeming eager to speak, she and I starting to warm up to each other straight away. "My bedroom was as big as this living room. See, a lot of this furniture was in my parents' house," she intoned in sullen fashion, before rising in mid-sentence the second her husband entered the room, much to my dismay. Though I tried to slip in more questions, Yusif's entrance startled me and silenced her instantly. He took the seat with pomp, indifferent to our conversation, and she promptly left the room.

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<sup>29</sup> This case of matrilineal bequest is a little unusual, but reflects sufficient wealth in property that allowed its distribution in kind (a whole house) to female offspring.



**Figure 9: Rida House, Basta.**

Majid made a reference about his older brother as introduction, deciding then and there that Yusif would be the main interviewee of the encounter although I had hoped it might be a three-way conversation. He acted as though he was doing me an honour by leading me to this wellspring of truth and knowledge about the city and about their house and lineage, before leaving me with the man.

That my interview with Yusif should have ended with him inappropriately avowing his sexual frustration to me, and assessing my femininity in accordance with his understanding of Muslim standards, revealed little of interest to me about the transformation of the city and the ageing of family houses, but a lot about the reality of misused, patriarchal power, indeed its extent and leeway. It is worth noting here that the patriarchal power I am discussing in this section is impervious to the rise of women's status through education and professional labour, its advocates quick to dismiss ideals of women's "equality" to men. As Majid and Yusif seemed keen to counsel me, "women in the West have it all wrong." The ideal category, "Muslim femininity," implies being respectable and kind under the protection of and with obedience to her male kin guardians, and attention to performing beauty to the enjoyment of her husband. Though they recognise – and perhaps even derive prestige from – the education and

professional labour of their wives (at least Yusif tries to), this form of cultural capital is met more with ambivalence, indeed even hostility. Before their only son had died, Dana had worked as a speech therapist and a university professor, but she retired since their tragedy. Yusif told me with mixed feeling that his wife is “bourgeois and educated and good and wealthy and everything” but then criticised her for “losing her femininity,” from grief perhaps, with disobedience. Having evidently married up, meanwhile, he was quick to laud what he perceived as her original social value: her father and his eldest son (meaning Yusif’s counterpart in his in-laws’ family) who “are very important people.” They were also the deciders in the renewal of their property, amongst the things that Dana regrets, but which Yusif regards as the natural course of urban development, namely by renewal.

I have repeatedly heard during fieldwork that aside from debt, the worst thing you can pass on to your children is your own entanglement through shared property with an ever-expanding pool of co-inheritors. Such concern is by no means unique to my field-site, nor indeed to the present time. Gilsenan’s account of Yemenis inheriting while in the diaspora in the 19<sup>th</sup> century shows that distance and absence from the source of property further complicates the already thorny predicament of dividing inheritance. He quotes an account of one landlord who is about to write his will: “at ‘the perilous moment’ when death comes ‘and all is left, such as the houses, which may cause much annoyance and sickness,’ he hastens to make his will” (Gilsenan 2011: 358). In my own fieldwork moment, the classic warning is that leaving shared property undivided, and hence in the multivalent condition that co-inheritance brings about, is “a headache” that should be avoided. This is all the more so the bigger the pool of inheritors and “you stop knowing who you are dealing with,” as one interlocutor said, as though the relationship with kin thins the farther away you get from a core that owned and once experienced a house together. This relational distance impinges itself upon the shared property making it unwieldy to sell or activate for redevelopment through construction, as and when this is the goal. The effect is the criss-crossing of property with the many values that inheritors attribute to it, which amount to their disparate intentions, experiences and needs. Meanwhile, a sale and renewal requires that a single value is agreed upon, hence the salience of efforts to consolidate multiple inheritor’s intentions, under a single voice through legal procedures such as “power of attorney,” that may expedite the process while circumventing inheritance codes altogether. As I mentioned in the previous section, the offices of public notaries and law firms are abustle preparing the formalities

that this intervention and avoidance of the “headache” of co-ownership requires. This is not to mention the instances where particular family representatives symbolically sell property to those whom they consider their own, to the exclusion of others who may be legally entitled to inherit. What is of relevance here is the precision and high stakes involved in acting upon co-owned property by deploying legal, bureaucratic and material artefacts in order to legitimise the transfer of value to particular members (not others) toward a particular end (and not another). While the “impracticality” of partible inheritance, such as prescribed by Islamic law for instance, is as much a rural concern as it is an urban one (Mundy 1988: 3), the familial tension in the urban context such as Beirut, is heightened by the centrality of real estate in Beirut’s economy (Marot 2014, Tierney 2015), the scarcity of land, density of urbanisation, rapid rise in prices, a housing crisis, that renders more fierce the competition over available and affordable dwelling.

As such, how the one (man), whether jointly or self-appointed, actually takes charge of a co-owned property sale or investment within the family, is a contentious matter. Although some of my interlocutors, particularly those who had no will or stake to contest this power, attempted to relay to me the impression that their family acts as a “united front” and that the power invested in their representative is “unanimous,” the fissures and conflicts always managed to surface, through hearsay or fleeting comments. This was the case with a second prescript on co-inheritance and consolidating disparate decision I encountered, and which flies in the face of the prescript to avoid the “headache” of co-ownership by any means. “My father always told us, ‘Whatever you do, never give anybody power of attorney over your property shares,’” said Hiba Muallim, a member of an upper middle class family whose large villa was sold while several of its inheritors were living abroad having fled the Civil War. Hiba’s sense today, after land prices where the villa still stands increased exponentially, and given her own struggles to make ends meet today, is that the close relative, whose identity was kept secret from me, sold for much too little and did not distribute the profits fairly. Meanwhile, her younger sister, who married more wealthy and in a relatively more stable life in the Gulf, has no regrets about the sale. In this regard, Herzfeld’s link between kinship and bureaucracy holds very true:

"Kinship is like any moral system, in which formalisation of the rules is precisely what makes their transgression especially easy for those willing and able to dissemble. Bureaucracy... operates in much the same way. When

bureaucracy meets kinship and adopts it as an identifying device... there are vast possibilities for creative interpretation, especially because this particular zone of cultural intimacy - here in the form of complicity between the authorities and those over whom they exercise power - is relatively immune to inspection" (Herzfeld 2007: 321).

While my interactions with Abu Amir gave insights into the solitary preoccupations of one with power of attorney, the Ridas' revealed more about the dialectics of this power, namely the persons who might be at the receiving end of that domination; men as well as women, and myself included momentarily. The following section goes into more depth in that direction.

### DEFERRING TO PATRIARCHAL POWER

Where one man takes power of attorney over a shared property within a kinship group, capitalising on established gender norms and bureaucracies, women are among the more dependent and marginalised persons in the tales on dividing co-inherited property. After looking at the mechanisms and imperatives of consolidating power and value around the decision of representative patriarchs in a family, here I turn to the brunt of such univocality, namely the way women and other vulnerable dependents experience this relationship. The main story here involves one older male member of an agnatic group taking charge of a co-owned property, including the violent coercion and exclusion of some of his siblings, both from the decision-making process and from some shares of the property itself, as relayed mainly from the position of his sister-in-law who inhabits the shared property in question, but also substantiated in neighbourhood gossip. The accumulation of documents and social status that I witnessed with Abu Amir and Maher, meets its match in other forms of symbolic coalescence around patriarchal power, namely the hoarding of personal titles as well as the over use (or abuse) of such powers I saw with Yusif. This section attends more thoroughly to those who are made to defer to such powers, those who despite their wish for urban renewal to be expedited, do not control the terms of such expedition nor are guaranteed a fair share in its benefits. Moreover, their deliberations and their narrations are the property of this power regime, as became clear when my attempts to get an interview with Dana separately from Yusif proved characteristically unsuccessful, despite our spontaneous gravitation toward conversation during our first encounter. Whenever I called, Yusif repeatedly censored her



from me volunteering that, “Between taking care of the house here and the four villas we’re building in the mountains, she’s far too busy.” My impression was supplemented by an array of rumours, which my other female interlocutors and long-time neighbours of the Ridas told with passionate indignation about “the sheikh.” They said that he once beat up another younger brother of his (not Majid) “who is mentally disabled” in the middle of the street, over inheritance. Rumour also had it that he applied his influence at an Islamic charitable organisation to withdraw financial assistance to one paraplegic man, after the man’s wife rejected his advances at her. Clearly his domination, privileged firmly in patriarchal norms but built around cultural capital acquired through higher education, professional positions, religious authority, the hoarding of self-proclaimed clout and through the performance of intimidation, was put to use for various personal goals of which property management is one.

The old family house in Basta is but one of Yusif’s sites of interest as he claims to have bought a villa each for his four daughters in the mountain town of Hamana. But for his adulating (or fearful, but certainly indebted) younger brother, Majid, who struggles to make ends meet working part-time at a news agency, it is the only significant material possession, inherited from their mother’s line. Yusif and Majid are interested to sell and renew, but they are delayed by a court case against one of the shopkeepers on rent control in the lower arcades of the house. The man is demanding ownership of shop space in any new development, as compensation for breaching contract, but they refused this demand. For Majid’s wife Zina, the place doesn’t only appear uninhabitable, it is in fact uninhabitable to her and she cannot wait for the brothers to come to an agreement and sell it. Beyond the heavy burden of caring and repairing the place endlessly to maintain a modicum of comfort and hygiene within its walls, the fact that her residence is jointly owned by her husband and his other siblings makes Zina feel that she is not at home. On the brief occasion that I was “allowed” to sit and talk with her alone, she could not understand what I wanted with her, since she claimed to have no ownership in the house, and by extension no right to speak about it. “This is their house,” she said, “You should ask them about it” (which I already had). “And I don’t get involved in their business, because they talk a lot in their family. They never stop talking. I’m not like them. That is why I don’t say anything any more.” “Talking” here implies promising without delivering, but also an authoritative voicing that shuns listening and drowns out other voices. In either case, it is a monopoly on the will to act without the promise of materialised action.

Zina and the sheikh occupy two distinct positions in the structure of inheritance distribution as scripted in Shari'a law, in patriarchal practice and as experienced within the context of ownership of property that is poised for renewal in Beirut. As the wife of a co-inheritor, she would be entitled to one eighth of Majid's share should he pass away before her, while her son and daughter would receive two thirds and one third of the remainder, respectively. Zina's desire to move to a house that is her own and "proper" (newer, doesn't leak, and "looks clean when you clean it") are postponed since the sheikh being wealthier than his younger brother, can afford to wait for land prices to rise. The sheikh, who is also a judge in a position to expedite a court case, can afford to procrastinate because waiting will speculate the price of the land and he can hope to make more from it then. Meanwhile, Majid feels indebted to him, at least for having subsidised the cost of minimal maintenance of the house and perhaps also other support. At least by that debt, Majid defers to Yusif's decision about the moment to resolve complications around the house and on what terms to sell it. "My brother is taking care of it. We are seeing what to do with the house but there is nothing certain now," he told me repeatedly, along with tales of scrutinising interested developers, much like Abu Amir did. The extra-judicial arrangements of inheritance, discrepant material circumstances between Majid and Yusif, and the power relations at play between them, represent the "social 'acts'" that outweigh the "natural 'facts'" of kinship that ultimately inform inheritance sharing (Lambek 2011: 5). Inscribed within subtle though consistent hints of brute force and intimidation, Zina is stuck in the sheikh's self-proclaimed authority, and the temporality that it imposes on her everyday life, of dirt that can never be cleaned and a binding abrasiveness and intrusion that does not go away. Technically, she is also living under his roof and her affect, of sudden silence and intimidation, at the moment when he intruded upon our visitation revealed a violence in the relationship, which she seemed unable or unwilling to articulate, especially when he entered the kitchen.

Before he came in, however, my conversation with Zina passed through one of those politico-ethical interludes that are so typical of Lebanese conversation between relative strangers, about the miserable state of the country, its despicable politics and poor economy, strung in a single breath with a lament over the loss of morality and growing disrespect between neighbours and kin. After which came Zina avowed: "There's a lot of injustice these days... if some women are oppressed by their own husbands and brothers oppress their brothers... They say that's a sign of the end of the world, when a brother beats his brother for inheritance." She looked keenly at me to see

if I appreciated the subtlety of her divulgence. I could tell she was no longer talking about society at large but a familiar incident, even though she made no specific reference to her own household or family. It did not matter that she would not say anymore; I suspected that she *could* not say anymore. But she had said enough, confirming neighbours' rumours as well. A strong sense of coercion hung in the air as it had at Yusif's house. My impression was confirmed when this latter suddenly made an unannounced knock at the kitchen door, no doubt tipped off by Majid who knew I was alone in Zina's company and felt uneasy about it. That the sheikh lived so close by meant he could come and go to the house as he pleased, with or without Zina's preparedness, except for the necessary time it took her to put on her veil. It is his house after all. Zina opened the door for him and went mum as soon as he entered and for the rest of my visit with her.

Rewind back to before sheikh Yusif entered, when Zina, Majid and I were in the kitchen together. During that conversation, Zina expressed disdain for Majid's views in politics and gender, and an unabashed disrespect for him generally.<sup>30</sup> During our meeting in the kitchen, for example, and before Majid made his exit, he kept hovering over us, procrastinating his departure to the market to buy Zina tomatoes for the salad for lunch, and to his work. She kept reminding him of the tomatoes while he kept trying to open up topics of conversation with me that were disproportionately large for the time he had, such as his education in the English language from childhood until now and his regret that he had not learnt it better. "From lack of practice, I didn't master the language," he intoned, to which Zina retorted mockingly without looking up from her cooking, "And from lack of tomatoes, you're not going to have any salad!" I struggled to hold back my laughter, but it became easier when Majid turned to the subject of the new law amendment that was under debate in parliament at the time, to increase penalties on men who abused their wives and other female kin during domestic violence. He proceeded on a rant that entailed a good dose of self-contradiction and a misunderstanding of the civic nature of the law, namely that it lies outside Lebanese personal status law for instance, which derives from religious jurisprudence. He said he opposed the law's amendment because it privileged Western conceptions of women's morality not Muslim Arab ones, which did a better job at preserving women's rights. He

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<sup>30</sup> Majid's views slotted neatly into the Sunni Muslim Beirut rhetoric that criticises - particularly after Hariri's assassination - the Syrian regime and its Shi'ite extension in Lebanon, mainly Hizbollah, and justifies the rise of the militant Islamic resistance to it. See Appendix 1 for more historical context.

argued that it sought to protect women “who did not deserve protection” and to soil the reputation of Islam, adding that “even Christians abuse their women,” and that I ought to use my position as researcher in the West to publicly correct this misperception. Having cultivated a calibrated channel of debate with Majid over the course of our repeated encounters, I allowed myself to disagree with him and say that I thought the civic law was trying to curb a prevalent social problem, which put him on his guard, seemingly raising his suspicion of me and my research intentions. Meanwhile, Zina interjected curtly that the law is a separate issue from the reputation of Islam’s treatment of women. “Women in the West envy us because Islam supports women,” she said, adding, “A Western research once studied Saudi Arabia and the Arab world, and the first statement she made about her findings was that Muslim women are well respected in their homes and in their domains.”

When Majid started on the topic of the “importance of culture and civilisation,” Zina reminded him again of the tomatoes, and I decided to nod politely and peel my attention away from him in my intent to settle down with her, un-chaperoned. It seemed to me that he was trying hard to linger on and dissuade my conversation with Zina. Later on, Yusif too tried to discuss the new law against domestic violence with me - was that a coincidence? Aside from being in the news during that period, why did the congregation of two women in conversation alone inspire the necessity to refute a law against violence against women? Did being a female researcher studying in a Western university make me threatening? Were they afraid of what she might reveal to me about their power dynamics or prompt her to rethink the uneven inheritance distribution in their family? “If a woman leaves the house for two weeks and doesn’t tell her family where she is or when she’s coming back, upon her return, do her brothers and father and uncles not have a right to raise their voices? Is that violence?!” he asks me patronisingly as an examiner would. Taking strength from Zina’s previous retort on the law, I answered as vaguely as possible, “Well, that’s not what I think the law is trying to tackle.” Of course I had no idea who that hypothetical woman in his question was and my discomfort with the sheikh prevented me from probing. To a great extent, his presence worked to intimidate me too. Nevertheless, I accompanied him on a tour of the abandoned annex of the house, whose contents I discuss further on. Upon returning to the kitchen, it dawned on me that there was no chance I would be left to talk with Zina alone. Then her son arrived from college for a quick bite before his afternoon activities, and she got too busy to converse with me, setting his table, dishing out food, hurrying to

finish the salad that was delayed partly by late tomatoes partly my presence in her kitchen. Meanwhile, having no intention of remaining a hostage to Yusif's monologue, I got up to go. As she accompanied me to the front door to say goodbye, we had a moment alone when she quietly said, "So... I think you get the picture now," which I understood as a summary of her situation as much as her advice - her wish perhaps - that I abandon the futile attempt to meet with her alone again.

Zina's sarcastic disdain toward her husband, a man who embodies the link of dependency to her brother-in-laws, and whom she considers inefficient and somewhat emasculate by dominant gender norms of financial prosperity and job stability, reveals the complicated nature of patriarchy and the tensions of intimate domestic life. Her simultaneous deference to her brother-in-law, a man who acts as the man of the house and wields power over her family's dwelling arrangements, reveals the ambivalence in kinship relations. Though she is attached through marriage to this patriline, in a moment of frustration she dissociates herself from "them" ("I am not like them" "You should talk to them" "They talk too much") performing her marginality in decisions over her own living space, meanwhile seeming to *decide* to draw a boundary between herself and them. By law, and if the letter of Islamic law of inheritance is being applied here, she is excluded from any ownership rights to the house unless she is widowed - and this unless other manipulations or arrangements of transference between siblings were put into effect, which I suspect they were when brother beat brother over inheritance in the street. The circumstances under which Zina might have confided more in me did not present themselves and although she might disavow the apocalyptic "injustice" that goes on in families, she does not necessarily recognise these as patriarchal per se, even if she begrudges her intertwinement in the debt and duty of family life.

## THE AMBIVALENCE OF KINSHIP

During fieldwork, I frequently heard the idiom *al-aqarib 'aqarib wal-jar hasud*, which means literally "relatives are scorpions and neighbours are envious," *'aqarib* specifically denoting "those who are close." In Muslim folklore, ancient as well as new, the scorpion is an ambivalent creature along with the hyena, reptiles, and some insects. The scorpion is generally associated with deceit, or that which stings unexpectedly, unannounced. Interlocutors used it while discussing conflict over bad reciprocity with

kin or someone abusing or taking for granted their material generosity or emotional labour. They also used it to signal that familial support and compassion can run dry and go cold unexpectedly and without due justification. In all cases, more attention was given to the first half of the idiom, emphasising the paradox of closeness and harm, relatedness and pain. The second and secondary half of the idiom attests to the envious gaze of ones who may be distant in kinship terms but spatially proximate. This latter is able to hear and see things on a daily basis, but is erstwhile not privy to nor directly affected by the most intimate details of the ambivalent oscillations of kinship. For instance, watching from afar as a neighbour arrives in a new car but not knowing what conflict went into acquiring it may draw such uninformed envious gaze. In either of its two parts, that on relatives or that on neighbours, *al-aqarib 'aqarib wal-jar hasud* sets the affective tone of proximate dwelling, to a misanthropic and suspicious timbre, which chimes well with the affective timbre of urban environments I discussed in the Introduction, in this chapter and in thesis overall.

While not all my interlocutors used the idiom, I believe many would readily subscribe to it. Abu Amir and Sheikh Yusif appeared to act on the grounds that it may well be true, as the former ensured he knew all the neighbours who surrounded him and held fast to his place as spokesperson for his siblings, while waiting cautiously for the deal that would grant him and his children more security in the future. The latter rushed to keep watch over (indeed censor) the encounter between a researcher and his wife and sister-in-law, lest the former, from her embittered place, should divulge any of the secrets of simultaneous care (dependence) and harm (exclusion) that binds them to him, may be even challenging it. Meanwhile, remorseful and doubtful that her childhood home was sold too cheap, its profits not shared honestly, Hiba Muallim wished she had heeded her late father's advice not to give anyone power of attorney over her inheritance share. As we saw in the previous two sections, the one who holds power of attorney is thus positioned to make claims and take actions on inheritance that reflects his (for it is usually his) interests, or his judgement about family interest, according to calculations that combine material and moral considerations, which may or may not be shared but are possible to impose juridically, financially, socially and emotionally. If such a position is at one end of the spectrum of privilege, at the other is the position of unmarried women, especially where female disinheritance is upheld. With this final ethnographic snippet, I share the circumstance of Katia Hajjar, who exemplifies this position, used this idiom frequently, and whose marginality reveals the emotional if somewhat performative

poignancy that ambivalence in kinship can produce.

Katia Hajjar is unmarried in her 60s, works in domestic labour, has two sisters in the diaspora, and lives alone in a 30-metre-square single-room studio neighbouring the Ridas, which her brother rents for her while residing in another neighbourhood.<sup>31</sup> When I asked her about her inheritance, she answered, “Amongst us (*indna*), girls don’t inherit,” indexing her rural Kurdish origins, but which she would be more inclined to identify as “Turkish,” to dodge the stigmas of the Kurdish identity that is typical of urban middle and upper class slurs. Meanwhile, she also recounted that when her brother inherited from their father in Turkey, he bought a flat and registered it in her name to encourage her betrothal, as a woman with a house of her own is more marriageable than one without. But then her brother’s wife got cancer and Katia sold her flat to help cover the costs of treatment, having surpassed the normative age of marriage. Although she received several suitors in her youth, Katia says she never married to stay beside her ill mother, but I also knew that she was deeply in love with a married man for more than a decade, even while I met her. Although she is illiterate, Katia has memorised and recites parts of the Quran and popular sayings during our conversations, to add punch, credibility or embellishment to her views about the demise of the world and advice to me in my own dealings with its many trappings. One of her favourite sayings was indeed, “*Al-aqarib ‘aqarib...*,” which she incanted with unrelenting bitterness and dropped the second half entirely. Her biggest grievance, her deepest grief – in her own words “my heart is bleeding” – was her feeling that her siblings have abandoned, disowned her and given her the cold shoulder. During the long hours I spent with Katia, her most recurring topic of conversation, similar to the one I had with Zina, was that the world had lost its values, people their morality, and life its meaning. “Hearts have hardened, Samar! There is no more honesty, no more honour! If a woman doesn’t look at her own sister in need... Just the other day they had a woman on television defending her job as a prostitute...” Her commentary on the demise of contemporary Lebanese society and its affective abrasiveness, characteristically linked to the (dis)honour of women, are culled in a single run-on sentence from personal experience and the display of others’ scandalous lives in public spectacle.

Her sisters who were married and live in Germany, where their husbands run car

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<sup>31</sup> A more extensive background of the Hajjar family comes in Chapter Four, within the discussion on nostalgia.

dealerships and other business, are “on top of the heap,” unlike herself she insinuated without needing to. That she never married makes her brother responsible for her maintenance, although he struggles financially himself, having raised his three sons as a single parent and put his them through higher education. She sensed his grudge against her in the curt and infrequent visits he made to pay her stipend, never asking how she was, never staying too long. Meanwhile, Katia supplements her income from working as a cook and housekeeper, on a freelance and part-time basis, and this with numerous interruptions due to chronic physical and psychological ailments. She believed her siblings blamed her for her own destitution, for refusing offers of marriage from elderly male relatives, for not keeping their houses while they were away and upon their return - in a word, for not cowing down to their demands. Meanwhile, she reproached them for not giving her more regular and generous financial and moral support, as her physical and mental health grew frailer and her lonely isolation more intense. She faulted them for not showing her the gratitude and respect she felt she earned by caring for their ill mother till her dying day, for looking after them and their children when they were small. Feeling trapped and humiliated in her financial dependency upon kin, coupled with her sense of failure in love and before the social imperative of marriage and reproduction, Katia accumulated an unwieldy debt from her local pharmacist, for the cocktail of sedatives she regularly prescribes herself to get through unhappy days and sleepless nights.

Speaking from the rural Palestinian context, Moors claims that when it comes to women’s inheritance, the standard equation of power to property - that the more access you have to land the more power you gain - needs to be refined to include the case of when sisters give up their land inheritance to their brothers, in order to strengthen their brothers’ obligations to support them on the longer term, in the form of maintenance (Moors 1994: 69). Yet, in my field context, among lower-income urban residents, I would argue that the heightened abrasiveness and contention within families makes that axis of sibling support, idealised though it may be in Islamic tradition, less reliable in practice as a moral framework, and therefore also less available as a source of material security for sisters. Where it may be available within conditions of scarce resources, as Katia’s case showed, the moral cost of being dependent, is extremely high. The stigma of remaining unmarried and refusing convenient marital arrangements to lessen the burden on agnatic kin, renders the counter-intuitive assurances of female disinheritance a source of affective ambivalence.



In this chapter, the relevance of ambivalence - “the simultaneous experience of powerful, contradictory emotions or attitudes toward a single phenomenon” - has manifold sites of occurrence (Peletz 2001: 413). More specifically, however, I used ambivalence to think about the ways value, both material and moral, intersect in the experience of inheritance issues, and are fashioned in broader political and economic processes. Firstly, it is not just the opportune backdrop of this discussion that the physical space of the house is where kinship relations are actually “made,” where they are practiced daily, laboured over and reproduced (Bahloul 1996, Carsten 2004: 35). Rather, as Carsten argues:

“The learning of social distinctions within the house is clearly not just a process with domestic significance; it has an inherently political import. The naturalisation of hierarchy is thus one theme that connects domestic kinship to the world outside the house. Although much work remains to be done on these connections, houses are inevitably part of wider historical processes, linking domestic kinship with other political and economic structures” (Carsten 2004: 35).

So, having focused in this chapter on kinship relations, and on the ambivalence of sentiment and disputes and so on, it was to emphasise their connection to the broader conditions of dwelling in Beirut and to recognise that the social and affective relations within and around the decaying house extend beyond their walls. I am therefore not engaging in a discussion about the transformation of kinship relations generally, so much as focusing on the quality of ambivalence in kinship that institutionalises particular forms of deliberation around dwelling and produces the neglect that decaying houses come to embody. One prevalent manifestation of this is that “the inheritors could not agree” has become standard response on the street as the reason a dilapidated house still stands in Beirut. Such response signals, as I mentioned earlier, that while familial disagreement over property is common where partible inheritance systems and codes apply (such as Islamic ones but not only), tension is heightened when economic and social development are driven by the neoliberal real estate market and the building sector has taken centre-stage, while housing insecurity rises from gentrification. The transformation of several properties in Beirut therefore relied on inheritors arriving at a single decision, a univalent position and price, in order for a sale and renewal to come about.

I want, therefore, to posit a link between the ambivalence of sentiment - someone

feeling simultaneously opposing feelings like love and hate, attraction and repulsion, toward someone or something, which Freud found repeatedly in his practice - that defines kinship relations, and the ambivalence associated with diverging stakes in and discord over shared property (Freud 1919: 347). One is tempted to say that the word multivalence would do better justice to the spectrum of views and valences that exist, but ambivalence captures this meaning, even as the divergent positions often come in opposing dyads that are well expressed in the chosen term: one wants to sell, the other doesn't; one sets the property at one value, the other sets it at another; one wants to sell to strangers from outside the family, the other wishes only to sell to family members, and so on. I want for a moment to take literally the "valence" (strength, worth or value), in the terms "ambivalence" and "univalence" to emphasise the connotation of both material and moral/affective value. In that sense, if a co-inheriting group agrees (or its members are made to agree!) they all should sell a particular house, then in principle they are agreeing to transform (translate in a way) the house from its use value to its exchange value. This requires a levelling of disparate and fragmented experiences of the house, or at least a compromise between the various urgencies and time frames people have for its profit, a sort of formatting of the social, temporal and affective entanglements in it to the *univalent* needs of immediate market circulation and optimal profit. If the group wants to sell but still cannot agree, the dimension of pricing, or *evaluating*, the property and what the house is *worth* enter the equation, but not without intricate social and affective entailments here as well. Invariably, my interlocutors have begun to factor into the property evaluation the various forms of emotional and material labour they or others have invested in shared property as well as relationships, which produce debts, dependencies and expectations couched in norms – and indeed myths and ideals - of kinship as the site of support and protection.

Clarke discusses "closeness" in Lebanese kinship in the way it figures in Islamic law as an aspired social value, and one that sets Lebanese society higher than "the West" in practical and moral rhetorical terms, according to local ideology, which we saw in Zina's expression earlier (Clarke 2007: 386). But he also signals repetitively to the "ambivalence" of this closeness. This stems not just from the frequent discrepancy between ideology and practice, including the exceptions and adjustments to scripted religious or moral codes that every day living and other economic and political realities require (such as globalisation which defies physical proximity for instance). Rather, Clarke is using ambivalence to argue that these adjustments relativise "closeness," which

is a matter of degrees of closeness and strangeness.<sup>32</sup> From within the Muslim imperative to protect and support other kin including compassionately and financially if need be, and from a prescript regarded rhetorically as Middle Eastern, of (male) kin taking responsibility for the morality of other (female) kin's behaviour, "closeness" is ambivalent also because it causes claustrophobia and gives rise to inter-familial gossip, another source of familial contention (Clarke 2007: 387, 393). Another example of kinship ambivalence appears in Obeid's work on brother-sister and maternal uncle-nephew relations in the rural town of Aarsal (2017). Her ethnography identifies that ambivalence in the failed expectations of care and reliability, and the simultaneous sense of entrapment that ensues because strong moral imperatives prevent kinship relations from being breached when there is conflict.

Anthropological accounts that recognise ambivalent sentiments between kin have become more salient in the past three decades of kinship studies, following a reluctance or inability to integrate analysis of data depicting the phenomenon in earlier scholarship (Peletz 2001: 420, 422). The analytical prominence of this ambivalence has sometimes revealed the outright breakdown of kinship relations, or "anti-kinship" (Lambek 2013). Meanwhile, such analysis generally engages with the transformation of kinship as a classic anthropological topic of interest or social theory, complicating kinship ideals of compassion and cooperation, and recognising that kinship is often about processes that exceed its norms and categories (Carsten 2004, Herzfeld 2007, Miller 2007: 536). At one point in his article on ambivalence and kinship, Peletz reflects on Hochschild's implicit claim that "capitalism inflames or drives a wedge in most if not all types of kinship ties" (Peletz 2001: 428). Speaking of ambivalence in Balinese and Malay kinship relations, where like the stratification found in Lebanon, there can be huge variations and multiple mobilities in class and status within a single family, vulnerability arises "from the hundreds if not thousands of big and little brothers and sisters peopling their kinship and social universe(s) - good numbers of whom are assumed to be deploying the social and cultural resources at their disposal in order to enhance (or at least maintain) their own status and prestige while simultaneously undercutting the status and prestige claims of others" (Peletz 2001: 431).

Amid a co-owning class that exists in precarious socio-economic conditions,

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<sup>32</sup> This is based on the strict Muslim recognition of kinship through marriage and marriageability, and of linguistic categories in Islamic law and cultural rhetoric, but which get variegated in *ijtihad* (Islamic exegesis) or indeed practical and customary adjustments.

stalling a sale or manipulating inheritance codes are all some of the strategies intended to capitalise on inherited real estate, in order to prolong dwelling in the city or acquire cash that will yield some security. Where the stakes are highest and the inheritors disparately competing over them, the abrasiveness of kinship relations intensifies but often gives way to existing patriarchal structures of monopoly, amid rising intra-familial suspicion and sometimes-violent exclusion of the most vulnerable kin. These include women but also the mentally and physically infirm, as well as those who unwittingly trust institutionalised modes of inheritance management and distribution, rather than actively engaging in strategies to fend for their shares amid rising opportunism. It also includes dependent kin, who indebted to powerful relatives are convinced or strong-armed to make concessions. In this final section, I have shown that existing idioms on kinship ambivalence, as well as contradictory advice about what power formations to summon in order to negotiate the fraught line between expediting inheritance division and safeguarding ones entitlements therein, are the characteristic of landowners' deliberations over their decaying homes in Beirut. Finally, Katia's situation provided perspective on the effects of total disinheritance and dependency, and the affective texture of relations of simultaneous care and harm, which stem from the moral and material conditions of some of the most marginalised dwellers of the city.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed the ways in which co-inheriting kin deliberate over inheritance, and what mechanisms and hierarchies of power, as well as sentiments emerge from efforts to optimise benefit from the renewal of co-owned property. I showed that some of the most idealised moral frameworks, such as Shari'a law and the expectations of inter-familial solidarity and support, may be sacrificed and manipulated toward this end, particularly where a larger pool of inheritors must compete over a single plot of land as scarce resource. This chapter also entailed an analysis of the ways that relations between co-inheriting kin are manipulated to ensure the smooth exchange of property, which the neoliberal building regime in Beirut requires to perpetuate renewal. Given the prospect of such renewal looming heavy over most ageing properties, this chapter has showed how owners grapple with or weighing out the stakes of selling and/or redeveloping, given the chance and when a desirable offer comes along. I have outlined

the way that absences and fragmentary inheritance laws that give people with diverse priorities stakes in the fate of a single decaying property, expedites the properties decay. I have focused more specifically on how diverging socio-economic conditions and conflicting aspirations also contribute to eroding both the material and moral ties around the house and the family. Such an analysis harks back to Levi-Strauss's definition of "house society" as that which privileges inheritance as an institution because it is based on decent rather than alliance. "The house," he writes, "is an illusory objectification of the unstable relation of alliance to which it lends solidity" (Levi-Strauss 1987: 155 cited in Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995: 6). Leaving aside the debate over whether "house society" is a useful category to think through, such a remark captures the importance of moral and affective relations in shaping the material condition and fate of a house, which resonates with this chapter's claims.

The four ethnographic cases tried to capture the diversity within families in notions of time, material and moral value, calculations of reciprocity, which shared inheritance of land and family life occasions. Particularly, this ethnographic material shows the way that various intra-familial discrepancies of power, wealth and stability, produce various senses of urgency, despair and remorse. These senses are accentuated in kinship struggles and contests, and played out through prolonged relations of harm and care. Such ambivalence is distilled into popular idioms that counsel prudence of – sometimes paranoia over – kin and kinship entanglements when shared possessions are involved. This sets co-inherited decaying spaces and the perceptions of their potential renewal to an ambivalent affective timbre. I show that the mechanisms at the disposal of those who can tap them include the monopoly of power through bureaucratic procedures such as power of attorney and hoarding of documents and titles, secret arrangements that bypass inheritance prescripts as well as brute force and intimidation that impose deference. I argue that these mechanism rely on as well as reaffirm, existing patriarchal domination. Building on literature about inheritance and the abrasiveness of kinship relations, I show how the intricacies of such domination, insinuates the ambivalent nature of kinship relations in their simultaneous aspect of care and harm (Clarke 2007, Gilsenan 2011, Herzfeld 2007, Lambek 2011). What emerges are instances of family members (mainly men) monopolising power over the fate of a shared property, and the potential for unequal division of inheritance, including total disinheritance, of women in particular, but also other vulnerable or dependent members of the family.

Assuming as backdrop the fierce competition over ever-scarcer land and the logic of growth that fuels it, I also propose that the neoliberal urban regime seeks to discipline otherwise disparate - or ambivalent - aspirations of co-inheritors. It does so in order to align - indeed render “univalent” - their practices in the service of renewal as a teleological end. As I elaborated in the thesis Introduction, by teleology, I am referring to the sense and expectation, which subsumes decaying houses under a seemingly inevitable cycle of renewal, transforming them from homes to objects of exchange for optimal profit. The various laws, policies, practices and discourses, which facilitate this inevitability and which I have grouped under the concept “institutionalised neglect” must here be joined by the institution of inheritance. The de facto inclusion of multiple inheritors, here specifically under Islamic inheritance law, is implicated in the neglect of houses because of how families outgrow old houses and disperse, making homes elsewhere. That non-resident inheritors continue to have stakes in these houses without aspiring to dwell in them, draws in a slew of conflicting positionalities and priorities into the fates of the ageing properties, further complicating their perpetuation as homes. Such fragmentation is fertile ground for renewal, even if the process alleging inheritors’ actions to achieve the necessary “univalence” may be complicated, if less so with recourse to patriarchal domination and other strategic manipulations.

## CHAPTER TWO

CLEANING REAL ESTATE AND THE HIERARCHY  
OF VALUE

**Figure 10:** White Building, Basta.

## INTRODUCTION

Um Ali and I crossed Khalid Street from their flat in the Sidani Building where she lived with her daughter Suhayla, to her ground-floor flat in the White Building, where she had raised her large family with her now deceased husband for over half a century (Figure 10).<sup>33</sup> She pushed the garden gate open and then the front door - both were unlocked. Aside from the living-room, furnished for formal occasions, there was one bedroom, one sitting room with a television, and a minuscule kitchen and bathroom to one side of a corridor that lead to the single bedroom, in the confined area of 50 metres-square. The mouldy stench grew stronger as we passed through the corridor to the bedroom, which was empty except for a single bed and a mattress on the bare floor. A strong smell of rotting fish was coming from the aluminium windowsill where garbage has visibly collected from the outside. A displeased Um Ali began to rant about the migrant workers who the owners had brought in to live on the upper floors above her flat, while they deliberated over the eventual demolition of the building for renewal. "He put the Bangladesh here to push us out," she complained. "Their spit lands on my guava tree when they brush their teeth and spit out of the windows. The whole street used to eat from our trees... and now the spit on my jasmine bush... and everyone used to eat from the fig tree as well." The fridge in the family room was running but empty except for a bag of dried beans. Suhayla had it cleaned recently after it turned black with mould when the upstairs neighbours - "probably with instructions from the owners" - disconnected the electricity from the flat again to torment Um Ali. The kitchen light was left on when we entered and Um Ali left it on as we exited, a sign to any curious tattle-telling neighbour or the suspicious landlords themselves, which Um Ali and Suhayla still inhabit the flat even though they no longer really did because of the mould. Should the landlords be able to prove that Um Ali and Suhayla spent most of their time in their Sidani flat, he would deprive them of compensation for severing their rent control lease. "I haven't been to the house since I returned from the South seven months ago, imagine! Because of the stench. [The owner] wants us to go of our own accord but I won't go, so long as I'm alive!" Um Ali pointed a finger to the sky in defiance, showing zeal uncharacteristic of this sullen and unusually tall woman.

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<sup>33</sup> Ethnography in several chapters unfolds in this White Building, an early 20th century Art-Nouveau style four-floor building with two spacious flats per floor - except where flats were split in two - and a large staircase without elevator.



In this chapter I look at the ways that various interlocutors use notions of cleanliness and dirtiness in key sites of intervention on and contest over urban space, in order to understanding how ideas about who deserves to dwell in Beirut and how this worthiness is socially constructed. I was initially inspired by the idiom “sweet and clean real estate” (*‘iqar nadhif zarif*), which landlords and real estate professionals use to mean property this is rid of all obstacles in the way of its renewal and redevelopment. In my observation of its various usages, *‘iqar nathif zarif* is a property in an optimal legal, bureaucratic and social condition for transformation from a dwelling place (with all the idiosyncrasies of multiple ownership and formalities left unattended to over the years of civil conflict), to becoming a financial investment, for subsequent use or for pure speculation. Taking as starting point the ethnographic association between cleanliness and urban renewal, this chapter further explores interlocutors’ notions of the “good” neighbour and neighbourhood, the “decent” resident of a building and who is entitled to be a Beirut dweller. I ground these perceptions in the various structural dispositions and strategies of the people who voice them (Bourdieu 1977). Variegated and contestable as these expressions may be, they come to constitute powerful clichés that congeal and travel between multiple subject positions, insinuating themselves rather more into discourse about spatial politics than its necessary outcomes. Pronouncements that echo moral distinctions implying cleanliness and dirt, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, constitute a wobbly hierarchy where the bodies and lives and material arrangements of particular urban dwellers are valued over others’ according to race, class, religious affiliation and national identity.

The various obstacles to “cleaning” a property include inheritors’ disputes resulting in the reluctance of some to approve a sale for renewal, as I discussed in the previous chapter. They also include heritage listings placed on an old structure that significantly reduces the property’s selling price because it prevents developers from building anew (Appendix 2). It can consist of formalities such as unpaid taxes and utility bills, or informal structures built without permits or lacking parts of their procedures, whose payment or removal owners and developers have to negotiate in the process of acquiring and cleaning property. While these technical obstacles lie somewhat outside my ethnographic inquiry, they crop up briefly in Chapter Five on Mansion, in relation not to renewal but on the contrary in the effort to prolong comfortable dwelling in the old house. Finally, one of the most contentious implications of “cleaning” real estate has been evicting tenants on rent control from a property that is slated for renewal, which

usually entails lengthy negotiations until monetary compensation paid from the owners to the tenants is agreed on.

This chapter's ethnographic focus is firstly, a standoff in Khalid Street in Basta neighbourhood between a tenant on rent control in a dilapidated building and the building's recent owners who want to vacate and renew the property. This is simultaneously an owner-owner competition because the tenants are also propertied in other places on the street and in the city. These latter are, however, reluctant to give up their rented flat because of attachment to it and its convenient location. Here the contest is on the scale of the individual property, between two families who are of similar religious background and socio-economic trajectories. This complements scholarly representation of conflict over property in Beirut as an essential extension of inter-sectarian relations, to allow for analysis that integrates class and cultural distinction as well. Cleaning as a metaphor of class and sect-based spatial exclusion and symbolic violence, are substantiated in historical, practical and discursive processes, while dirt for its part takes on material, moral and bodily dimensions in the present ethnography. I situate the widespread perception of Basta's present social and cultural degradation in ethnography about Christian bourgeois inhabitants' displacement out of the neighbourhood under the threat of Civil War, and the socio-economic mobilities (both upward and downward) of Muslim inhabitants who remained. Through analysis of a collection of pronouncements about notions of "rightful" and "impostor" presence in the city, I reveal the distinction between new and old money. Finally, drawing into the analysis the perceptions of small independent real estate brokers who practice (and advocate) "cleaning real estate," I show the imbrication of such metaphors in the moral and material mechanisms of urban renewal.

My chapter draws on some aspects of Mary Douglas' theory of dirt and purity, to understand how people and their various modes of dwelling and appropriation are culturally and materially valued (1966). I seek to refine this binary approach, however, with recourse to Michael Herzfeld's model of "global hierarchy of value," which he paints as a concentric form of evaluation that iterates between localities and global power dynamics (1994). My chapter argues firstly, that the distinction implied by clean real estate privileges ownership over tenancy in general, and as second tier status informal/impermanent tenancy over contractual old rent tenancy, in so far as this impermanence and indeed fragility is instrumental for eventual real estate cleaning. Secondly, it reveals persistent vestiges of a Western imperial hierarchy of bodies, placing

white foreigners and Christians at its zenith and dark-skinned migrant workers and war refugees at its nadir. Thirdly, it distinguishes between “clean” and “dirty” money as corresponding loosely to “old money” and “new money” respectively. What runs through these diverse ethnographic categories is threefold. Firstly, interlocutors’ insights and interventions are in response to the experience of the city as changing, for better or for worse, and their struggle to come to terms with their own changing circumstances. Secondly, the moral imperative to “clean” the city, whether by reshuffling people between neighbourhoods or displacing people from single abodes, is founded on suspicion about counter forces that deliberately “dirty” and intentionally cause harm by degradation. Thirdly, the condition of being stuck, having to wait as law suits take their course, agendas are formulated or strategies bear fruit, permeates the chapter and its stories. An exploration of how entitlement to the city is imagined, ordered and reproduced in several key sites of contest, intervention and stagnation, reveals the material and symbolic strategies that occasion urban renewal, and which the prospect of urban renewal in turn occasions.

## BINARY AND HIERARCHY

Notions of cleanliness and dirt feature in several disciplines, where they refer to more than hygiene, and take on material and symbolic connotations, as well as various combinations of the two. Metaphorical usage is found in law, philosophy and politics; literal usage is often found in environmental and health sciences. Meanwhile, for academic and practical disciplines whose focus is social and spatial change, including geography, economics, urban planning/design, sociology and anthropology, but also military sciences and politics, “clean” and “dirty” are laden with implicit or explicit value judgement about what material arrangements, transformations and interventions are favourable over others (Weizman 2007). So for instance, in early 1980s Beirut, the massive bulldozing of Beirut’s central district, which Hariri, then multi-millionaire contractor and not yet Prime Minister, returned from Saudi Arabia to orchestrate, was labeled “cleaning” (*tandhif*) by its champions. In 1982, when Beirut was still under Israeli siege, but months after the Sabra and Shatila massacres (an ethnic cleansing of Palestinian refugees) Hariri’s company OGER tore down entire blocks of buildings that were deemed war-damaged and abandoned, to clear land for Solidere’s reconstruction

and renovation of the remaining buildings. From the narrative of then OGER spokesperson, Al-Fadl Shalaq, cleaning entailed inviting “Beirut’s inhabitants” to participate in removing the war debris, so that “a smile could return to the face of the city” (Farshakh 2006: 50-53) Promotional images of these “true” inhabitants, mostly the professional and merchant classes, getting their hands dirty in the rubble emblematised this worthy cause. But the bigger feat was accomplished with several dozen Caterpillar loaders that were brought into Beirut through the militia-controlled port<sup>34</sup> with the consent of the occupying Israeli forces, state apparatuses being all but paralysed at the time (Farshakh 2006: 69). The “good people” helped clear everything, according to Shalaq, but when it came time to clear the enormous heaps of accumulated garbage, they stopped, finding this work beneath their stature. Instead, OGER enlisted and paid private fees to the army of “underpaid” and “idle” labourers from the defunct Beirut Municipality (Farshakh 2006: 125-129).

I do not recount this story to say what is obvious about class distinction and social stratification, and obviously not unique to this political geography or period in the history of cities. Moreover, this story is typically opposed by those who claim OGER demolished many salvageable buildings that have heritage value, and by those who contested the abrupt and unilateral clearing of the city centre because they either owned residential or commercial property or had established businesses there by formal or informal arrangements.<sup>35</sup> I tell this curtailed version of a controversial story from the vantage point of some of the most (if not eventually *the* most) powerful interveners in Beirut’s recent urban history, because it makes clear how notions of cleanliness and dirt are intimately woven into narratives of Beirut set “right” after war devastated it (ironically even as the war raged on). It was clear even then who the city rightfully belonged to and who was entitled to it (the mercantile urban bourgeoisie), who was suitable for dirty work (the “idle” working class and public servants), and indeed who was considered dirt that needed to be cleaned (the “idle” working class and

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<sup>34</sup> The Beirut port was under the control of the Lebanese Forces at the time. This is a Christian, mostly Maronite militia with Lebanese Nationalist (right wing) leanings, and with a history of collaboration with the Israeli state during the Civil War.

<sup>35</sup> In February 2016, outside the screening of the film *Bonjour Beyrouth* (Georges Salibi 2016), a member of the Organisation of Rights Holders in Beirut’s Commercial Centre distributed a pamphlet protesting the film’s feature of Minister Bahij Tabbara claiming that the OGER cleaning was necessary because the buildings were unsalvageable. The pamphlet claimed that many buildings located away from the Green Line, were in fact possible to renovate and should have been thus renovated and restored to their former owners. More can be read about this struggle (in Arabic) on [www.wasatbeirut.org](http://www.wasatbeirut.org).

disenfranchised merchants and small owners). According to the critics of this effort and of Solidere in general, the cleaning intended - under enemy watch - to target and dislodge dwellers and economies that had moved into abandoned buildings and shops, including people who were displaced by war from other areas of the country and city. This cleaning helped to usher in the urban regime, which a political and financial elite and prospering diaspora still controls today (Krijnen 2015, Tierney 2016).

As I mentioned to start with, associating the binary clean/dirty with spatial politics has a long history in several disciplines. In anthropology and other social sciences, it is strongly linked to Mary Douglas' work *Purity and Danger* (1966). Dirt for Douglas' is famously defined in the aphorism, "matter out of place," and only makes sense within the particular classificatory system that conceives of it as such. This includes particular aesthetic and spatial characteristics, as well as localised beliefs and practices that vary across time and space (Douglas 1966: 41). She also argues that all peoples have something they consider polluting and which they regard as offensive, dangerous and disruptive of social order, causing anxiety and prompting societies to perpetually arrange and rearrange their world to accommodate or "deal with" that dirt. In his survey of Douglas' influence on architecture and urbanism, Campkin finds questionable the simultaneous universality and particularity of Douglas' model, critiquing its binary nature from the empirical standpoint that some things within the same social order are simultaneously dirty and valuable (Campkin 2013: 9, 11). While attributing this "convoluted" universalism and necessary binary to the structuralist perspective of anthropology to which she ascribed, he shows how influential Douglas' theory. He focuses on how its phenomenological tendencies influenced work that considers dirt both in its material and metaphorical manifestations, extending to issues of exclusion in the capitalist city (Campkin 2013: 7-9). One site of intersection between the aesthetic and material registers of dirt in Western cities is the celebration of modernist architecture and design as "clean," conceived within modernity's preoccupation with sanitisation and hygiene in spatial order and politics (Campkin 2013: 8). He notes:

"The spatialised discussion of prohibition, transgression and punishment provides a platform for exploring the role of the built fabric as a reflection of, or an instrument in the production of, individual, social or cultural ordering systems. Related to this point, beyond practices of hygienism, maintenance, cleaning and waste management, such theories may enable us to better understand the underlying sociocultural and psychological impulses driving the imposition of different conceptions of order and disorder on

specific buildings, whole city districts, or urban conditions; or the socio-economic, symbolic and physical ‘sanitization’ processes associated with urban redevelopment and gentrification” (Campkin 2013: 8).

Although Ruth Glass coined the term for London in the 1960s, “gentrification” has been recognised across the globe, where a standard of exclusionary effects accompanies all but the rarest economic and spatial restructuring of cities (Porter & Shaw 2009), as I already discussed in the thesis Introduction. Whether in Hong Kong, Mumbai, Beirut or Detroit, these effects resonate with the notion of cleaning, in accordance - to use Douglas’ formulation - with a classificatory system that typically places bourgeois lives, livelihoods, bodies, and material arrangements above those of poorer classes, including workers, impoverished migrants or marginalised racial minorities (Roy 2009). Historically associated with state-led restructuring, gentrification in Beirut and increasingly elsewhere is effectuated by a concatenation of government and market forces, both traditional bourgeois seats of power (Herzfeld 2004: 197). On the subject of gentrification and its association with some notion or other of cleanliness, I find parallels in studies from on cities both in the Arab-majority region and beyond (Daher 2005, Rao 2013, Roy 2009). Of these, the idea that neoliberal politics seeks to “discipline” poverty (Wacquant 2012: 76), having already criminalised it, and that gentrification is one of its main spatial and social means for this end, resonates throughout (Herzfeld 2009). From Rao, for example, I detect similar concerns with how people’s presence in the city is legitimised or vilified, in her discussion of the resettlement of urban poor from the informal slums to the government-built suburbs of Delhi. She argues that by not being able to become private owners in the new settlements, resettled slum residents do not attain the status of “legal citizens of the city,” but are “tolerated” in “legality at the margins,” where they endure (Rao 2013: 760). What is more, “[i]nstead of being new legal suburbs, these resettlements are spaces for vigorous and on-going renegotiations of what can count as permitted ways of living in the city” (Rao 2013: 760).

As will become apparent in the coming sections, in my fieldsite, gentrification, exclusion and the eviction of tenants on rent control, happen without the introduction of state housing or any government-led housing policy per se.<sup>36</sup> The legality of dwelling and perceptions of entitlement of particular dwellers over others are erstwhile facilitated

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Nayla Geagea, a lawyer and civil rights activist, May 2014.

by laws and regulations, which make possible cleaning based on notions of dirt - as class or ethnicity, of human or house. If we engage with Murphy, the law does not *make* anything. It just facilitates the implementation of particular decisions that have the power to make distinctions, which are wrought not in the script of the law but in extra-legal social prejudices. "Legislative and adjudicative processes," he writes, "are involved in 'recognition' rather than constitutive exercises, in recognition or non-recognition of realities which arise and are validated as 'true' in some other place outside the law" (Murphy 2004: 138). The ethnography I focus on in this chapter reveals distinctions between owner and tenant, old money and new money, white and brown bodies, sedentary and migrant identities, and Christian and non-Christian affiliation. Taking Murphy's point into account, I ask by what logics of discrimination and recognition these distinctions are manufactured, reproduced or instrumentalised in spatial politics.

One way to unpack these cultural hierarchies is the model of Malkki's adaptation of Douglas in her ethnography of Burundian refugees in the Rwanda-Burundi war and atrocities of the 1990s. Aside from mapping mutually constructed physiological distinctions between Hutu and Tutsi people, framing their atrocities against each other in biologically essentialising and ethnic terms, Malkki draws links between the figure of the refugee and perceptions of purity and impurity. From the perspective of those who deem themselves autochthonous to a place, refugees and their bodies are emblems of impurity and danger because they breach the borders of so-presumed homogeneous national entities and other policed membranes, homeless and without certainty of ever returning home. Conversely, migrants - especially camp refugees - themselves regard the sense of collective identity in exile, as "pure," which they morally guard from a categorical other - be it non-refugees or other more assimilated refugees - defined in essentialist terms as "impure" (1995). The argument that migrants are perceived as problematic, disruptive of order, "matter out of place" ("classificatory systems" again), especially in the age of paranoid nationalism, strongly resonates with the present analysis. Yet, the subject position of the one doing the classification is key.

In the primary fieldsites of this chapter, the Shiite rural-urban migrants displaced in the Civil War, the Syrian refugee fleeing war since at least 2011, and the Southeast Asian and African migrants who has been coming to work in Lebanon at least since the 1970s, are among the candidates for classification as "impure" bodies in a neighbourhood revving up for gentrification. The legal and bureaucratic infrastructure that accompanies the fabrication of migrant workers' distinction as "dirty" other,

includes a human trafficking economy (including illegal trafficking) and the local *kafala* (sponsorship) system for employment. Recently made mandatory for Syrian refugees as well, having a *kafil* (sponsor), under whose name and responsibility they are registered, is the only way they can enter and stay in Lebanon. Yet given my interest in the tenant-owner relationship, and given that the Syrian refugees and migrant workers residing in my fieldsite were mostly squatters or informal residents without leases, I limited my fieldwork to Lebanese tenants, including Shiites who were rural-urban migrants to the city. Being more racially discriminated against, however, the foreign migrant workers, especially female domestic workers, are the most vulnerable group in the street and in Lebanon generally, and have been for decades. (Jureidini 2003, Jureidini 2009). In addition to a market that favours their quasi- and actual enslavement by employers, their maltreatment is a staple of most public and private institutions, not least the households they serve, nor indeed the traffickers and officialdom of their own home countries (Frantz 2013).

Most of Beirut's Shiites came to the city as rural-urban migrants who were displaced by civil conflict and war devastation from various parts of the country, but primarily from the South, which was occupied by Israel since 1978 and experienced a lot of marginalisation from central government. In this case, the social construction of prejudice must be understood on the one hand in terms of class-based urban-to-rural prejudice against Beirut's Shiites, who while serving the bourgeois economy in enterprise and well-to-do households, were relegated to the status of peasantry and inferior migrant. Yet tied in with that are echoes from an official history about the marginal role of the Shiite Lebanese community in establishing the Lebanese nation-state, who at independence from France was allegedly constructed primarily with (and for) the Christian Maronite community in the National Pact on power sharing (Appendix 1). Shiite influence and presence in Beirut dates back to the turn of the century, with large economic and social networks connecting rural areas to an established bourgeoisie and educated middle class in city, which extended to a nascent diaspora in Africa among other places (Souaid 1997: 110). Yet the more substantial flux of Shiites who migrated to Beirut during the Civil War dominates most of the uneasy perceptions among Sunnis and Christians of Shiite "encroachment" in the city. This unease is compounded by the visible upward mobility of several members of this recent wave of migration, which was accompanied by the steady rise to power of Hizbollah and its claims to political hegemony since 2000. Not unique to Lebanon, it resembles tensions that form at the



intersection between sectarian distinctions and the rural-urban cultural divide, which can be found in heterogeneous polities in the Balkans for instance (Jansen 2005).

The incentive to engage with Douglas' model to think the spatial and symbolic ordering of cities through the binary of clean and dirty, stems mainly from the prominence and recurrence of these categories and similar terms in my field. Yet keeping in mind the limitation of this model, which presumes they are mutually exclusive categories in an otherwise stable cultural order does not account for the complex and shifting processes that engender and redefine their distinction (Douglas 1966: 40). I find it useful, therefore, to interlace the binary with Herzfeld's concept of global hierarchy of value from his book *The Body Impolitic* (2004). From ethnography on artisans and apprenticeship in a small Cretan town, Herzfeld argues that the marginality of his interlocutors, including their material circumstances, their cultural reputation and their limited opportunities to thrive - or indeed survive - social and economic transformations, are wrought and maintained through global hierarchies with local inflections. These include, for Herzfeld's context but clearly also for Lebanon, a combination cultural imperialism ("the aftershocks of colonialism" and global expanding capitalism (Herzfeld 2004: 24). Herzfeld's most precise definition of it is the following:

"The increasingly homogeneous language of culture and ethics constitutes a global hierarchy of value. This "hierarchy, which clearly succeeds to the values promulgated worldwide by the erstwhile colonial powers of Europe, is everywhere present but nowhere clearly definable. Its very vagueness constitutes one source of its authority, since, while it often appears as a demand for transparency and accountability, it is itself protected by that besetting vagueness from any demand that it account for itself. Whether as the most arrogant Eurocentrism of the kind that automatically assumes pride of place for Western "high culture" (itself an opaque concept despite a superficial gloss of obviousness) or as a less direct but ostensibly more liberal assumption that some ways of doing things are simply more decent or more useful than others, it represents the most comprehensive and globally ramified form of common sense - the ultimate expression of cultural authority" (Herzfeld 2004: 2-3).

As a concept, this hierarchy seeks to account for the ways particular symbolic and material forms become valued, while challenging the potency of the hierarchy's claims and the exclusive effects it can have on the lives of people who are relegated to its lower rungs. Thinking through this concept, elicits questions from my field: How are some social relationships to things (namely property ownership over borrowing or renting)

recognised as better than others? How are the bodies, the money, the property and the prosperity of some people, recognised as good, clean, and legitimate, and not others? What are the overlapping zones of entitlement operating on properties in decay that are slated for renewal? That there is a hierarchy is universal for Herzfeld, but what axes of discrimination are subsumed into that hierarchy depends on local and historical specificity. In my ethnography class, race and religious affiliation are the resonant terms. Moreover, the hierarchy is predominantly constituted by those at the top but its ethical and aesthetic values nestle in the consciousness of all who are subjected to its claims, co-constituting it in subtle but violent and often self-deprecating ways. By this token, I would attribute the question of recognition of bodies as dirty or clean in Basta to resilient cultural hierarchies crafted in Ottoman imperialism and French colonial domination in Lebanon, and reproduced in the discourses of the mercantile nation-state and its present-day capitalist corollary, the neoliberal urban regime. For example, in addition to shaping Beirut to privilege military security and economic interests, the first Ottoman municipality of the city in 1970 concerned itself with hygiene and public health, which translated into spatial arrangements that in turn can be critiqued as marginalising of the urban poor at the time. On another register, when the French Mandate took charge, it did its best to eradicate traces of Ottoman arrangements, considering them culturally inferior (El Hibri 2009: 125). Other local inflections of this global hierarchy and the discrimination it produces incorporates political rivalries in Lebanon and the region, the legal/bureaucratic arrangements toward (non-Western) foreigners, and perceptions of old and new money that apply more globally.

That my fieldwork was set in a very localised context might give pause to my recourse to a global concept to help analyse my data. While I did not engage in following the “flows” of movement of people and resources and information that anthropology in the age of globalisation suggest are necessary, globalised values are nowhere absent. When acquaintances ask me why my English accent sounds American, and whether this is because I grew up in the United States, I have taken to answering: “No, but if you don’t go to America, America comes to you.” The anthropologists’ ability to iterate between local and global scales of understanding, is a trademark of the discipline that Herzfeld prides in. “[I]t is only at a highly localized level that the effects of global process can be brought under genuinely intense inspection,” he argues, “Ethnography pinpoints universalism’s capillary pervasion of embodied experience at specific times and places” (2004: 208). Nagel’s analysis of ethnic conflict in Beirut (equivalent to sectarian conflict

in my fieldsite) and the reconstruction of Beirut's city centre, summons the need to tune in to global and local processes at once. She builds on Massey's work to argue that the global and local are not even two distinct scales of analysis, particularly since they are not experienced as such. Instead, they must be treated as gradual continuities and intersections of social relations (Nagel 2000: 217). In her view, the constellation of power dynamics, which insinuate themselves into sectarian conflict and capitalist relations from within and beyond Lebanese borders, help to "harden" communal boundaries (2000: 218). More over, "urban development is not solely a strategy of capital accumulation...[but] tightly bound to the violent civil conflicts that gave rise to the need for redevelopment in the first place" (2000: 222).

Stigmatising some parts of the city as dirty because they are blighted and rundown, some bodies as impure because they occupy marginal positions in a cultural hierarchy, while some property that is ready for sale and reconstruction as clean, are convenient discursive ways to occasion and legitimise urban renewal (Campkin 2013: 14). They constitute a kind of "creative destruction," whether literally or metaphorically by way of denigrating in order to dominate, of harming in order to re-appropriate, of demolishing in order to rebuild. Moreover, the bodies of those who are least valued get implicated as material repellents against unwanted/dirty tenants under rent control by owners who wanting to evict them. Whose bodies constituted the category of repellent, of dirt, varies on the social position and trajectory of the person doing the imagining. There are, however, identities over which a consensus of denigration congeals. By that "convoluted" consensus, the belief becomes possible that antagonistic owners are deliberately dirtying their property with unwanted bodies as a means to expedite renewal. Following is a discussion of the legal and economic circumstances that make such strategies of expulsion and its attending suspicions possible.

## OLD RENT - NEW RENT

The liberalisation of rent control, has made tenants increasingly fearful of being "thrown out/cast away" (*yzituna barra*) without alternative housing to move to in the city. While many have already had to move further afield to the suburbs of Beirut, these outskirts in turn are becoming too expensive to afford and experiencing newer waves of exclusion. In this section, I disentangle the legal and economic circumstances under

which the contest between tenants under rent control (or “old tenants”) and their landowners, unfolded in the context of my fieldwork. This elaboration draws on numerous stories about the relationships between these two categories of urban dwellers/actors, of which the particular standoff I discuss in the next section is one telling iteration.

In Lebanon, all rental contracts predating July 1992 came under rent control with Laws 159 and 160 issued that year, until in 2014, parliament passed a new and highly controversial law intended to free rent rates gradually, and which I will discuss below. Known in colloquial terms as the “old rental” law (or simply “old rent”), the law applies only to urban residential property, excluding villas surrounded by gardens. This seems to explain why decaying villas and gardens are more thoroughly abandoned in Beirut than their counterparts in apartment buildings wherein you see the traces of dwelling more frequently. In such “old rent” apartments, estimated in 2016 to accommodate 170,000 households out of the total 210,000 who lease in Beirut households, the law protects tenants quite efficiently from eviction in a number of ways. First of all, the rental contract is automatically renewed on an annual basis so long as the tenants are themselves present and using the property, except in case of violent political conflict when their absence for shelter is justified. Secondly, upon the death of the primary tenant contracted in the lease, the law permits the spouse and/or children who resided continuously on the property to inherit the contract, with rent control. Thirdly, the landowner can only refuse to extend the lease and recover the property if s/he intends to house one of their children in it or to reside close to a relative who needs support, in the absence of any other alternative, and s/he must present proof to the effect that this is done within a year and thereafter for at least three years before contracting new tenants. The law permits landowners to recover their property for sale or redevelopment, stipulating they have to begin construction within six months and complete it within five years. Yet the biggest legal and economic obstacle in the way of landowners cleaning old rent tenants out, is the monetary compensation they have to pay them to recover their property for renewal. According to Law 160, this compensation is estimated at 25 to 50 per cent of the value of the property that prevails at the time of settlement, which is by court verdict if there is disagreement. However, these recovery compensations are frequently settled independently between tenant and landlord to avoid the long, costly and characteristically unpredictable outcomes of Lebanese judicial procedures. Should the landlord fail to house a child, reside close to a relative needing support, or renew the

property within the stipulated timeframe, the law requires him/her to pay additional compensation to the tenant.

Rent control legislation was implemented after the Civil War ended in 1990, to solve the housing crisis that internal displacement had created during the 15 years of conflict. It meant that migrants from the various and often rural parts of the country, could afford living in urban and economic centres such as Beirut where housing prices were fast rising, and where they have now reached prohibitive heights even for so-called middle class households. From the perspective of citizens' rights to affordable housing, it has temporarily protected tenants' access to dwelling in cities where they had come to work, leaving urban poor who have no such leases excluded from this arrangement. The Lebanese economy was severely damaged and the currency devalued since the early 1980s, from 2.5 Lebanese Pounds (LBP) to the US dollar in 1975 versus LBP1500 to the dollar in 1993. So for example, whereas a LBP500 monthly rent was equivalent to £150 before the Civil War in 1975, since 1993 until today that rent equals to 20 pence. A 1994 amendment to Law 160 called for the multiplication of rental rates by a range between 165 times for contracts predating 1954 and two times for those signed in 1990. But this incremental multiplication grants very little benefit to landowners. Where rent control rates are so negligible landowners sometimes accept the meagre payment annually to make it "worth it," or else they settle on an alternative amount by friendly agreement with tenants. Others have neglected to collect payment at all, while still others strategically refuse payment altogether, in a bid to pile an implicit debt upon tenants whom they would like to evict, in the hope that not taking rent will enable them to negotiate a smaller recovery compensation. The discrepancy between the rent controlled rates of contracts signed before 1992, and the free-market rental rates of contracts signed after 1992 implies that sometimes on a single street and in a single building, some tenants are paying the equivalent of over £1500 per month for a three-bedroom flat, while their next-door neighbours pay next to nothing, indeed sometimes literally nothing.

Rent control is one strategy that the governments adopt in order to deflate social upheaval likely to spring up under dire economic circumstances if there is a grave housing shortage from inflation or other crises like wars. In various parts of the Western world, rent control has been a form of state policy, dating most recently back to World War II, which was intended to temporarily put a ceiling on rent while other housing policies such as subsidies are installed or projects like public housing are implemented

(Slater 2015). The Lebanese government has, meanwhile, not made arrangements for affordable housing, opting instead to extend the rent control law ten times between 1992 and 2012. In 1977, it decreed and subsequently amended a Law in 1994 pertaining to the Bank of Habitat, enabling clients to purchase, build or renovate homes with interest rates only slightly below those of private banks, who owned 80 per cent of this private-public fund. At the same time, it was only in 2008 that the legal minimum wage reached LBP500,000 and LBP675,000 (approximately £335) in 2012, although the informal labour force - especially foreign migrants - are often paid much less. Meanwhile, minimum monthly living costs in Beirut for 2015 were nearly 4.5 million Lebanese Pounds (approximately £2250) for a four-member household, including everything except accommodation.<sup>37</sup> Beirut ranked as fifth most expensive city in the Middle East and 111<sup>th</sup> worldwide in 2016.<sup>38</sup> The lack of action toward a just housing policy coupled with the passing of the new Building Law of 2004, created huge benefits and facilities for the development of property by increasing the permissible amount of built area on any single property and providing tax and other jurisdictional exemptions for high-rises. By extension, incentives for the eviction of tenants and the renewal of old buildings are stark indications of the government's priority to encourage property ownership and the real estate market at the expense of housing needs.

In April 2014, after over a decade of tinkering with rent bills as alternatives to rent control, Parliament passed a law that liberalises rental rates and gradually eases rent control. While it stands to have a dramatic effect on the city, the law is not yet in effect because for lack of political authority or will, the caretaker government that has led the country without president since May 2014, has not put into place the bureaucratic mechanisms required to adjudicate by or implement this law. This did not prevent some judges, at the start of 2016, from issuing discretionary verdicts in favour of landlords who filed eviction suites against their old tenants, drawing an immediate resistance from tenants associations and urban rights activists. These groups were not only objecting to what they perceived as premature and unlawful verdicts, but to the law itself given the lack of housing alternatives. The liberalising law (known also as the "new rental law") entitles landlords to increase rent incrementally over a course of six years, by fifteen per cent annually during the first four years, and then by 20 per cent for the last two. This

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<sup>37</sup>See Numeo: [http://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/city\\_result.jsp?country=Lebanon&city=Beirut](http://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/city_result.jsp?country=Lebanon&city=Beirut)

<sup>38</sup> See Expatistan: <https://www.expstatan.com/cost-of-living/index>

amount continues to be the rental rate during the seventh, eighth and ninth years, at which point the rental contract is “freed” and begins to follow the rates of supply and demand, coming under the rental law in place for contracts signed after 1992. Under the new law, tenants under rent control must comply with the annual percentage increase in rent for the first six years or face eviction, but they can remain for a maximum of nine years so long as they comply. By the ninth year, landlords have the right to breach the contracts by paying tenants recovery compensations worth 30 per cent of the land value at the time of settlement.

Although the new rental law stipulates the establishing of a public fund that entitles Lebanese tenants with cumulative household incomes below three times minimum wage<sup>39</sup>, to receive public funds to cover their rental increases, the actual implementation and just operation of this fund remains uncertain if not altogether dubious (Marot 2014). Indeed, the precedent of the state’s administration of specialised public funds in the past has been fraught with exceptionalism, procrastination tending toward frustration, and political wrangling and finagling. Observers who are concerned with social justice, therefore, remark that the real bureaucratic challenges of implementation, the new law exacerbates a housing crisis for an ever growing section of the population, forcing most to leave the city for the suburbs that have sprawled far out of the capital. This is also in light of the absence of any housing policy. Meanwhile, under the economic and political circumstances surrounding Laws 159 and 160, a large portion of the landed population in Beirut was also being impoverished, particularly those who could not afford to pay compensation to discontinue the rent control leases, in order to benefit financially from renewing their properties. Like tenants who were compensated but could not afford housing in the city, many of this landed population were also losing their land through the liquidation of co-owned property, which left them with sums of money that only afforded dwelling outside the city, having to commute in heavy traffic to their work and lives in the city centre.

Understandably then, few are the landlords who would willingly pass up the chance to benefit from the legal and bureaucratic facilities that append to the building law and new rent law. While some, particularly owners of relatively well-preserved and habitable buildings might rent their properties anew if the law gets implemented, most

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<sup>39</sup> With minimum wage at LBP675,000 effective in 2012, the cumulative would equal LBP2,025,000 (around £1000).

will strive to remove obstacles and harness the adequate investments for renewal, which they generally favour. Landowners, for whom a property is a scarce resource, perceive the new rent law as “freeing up” their property, while rent control kept it hostage or under “occupation.” Refusing to accept the rent gives them additional moral leverage to make such claims. Given that old rent contracts are more likely to be found in old decaying houses and buildings, critics of the new law have argued it is deliberate a way for lawmakers to speed up the removal of long-lease tenants to make room for new construction. Parts of the heritage lobby and the “old tenants” association lump all landowners together as the enemies of decaying houses and of tenants who have alternative dwelling respectively. As one interlocutor and activist in numerous urban and environmental issues told me, “Poor owners and rich owners are all against us.” As the old law sought to protect fragile families who do not own property in the city, but whose labour the city needed and who also needed to work and live there, its inevitable side effect was to impoverish numerous small landowners. These include those who already owned little land, those whose means of livelihood was hard hit by the economic instability of the Civil War and its aftermath, and those whose only source of income was rent - sometimes a combination of these and other misfortunes coincide. These landlords also face, if with less severity than their tenant counterparts, an unstable and badly paid job market in combination with rising living costs. Moreover and as I discussed in the previous chapter, with the passage of time, any small surface of urban land will likely be co-owned by an exponentially rising number of co-inheritors. This diminishes individual shares, sometimes below the amounts necessary to afford accommodation in the city.

Thus in the conflict of interest between landlords and tenants, the varying economic circumstances of either category - and of the landlords in particular - makes all the difference. Well-heeled urban professionals including owners, developers, contractors and investors systematically stand to gain from the legal, political and economic set up around renegade neoliberal renewal. Under the rent control policy, however temporary and untenable as it might now be, less fortunate landowners and tenants were in comparable positions as regards housing and socio-economic security. Rent control had the typical effect of impoverishing small-time owners, even though this only served to strengthen the legitimacy and privilege of private ownership generally over other forms of land tenure. Yet the liberalisation of rent control is likely to have more than devastating effects on old tenants. In proverbial manner again, if old tenants and small-



time owners ride the same boat, as several owners themselves proclaim, these latter hold larger oars than tenants - as the two sides row in opposing directions. Although cabinet had not yet ratified the law, nor instated the promised legal mechanisms to assist lower-income tenants in covering the gradual hikes in rent, several discretionary verdicts had been passed in favour of owners' eviction cases against their tenants.

In late January of 2016, at a protest that the Tenants Association organised, marching with supporters to Prime Minister Tammam Salam's house, one spokesman shouted fervently (and somewhat rhetorically) into a megaphone that the new rental law was pitting owners and tenants against each other, when in fact they shared the hardships of enduring life under dire conditions in Beirut. He blamed the government for letting this happen and warning that the situation is so tense it could ignite another Civil War. Elsewhere in the news, tenants have vouched to commit suicide or accept imprisonment over eviction (Farfur 2015). Recent analysts of the implications of the new rental law believe that the gradual rent increase, which culminates in certain eviction should the landlords choose, belongs to the breed of laws, including building regulations, that the state has passed to free up urban land, which is becoming ever scarcer to come by (Ashkar 2014b, Marot 2014). If the building law pushed a mass of impoverished tenants and landlords out of the city over the past two decades of the post-war era, some have argued the new rental law will help to sweep out remaining tenants and free more property for the real estate and building market.

From the point of view of brokers and the "agents of gentrification" (Krijnen 2015), however, the new rental law is better than the old for sure but its effects are still too meek and too slow for their desired extent of evictions. Supporting, indeed sanctifying the right to private ownership, their sympathies lie unequivocally with landlords, including the misfortunate ones, whom the law temporarily scoops out of their financial rut. The hope is that tenants will be deterred by the rent hikes and leave without much fuss but that is rarely the case. Negotiating recovery compensation has instead preoccupies the relationship between old tenants and owners, and keeps busily working the real estate brokers whom they call upon to mitigate. In practical terms, in order to sell a property for a good price, an owner must vacate it, including clear out any long-standing tenants. To do so you must pay old tenants compensation, which have until the new rent law been subject to negotiation from both sides, and often ends in disagreement over the acceptable amounts. A top consultant at one well-established real estate brokerage company claims the standard "fair deal" that tenants should accept is 30

per cent of the property's market value at the moment of settling. From tenants' point of view, this deal is insufficient in order to leave your long-term abode. To do that, you must have an alternative one or be able to afford to purchase or sustain a new rental contract. To this end, some tenants I met were demanding of landlords the compensations sufficient to place down payments on the purchase of a new flat, and then figure out a way to apply for a loan from the Housing Fund. Several of these tenants were keen on staying in the same or near the neighbourhoods, from which they were being evicted, having the desire to remain in familiar neighbourhoods or ones where other familial and familiar social networks existed. Wanting to stay in the city, where real estate prices are way above the financial means of a majority of the population, makes the compensation figures they are asking for often too high for landowners to afford or accept to yield to, leading to a standoff that can end up stuck in the courts but often just reaches a stalemate. This goes on until something changes, typically the arrival of a big investment to unlock the situation on the owners' behalf, clear out tenants and bring about renewal. While they may have done the same as their landlords if they were in his/her shoes, tenants experience this "unlocking," or what I am calling "cleaning," as the knell of dwelling in their homes as they know them and the alarm bell of potential homelessness for some.

## TENANT-OWNER STANDOFF

Um Ali and Abu Ali Hamsa raised their ten children in a 150 metre-square flat in the White Building on Khalid Street in Basta, which they rented over 60 years ago, narrow quarters for a family of 11 people. The flat was actually the half of a full apartment, which was cut in two to house more families at a time in the 1950s when the neighbourhood was becoming more populated from various waves of rural-urban migration to the city. The flat is one of those spanking clean, tidy and modestly furnished places you often encounter in working class houses where domestic work is proudly governed - with recourse to the labour of migrant domestic workers - if not rigorously performed by the female household members. But it smells of mould and Um Ali mentions the smell repeatedly, angrily. This is the smell that has kept her away all these months coming onto a year now. Um Ali and her only unmarried daughter Suhayla who is in her early 50s, live right across the street in the Sidani Building, in a

fourth-floor apartment that belongs to her son Hassan. She or Suhayla visit the half-flat regularly to check on things and to make apparent that they still “live” there, even though they technically do not. Without such an appearance, Law 160 would allow the owners to reclaim the flat without paying any compensation as discussed in the previous section. Despite the polish and somewhat gaudy plush of Hassan’s renovated flat, she wants to keep her own half-flat, she said, because it is hers and because it is accessible to her without having to climb stairs, as she is obliged to do in the Sidani Building. Seventy-three years old and having raised ten children there, she had hoped to spend the last years of her life in rest and stability in that familiar place. While Um Ali was visiting her village to take part in the olive harvesting season, Suhayla had the whole place cleaned with their maid. “She takes care of things,” Um Ali said of her daughter who never left her side, sounding relieved to be in her eldest daughter’s care. From the minute she was old enough - as soon as she was “aware” (*wa’iyah*) as the local term for maturing goes - Suhayla took care of all her younger siblings. Like a surrogate mother, she fed, bathed and tucked them in, tending so thoroughly to their needs and to domestic chores (“including laundering by hand!”) that Um Ali admitted, “I never got involved with anything after that.” A framed black and white photograph hanging over the television depicts Abu Ali with six of their children, and a separate portrait of Suhayla, superimposed onto the frame beside her siblings. Abu Ali passed away in 2009.

The Hamsas moved to Beirut from their Southern Lebanese village of Mays al-Jabal, right on the border with Occupied Palestine. A majority Shiite Muslim agricultural village, it was among the first and hardest hit during the long-drawn Israeli-Arab conflict, the South of Lebanon also being among the most economically deprived regions of the country since public development efforts historically concentrated on urban centres (Marktanner & Makdisi 2008: 5). Internal migration from such rural areas to Beirut was very prevalent mainly for economic reasons during the 1950s and early 1960s, and subsequently as flight from intensive fighting with and occupation by Israel from the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s until 2000. The Hamsas were among the economic-migrant category of the 1950s, when the nascent Lebanese state, established on privileged ties between France and Maronite Christian elites under the National Pact, neglected agricultural communities, including side-lining the Shiite sect politically and socially (Khater 2000: 569). Abu Ali working as a vegetables and fruits street vendor on a cart for much of his early adult and family life, until his sons grew to assist him in expanding into a wholesale trade. But in the 1990s, their son Hassan rapidly raised the

family's wealth to heights that no ordinary trade - least of all wholesale agricultural produce - could effectuate. Katia, the disinherited woman of Kurdish descent that I mentioned in Chapter One, who was a neighbour of the Hamsas in the "White Building" before moving to the ground floor of the Sidani Building where they presently reside, claimed Hassan became wealthy when he immigrated as a teenager to Germany. At first, he allegedly stayed and worked with her sister and her husband at their car dealership, before he branched off on his own and got involved in shady business. "Everyone knows you don't get rich fast just like that," she exclaimed, half critical half envious of the Hamsas and of Suhayla whom she had known for decades. "The whole neighbourhood knows that his money comes from 'white,'" she added, using the Arabic term *abyadh* commonly used to mean the illegal sex trade in Eastern European women, a slave trade. "After that, there wasn't anything he *didn't* trade in!"

The Hamsas are now among the financially comfortable families on Khalid Street that has quite visibly lost its former lustre and prestige by several residents' accounts - even the Hamsa's - but especially others who have experienced economic downturns or stagnation. The neighbourhood of Basta today appears as a patchwork of variously ageing and decaying low-rise buildings and villas, including sizeable ones that house educational, cultural and religious institutions. Along side this "fabric," as urban scholars and practitioners like to call it, sprout newer high-rising residential buildings, with discrepant signs of architectural design and quality of construction technique and materials. Dotted amid all this, you find empty plots where former houses were demolished and await a next move, or a construction pit where a building is rising or stalled. A busy market of shops lines many of the medium-aged residential buildings, while the newer ones are either fenced, gated or receding from the street - or all the above. The congested roads and sidewalks are abustle with cars and pedestrians, while the smell and sound of traffic and construction fill the air. Khalid Street is still one of the quieter side streets of the neighbourhood, but new construction has been fast approaching from the eastern and western ends of it, as the remaining older buildings whither unmaintained and their long-term residents relocated year after year. Few are the ones, like the Hamsas and Katia, who stayed in the neighbourhood, let alone on the same street where they lived before the Civil War, making for a unique ethnographic situation in which to observe the transition between dwelling materially and narratively. Suhayla echoed a nostalgic expression I heard very frequently on the street: "You could hear a pin drop back in the day" meaning it was so quiet and clean and classy, "unlike

today,” in reference to construction and traffic noise but also the “riffraff” who had settled there. By that, interlocutors sometimes meant the Syrian refugees, but such views were more poignantly directed at the Asian migrant workers.

When Abu Ali passed away in 2009, he bequeathed the lease contract in the half-flat, which falls under rent control, to Um Ali who still calls it “home” even if she technically cannot live there because of the mould. Before passing away, he began negotiating over recovery compensation with the building’s current owners, the Karaki family and particularly the father who is Abu Ali’s generational counterpart. A Shiite family from the north of Lebanon, the Karakis had a successful family business selling housewares and decorative items in Basta. In 2007, Abu Ali and the Karaki father agreed on \$25,000 (nearly £2000) as compensation for dissolving the lease. At that time, this may have sufficed as down payment for another flat in one of Beirut’s suburbs, but since then real estate prices rose so much that the equivalent in purchasing power today would be closer to \$150,000 (nearly £113,000), which is what Um Ali began asking more recently. Meanwhile, the Karaki father fell ill and relinquished most decision-making powers to his sons, the peers and rivals of the Hassan and Hussein Hamsa, who refused to increase the compensation and insisted on paying only their father’s original offer. The deadlock that ensued deteriorated the initial relationship between the two senior men, Abu Ali and the Karaki father, to the extent that after my first visit with the Hamsas, Katia told me they had suspected the Karakis had sent me to spy on them. For that reason, I never met or approached the Karakis in person, worrying this might jeopardise my trust with the Hamsa’s, which was already slow to gain. Um Ali believed the Karaki father was gentle and his relationship to her husband built on respect, mutual understanding and a shared past in poverty and hardship. They would share stories of the days when Abu Ali peddled his produce on his cart and the other man sold freshly baked bread door-to-door. Since he fell ill, however, his sons who were “born in comfort,” Um Ali scoffed, have taken a coarser approach, rejecting Um Ali’s demands and refusing to negotiate any further.

Meanwhile, during my first impromptu visit to the Hamsa’s one evening, Hussein, Um Ali’s younger son told me that his brother Hassan had been in the process of buying the White Building from its previous owners, the Hobbalas, when the Karakis stepped in and whisked it from under his feet. “They’re politically well-connected,” Hussein remarked, implying the opportune purchase happened under some form of political tutelage or strong-arming. The White Building switched owners twice since the

original owners and builders, both of whom resided in it, while the Karakis, never did. They paid compensations and gradually vacated the building in order to sell or redevelop it since they acquired it in the mid-1990s. As they recovered flats from old tenants in the White Building, they filled them with various marginalised occupants such as migrant workers from Southeast Asia and Syrian refugees fleeing the political crisis. The Karakis would typically be allowing the workers and refugees to live in the building as paying squatters. Keeping these occupants vulnerable to eviction at any moment, on short notice, because they have no formal rental contracts, left the landowners unbound while allowing them the opportunity to “work” their property until such time as its renewal is determined. From the Hamsas’ point of view, the Karakis had deliberately “dirtied” the building by placed these occupants there to expedite their own departure. Reducing them under catchall categories such as “Bangladesh” (the country’s name standing in for its nationals) or “the Syrians,” they complained about the “filthy” occupants, their “smelly cooking,” and their “dirty washing habits.” The Hamsas suspected their landlords were using their presence to pressure Um Ali to accept the low compensation rate or become so repelled by her neighbours’ that she leaves of her own accord. During my fieldwork, Um Ali was the only remaining occupant with formal lease and still refusing to go. The Karakis’ attempt to “clean her out” became that much more prickly in light of the competition that went on between the two families’ sons over buying the building. That the Karakis beat them in a pernicious purchase still tormented the Hamsas. At heart, however, Um Ali only wished to return to live in her old flat with its small front yard, where she spent the best part of her productive and reproductive days. She was adamant about this despite the fact that her son had hit fortune and had offered (indeed affectionately ordered) her and Suhayla to live in the newly refurbished and larger flat in the Sidani Building. He was keen to protect his mother from the mould that infested her own flat, which all her children agreed would be a hazard to her health.

This standoff defies the stereotypical depiction of property contest in Beirut as being inter-sectarian, mainly Shiite-Sunni, as an extension of civil-type conflicts Lebanon and the regional, but rather implicates class into the analysis. The depiction that property contests are sectarian wars by other means is mostly upheld among non-Shiites and others who feel threatened by the upward mobility of families like the Hamsas and Karakis accompanied by a rise in Shiite political power in the city and country over the past two decades (Appendix 1). The real estate broker, Faris, for instance, subscribed to this sort of view. That the two families are of the same sectarian background and similar

socio-economic trajectory, makes room for a different sort of analysis of what the competition over property and entitlement in the city can entail. What from a legalistic perspective seems to be a tenant-owner standoff became a contest between potential buyers over a property in decay where tenancy is rendered an obstacle to renewal while ownership is in principle not. From the Hamsa's point of view, the Karakis' politically backed (*mad'um*) purchase was unethical because it was intrusive since they never inhabited the "White building" so had no personal experience or "belonging" to the place., while their one-upmanship was associated with dirt. "*Wassakhu*," the Hamsas would say, which as an expression means, "they played dirty," but taken literally also means they simply dirtied something. In addition to trumping them in the purchase of their family home, at a moment when the Hamsas' were finally able, thanks to Hussan's big success, to make such a lucrative acquisition and secure a place in the city, the Karaki sons, in the Hamsas' opinion, were using strategies of "dirtying" in order to expedite the building's renewal.

The "dirty" measures that the Karakis were allegedly taking to "clean" Um Ali out of her flat weave neatly into urban gossip that circulates about conflict between landowners and tenants throughout the city. In a separate incident, tenants said their landlords strategically housed Syrian construction workers, in a building whose emptying out they wished to expedite. The strategy apparently worked wonderfully not only because some of tenants' class identity was insulted by the presence of labourers in their domestic space, but also for men of families from various class belongings who saw the presence of many single men as a threat to the sexual integrity of their women folk and particularly their unmarried daughters. Thus, aside from sabotaging the building's infrastructure, by disconnecting power lines and breaking water pipes that led to Um Ali's flat, strategies that I discuss in more depth in the next chapter, what interests me here are the workings of cultural hierarchy that enable one category of people to claim the bodies of others serve as a dirty repellent to themselves. Yet this and many similar stories are also valuable because they break with perceptions first, that tenant-owner standoffs in Beirut are inter-religious by character, and pit the Sunnis and Christians as the traditional majority landowning communities, against the Shiites as invading "new comers." The instance I have shown above should be understood first within a Shiite upward mobility that is cradled within a historical rise in the political/military influence of Shiism in Lebanon generally, a circumstance that has fanned fierce competition over ever-scarcer property between and within religious community; the Shiites are no

exception to that (Harb & Fawaz 2010). Nor indeed, are Sunni landowners in Basta and Zoqaq el-Blat, for instance particularly reluctant to sell to wealthy Shiite developers if the price is right, according to two *mukhtars* from those neighbourhoods, who have themselves helped facilitate the transactions of sale, and of inter-communal marriages and divorces too. Not only does this reveal the complex on-street, in-house articulations of tenant-owner relations beyond the two pervasive extremes of rhetoric on absolute inter-communal animosity or grandiloquence on inter-communal harmony. It relays the ways that an exceptional framework in civic law, in this case Lebanon's extreme rent control law, significantly contributes to the material decay of large numbers of buildings, while making various forms of mutual harm opportune, and redrawing - if with local and regional inflections - globalised forms of distinction and exclusion, of legitimisation and demonisation.

This harm, whether explicit or implicit, by calculated vandalism against or passive neglect of a buildings' physical wellbeing, has permeated the structure of tenant-owner relationships as well as the houses that bind them together. There is an unspoken understanding that with receiving negligible rent for decades in an economic environment where real estate is tantamount to gold, and with the added imperative of paying compensation to "access" that potential, landowners are implicitly exempt from the duties of repair typically stipulated by rental contracts. Yet, what standoffs such as the one I have described above can also say is that more than just exemption, landowners wield a power wrought from an implicit debt and an explicit stuckedness that the old rental law has produced. The tenant is somehow indebted to the landlord for paying next to nothing, and the landlord is stuck with the tenant until he can pay compensation. The tenant is most often also stuck in the sense that s/he has no alternative housing to go to, and seeing an opportunity to earn a lump sum of money in compensation, in some cases (not this one) a unique occasion that is unlikely to present itself again, s/he stays and dwells a time-frame at a time, until further notice.

That notice has now arrived with the new rental law, whose effects we have yet to witness but which are already being debated among tenants associations, urban planners and urban activist circles. Around the time when the new law was voted in, in April 2014, I began to see more and more "For Rent" placards on building exteriors, suggesting that the law - even before its final implementation - had begun to move things, begun moving people out. Those departing already are most likely those whose incomes are higher than the amount that renders old tenants eligible for the promised



rent subsidies, but who nevertheless find the impending rent increases undesirable in the old locations they inhabited or who already secured alternative dwelling. The end may be in sight for the moment of exceptionally affordable housing under rent control, the government's palliative for real housing solutions for an increasingly strapped population. Detrimental to the dynamic between the various stakeholders in urban change, the law temporarily kept a roof over the heads of the most vulnerable groups within the city's exuberant centre, but also housed less vulnerable and upwardly mobile groups. It may even have temporarily assisted in their upward mobility, raising controversy, both lay and academic ones, on the manipulation of the tenant-landlord standoffs by both sides to achieve various outcomes in the fierce contest over urban property. In all cases, the new rental law serves to fix the terms and temporal rhythm of certain eviction to recuperate ownership, while the old law had sought to securitise the terms of dwelling without ownership, even as it left the conditions of tenant-owner relations uncertain, and the conditions of either group precarious. As in Rao's Delhi, private ownership in Beirut has gradually been "fabricated" as the stable legitimate category even if it does not constitute a majority of the urban population, while tenancy is rendered less stable and less entitled form of dwelling.

### STREET-VIEW OF A GLOBAL HIERARCHY

The Hamsas were not the only inhabitants of Khalid Street who claimed the neighbourhood was once "clean" and proper, but had gradually (and in the eyes of some very quickly in recent years) become dirtied<sup>40</sup>, in reference to the culture and status of the people who live there. But the view from another rung on the global hierarchy of value considers the Karakis and Hamsas themselves as having helped degrade the sophistication and prestige of their urban environment. Presuming me to be one of them, older established Beirut families of Sunni but also Druze and Christian confessions - particularly those experiencing or fearing downward mobility or economic stagnation - uninhibitedly expressed to me that Shiite families who were displaced or migrated to Beirut constitute a negative element as far as "good neighbourliness" and the status of their neighbourhoods are concerned. In one instance, an interlocutor who inhabits the top floor of the decaying but very ornate (and obviously listed) building that

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<sup>40</sup> The specific Arabic words she used included *muqrif*, literally disgusting, or *m'alaat*, meaning filthy.

he owns in Basta's busy antique market street, commented on the demographic change on his neighbourhood after the Civil War, which used to be a middle class predominantly Sunni but also mixed area before becoming a mixed Sunni and Shiite, but increasingly Shiite. "This place was something else before. Now as you can see, the neighbours are all zeroes," he said, crinkling his nose at the word "zeroes," scanning his arm around 200 degrees, and clarifying under his breath in imagined conspiracy with me, "You know... the Shiites!"

In this articulation of the hierarchy, one finds in addition to religious distinction the added denigration of "new money" (or *nouveau-riche* to use the French and Lebanese vernacular term) of those who acquired wealth during and after the war, versus old money or more established bourgeoisie old feudal and ruling classes. On Khalid Street and also elsewhere (sometimes even in parody), this distinction finds its condensation in the terms "classe" and "not classe." For instance, Fatima Zubaydi,<sup>41</sup> one of the Hamsa's long-time Sunni neighbours explained to me that the street once had "classe Shiite" residents, rather than the present-day "non-classe" ones (*mish classe*). The term *classe* is the Lebanese pidgin-French for classy and implies a combination of sophisticated, civilised, modern, cultivated, and well educated. Unlike Shiite families of educated middle class standing to whom Fatima conferred the title *classe*, and whom she had befriended in the neighbourhood but who moved away, the Hamsas being of modest rural background did not enter her sanctuary of *classe*, and she did not have any contact with them beyond formal greeting. Becoming moneyed fast had rescued the Hamsas and similarly mobile families both geographically and economically from dire poverty, as their agricultural mode of subsistence got hard-hit. It also secured them financially, raising their status within extended family and establishing them more firmly in the heart of the city. But from the perspective of the "declining petit bourgeois," becoming moneyed fast drew upon them the stigma of *nouveau-riche*, with all the association of lack and vulgarity that this implied (Bourdieu 1984: 294, 249).

In comparison, "old moneyed" folk whose social entitlement has glossed over past forms of exploitative social and economic relations with which they accumulated wealth (under feudalism or colonial patronage for instance), are deemed perfectly capable of the right behavioural, aesthetic and consumer sensibilities that the "nouveau-riche" are not. This model of distinction is so prevalent that even people, who have nothing to gain

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<sup>41</sup> More detail and discussion on the Zubaydis is found in the following chapter.

from defending the Lebanese bourgeoisie or are indeed probably in relations of labour exploitation with it, still make this judgement. Fatima, for instance, a 60-something year-old of lower middle class background, her father having worked as meat merchant until the Civil War, has a poorly paid job as receptionist for a large architecture firm in the Hamra area. While her parents were not educated, she got a university degree in political sciences and was engaged in leftist party politics and activism during the Civil War. But today she and her sister who lives with her and who also has a lower-ranked administrative job at an Islamic charitable organisation, barely scrape by with three times minimum wage combined. This classification of *nouveau-riche*, particularly those whom she witnessed (even from the safe distance of her own house) making the climb from poor urban peasantry and wage labour to comfortable landownership, while she barely scraped by, clearly mixed contempt with envy. This resembles the element of “struggle,” which Jansen highlights from Bourdieu’s theory on distinction in order to characterise derisive representations of rural migrants by Yugoslav “self-proclaimed urbanites” (2005). The struggle in question is “a self-assured sense of distinction on the one hand and a certain anxiety in the desire for it on the other” that marks a tension in urban-rural relations and self-perceptions (Jansen 2005: 159).

Although, the term *classe* is occasionally dissociated from actual wealth given the impoverishment of the middle class over the course of the last half century or so, nevertheless a modicum of resources at some point in one’s biography are still a criterion for access to the educational and cultural exposure that goes into crafting a *classe* disposition. For Bourdieu, the marker of social distinction includes a person’s subdued aesthetic sensibility, inconspicuous mode of consumption and a performed (not necessarily an actual) nonchalance or “ostentatious discretion” toward money (1984: 249). But I would argue that in Beirut, the emergence and growing centrality of conspicuous consumerism as a prevailing form of social performance and power brandishing that yields prestige and access to public goods as well as interpersonal networks, the positionality of the person casting the judgement of distinction is more telling than any noticeable aesthetic or behavioural sensibility, least of all discreteness. Thus, the positionality of the person making the assessment about what - or who - constitutes an element of contamination or degradation of urban sociality, is key and differs mostly according to the socio-economic trajectory of that person. Used together, *classe* and *mish classe* indicate the class-based and imperial threshold of recognition that I found prevalent among middle to higher income city dwellers, as well as impoverished

landlords and the former Christian, Sunni and Druze petit-bourgeois, who shared neighbourhoods with Shiites and/or felt threatened by their growing presence and economic prosperity. Many of the generation that experienced Christian political hegemony prior to the Civil War, and periods of Western-style bureaucratic efficiency and attended missionary schools (another articulation of the global hierarchy of value), are particularly astute gate-keepers of urban middle class morality and distinction, indeed of a sense of modernity, even as they themselves struggle to survive the city's growing exclusivity.

With "Bangladesh" marginal workers unanimously taken to be the base of the global hierarchy of value, the dangerous and precarious Syrians close behind, and the Shiite rural migrants on a rung above in the eyes non-Shiites, we still need the core and pinnacle. The following statement, uttered by Katia, came to me as the single most articulate if somewhat surprising suggestion of this pinnacle. Speaking to me of the White building where she also lived for 40 years, and of Khalid Street more generally, she said, "This neighbourhood has changed a lot. Pardon me for saying so, but we used to have Jews and Christians living here. Everyone who lived here used to be of good social standing." Herself a Sunni, but of Kurdish origin which in the days even before war displacement or mass migration from Syria and abroad, furnished the cities manual labour-force, Katia has the memory and nostalgia for the street's former prestige, which she implicitly claims as her own (or her families'). In her present economic decline, she must have conveniently forgotten the rigid class structure that existed then and which most certainly cast her family as *mish classe*. The Lebanese Jew in the hierarchy is understandable given that most of Lebanese Jewry was well off and associated with Westernised institutions. They allied themselves with the Maronite Christian Phalange Party, playing a role in the establishment of Lebanon as an independent state (Schultz 2001). This was before the 1948 establishment of Israel rendered Arab Jewry an impossible identity, arguably most significantly by "cruel Zionism"'s undercover violent acts against Jews who were native to Arab states (Giladi 2006). On the other hand, it is interesting to find Lebanese Jews - whose numbers have dwindled to but a dozen individuals - still figure, even if through rare memories, in the figment of the city's hierarchic cultural legacy (Darmency 2016).

Another rare person to mention Jewish neighbours from back to the late 1950s, was an elderly and upper class former tenant of the "White building." Herself a Maronite Christian, whose family fled their Basta home at the time of civil conflicts of 1958, Nada

Saidi inhabits the obverse position to Katia, being entirely legitimised by her class, religion and cultural capital, not least through her association with the ruling elite. At the mature age of 80-something, she regards the “White building” and Khalid Street as the place of her childhood, a distant past and a social order of a totally different character to the present. “People used to accept their poverty back in those days, not like today when they are revolutionaries,” she told me, expressing a measure of distaste at the word “revolutionaries.” The view from the pinnacle of the hierarchy bespeaks once again how class dynamics, particularly anxiety over the disruption of a convenient and beneficial political and economic order for some, inform ideas about entitlement to life and place in the city, and who or what is out of place.

## MEET THE CLEANERS

I sat with Faris, the independent broker I mentioned in Chapter One, in a cafe in Achrafieh, a predominantly Christian neighbourhood of Beirut. Faris is himself half Greek Orthodox Christian from his mother, half Druze<sup>42</sup> from his father, and foregrounds one of his dual sectarian identities strategically in his business dealings, depending on which is more likely to earn the trust of potential clients or partners. I met him through common acquaintances of mine, after which we met alone for several talks and walks through the city. He had partnered with a Maronite Christian family, the Salibas, in purchasing a piece of mountain property and reselling it soon after, making a whopping profit of some 200 per cent for them and himself in less than a year. This earned their trust and admiration, whetting their appetite for more of the same. During that period of time, Mrs. Saliba (Faris’ main partner), lauded his business genius, attributing his trustworthiness to his Christian half. “You know his mom is Christian,” she would remind me. The next time new real estate ventures presented themselves, Faris and Mrs. Saliba jointly bought from multiple owners two buildings built in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century that they intended to resell. Faris was able to negotiate the buildings’ prices down because they came with “issues,” such as unpaid taxes, bills and municipal dues,

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<sup>42</sup> The Druze are a denomination of Islam, derived from Ismaili Shiism whose lineage is traced back to the 11th century, and is infused with classical Greek philosophy and Gnosticism to create a sectarian minority found exclusively in Palestine/Israel, Syria, and Lebanon and Jordan (including a significant diaspora). Setting themselves apart from mainstream Islam, the Druze play a pivotal role in Lebanese politics, the vacillating stances of its leadership often argued to tip the balance of power one way or the other in entrenched political disputes.

pending legal and personal disputes between tenants and the landowners over rent and the said unpaid dues. Faris paid these dues and did all the necessary formalities that enabled removing these obstacles and secured additional funds from a bank “on the basis of personal trust rather than collateral,” he boasted, registering the property and getting title deeds. Meanwhile, Mrs. Saliba’s role was purely as investors. In addition to Faris’ hand in cleaning the properties, he also kept his ears to the ground for an attractive developer to resell to, because neither he nor the Salibas were interested in redeveloping the property themselves. Despite his keen lookout and reputed bureaucratic skill, after several years the two buildings would still not sell. By 2013, when the Salibas faced some financial difficulties, they grew worried and more eager to cash back on their investment, even without profit if necessary. Disappointed that they were not getting the fast earnings they won in the first venture (times for real estate had gradually plateaued), they began regretting having collaborated with Faris, who they now saw as the dubious Druze. “How did we ever let this Druze man insert himself into our lives like that?!” Mrs. Saliba exclaimed after sleepless nights worrying about her money. From her Christo-centric perspective, his credibility and trustworthiness were now associated with the less favourable religious identity.

From his dual sectarian identity, but his proclaimed secular beliefs, for Faris “cleaning real estate” strictly meant removing formal, legal and state bureaucratic obstacles that might hinder the reselling and development of property, which is his main interest and skill. A “physics genius” at university by his own qualification, Faris emigrated in the late 1970s from Beirut to Cyprus at the relatively young age of 18 years, interrupting his advanced studies in physics in order to help his older siblings in a business venture, which he claimed he made extremely successful against many odds, suddenly elevating his family’s living standards and earning himself social credibility and recognition. Having entered the world of business and finance, he moved to London to study and eventually work in finance for decades. It was not until 2006 that he returned to Lebanon, having come-of-age professionally as a financial facilitator and business advisor in a reputedly more rational and rigidly regulated order than Lebanon, where law enforcement is consistently criticised as lax, “chaotic” and subject to personal clout, and where years of Civil War are often blamed for bureaucratic unravelling.

I attribute his understanding of cleaning strictly by financial and formal procedure to a prevalent penchant, through which practitioners in his social status come to define their professional competency. Such competency draws its legitimacy from

mimicry of “Western” bureaucratic stringency, presumes to be a sign of more accomplished rationality and modernity. It denigrates - in discourse but not practice - local-style “wheeling-dealing” and personalistic relations (Eames 1986). Not only are Western bureaucratic modes of production not as rational and non-Western ones not as symbolic as they are made out to be (Herzfeld 1992). But, the urban professionals who pride themselves on achieving desirable outcomes by so-called “correct” or “clean” means - in their minds corresponding to a rationality that is more ethical than the “dirty” and “illicit” dealings of market’s sharks, necessarily practice interpersonal and symbolic interactions explicitly to get benefits and services from the Lebanese state bureaucracy and its private extensions. Such proficiency is often called *shatara*, or street-smart competency, which is conveniently lauded by those who manage to tap such benefits, and criticised by those you are used and abused for or beaten to the such opportunity. Another rhetoric is that without *shatara*, you cannot get things done or done adequately within the corrupt state and its labyrinthine bureaucracy. Allegedly, you cannot even get them done legally without a bypass through some *shatara*. As Yasir, a well-established upper middle class and self-labelled “honest” developer once avowed to me, “Ironically, we have to resort to illegal procedures, like bribery and *wasta*,<sup>43</sup> just in order to have our construction projects implemented properly according to regulations.” Yasir’s statement reaffirms the perceived superiority and cleanliness of Western-style rational bureaucracy, while (inadvertently) leaving unchallenged the tenets of building regulations themselves, which were drafted and implemented through elite informality for the private interest of government officials turned mega-contractors (Fawaz). Such discourse and practice of some urban professionals who work in urban renewal in Beirut, seeks moral correctness in attention to “proper” bureaucracy and law abidance. While relegating symbolic and interpersonal channels of procedure to “chaos” out there, they do nothing to challenge the self-proclaimed “goodness” and “cleanliness” (remember “happiness”) of the building regime and its seats of power and capital, which the law evidently guards.

In addition to foregrounding “cleaning real estate” as a string of bureaucratic procedures, Faris and my meandering conversations and explorations through Beirut, revealed some of his strongest sentiments about the city’s recent and not so recent transformations. Faris, who finds the new rental law too lenient on old tenants,

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<sup>43</sup> *Wasta* means personal connection and the reliance on it in order to access goods or services in the private and public sector.

champions the idea that private real estate ventures should displace, and “tidy up” all poor and informal settlements in the city and some of its suburbs (the Muslim ones). Meanwhile, he takes particular issue with the growing prominence in the demographics, wealth and power of Shiite Muslims in Beirut. For instance, he called their settlement “expropriation” (*musadara*) in the formerly Armenian Christian neighbourhood of Khandaq al-Ghamiq and the traditionally Sunni neighbourhood of Basta/Bachoura. Mainstream media, particularly ones who are critical of the Amal Movement and Hizbollah, repeatedly called squatting in this and other areas “occupation.” One survey conducted in this neighbourhood showed the area to be of mixed residential status now, some with ownership, some on rent control, the “squatting” status having been largely resolved in all but the fewest exceptions through a government-led settlement in the late 1990s (Saksouk & Bekdache 2014).<sup>44</sup> Siting examples of gentrification in London, particularly Shepard's Bush, as good examples of cleaning up rundown neighbourhoods, Faris's narrative criminalised the Shiite dwellers of those neighbourhoods and areas in Beirut's southern suburb. Though they may once have been disenfranchised war refugees, today they have overstayed their welcome, while the aesthetics and ethics of their dwelling is offensive, even dangerous. Faris warned that “political forces” writ large, but potentially personified in individual politicians such as Nabih Berri (leader since 1980 of the Amal Movement) and “his posse,” are “deliberately re-engineered” Beirut in such a way as to shrink its authentic Sunni and Christian hold on the city and its suburbs in promotion of “Shiite spatial and political expansion.” The year Faris returned to Beirut, 2006, was the year that Israel bombed Hizbollah neighbourhoods and regions across the country. On his arrival, he became a member of a private coalition of people (including anti-Hizbollah and ant-Amal men) who were debating the possibility of establishing a political party alternative to Amal and Hizbollah. He soon left the group when it seemed to him an effort destined for defeat, and too internally divided to challenge the Shiite political parties' military and financial advantage over the city. Faris often cited his *classe* Shiite friends and acquaintances as confirming this theory, made all the more legitimate from the intimacy of their own community so-to-speak.

Most of the people Faris introduced me to when I asked to learn more about

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<sup>44</sup> In 1993, the Ministry of the Displaced and its Central Fund for the Displaced were set up in order to finance housing, restoration and reconciliation initiatives for nationals who have been displaced during the Civil War. Also intended to speed up the process of evicting (in essence displacing again) the displaced from private property, the process was, however, fraught and riddled with complications and conflicts, both individual and political, including within government (Sawalha 2010: 111, 131).



urban renewal were bank managers. Faris knew them in his capacity as financial and legal adviser to his own clients, and as small-time buyer and seller of real estate himself. Meanwhile, he also occasionally acted as adviser to the bank managers, who were themselves property owners in Beirut and struggling to resolve various issues that stood in the way of renewal. In a word, he was helping them clean their real estate including removing tenants from inherited and ageing property. His narration of these tenant-owner standoffs invariably demonised the tenants as impostors, while sanctifying the owners' entitlement to reclaim their property and draw material benefits from it, including demolish it if they so chose. He often attributed tenants' refusal to clear out with allegations that they were "playing dirty," pulling political strings, and wherever the case applied, he was quick to point out their connection to Shiite politics, leaving unmentioned connections to other religio-political groups.

At one occasion, Faris introduced me to Abu Abed, 70-something year old freelance real estate broker who "cleaned real estate" as well and whom he respected for being "clean." To be sure, Abu Abed prided himself in being at once a rational man and above utilitarianism or any avarice for money. Whenever I met him, he was dressed to a T, in shiny shoes and starched shirt, either hanging out in Ras al-Naba' at the office of a local *mukhtar* or with the owner of a gas station on Damascus Road. He promised to be "punctual" to all our meetings, giving me a time "in British time, not in Lebanese," he said meaning that he would be on the specified hour, not a minute later or earlier, nor completed off the mark unlike like the "unpunctual Lebanese." With Abu Abed, however, legitimate action upon the city is not only achieved through bureaucratic uprightness, but also through claims of historical authenticity to Beirut and a morally correct honest trade and philanthropy. Abu Abed's family have been Sunni Beirut merchants for generations, his father and grandfather owned a hardware store in Beirut's city centre prior to the Civil War. Abu Abed was always proud to say he was a former classmate of the current Prime Minister, Tammam Salam, whom he saw (along with himself) as amongst the last remaining "true Beirutis" of our time. He felt disenfranchised by the Civil War's destruction of his family's business and Solidere's post-war era of reconstruction and forcible eviction of former downtown home and shop owners. As such, he was amongst the Sunni Beirutis who staunchly opposed the Hariri family, who initiated Solidere and post-war reconstruction in the city, as he regarded them and "their posse" as illegitimate new-comers with new money who rose and

unrightfully took hold of the city and its resources.<sup>45</sup> Abu Abed was himself something of a downwardly mobile petit bourgeois without formal employment or stable source of income save, I deduced, the dutiful support of his children, whom he mentioned as close and loyal to him. I “deduced” because Abu Abed was reluctant to talk money, claiming that he did all his real estate services for free, “for the love of God.” But by local norms of reciprocity and favour, no one would accept someone else’s services for free without earning the reputation of a scrooge or a scoundrel. Even when someone tells you their service is for free, the subtext is “you are generous and we are deserving” (*inta karim w-nihna mnistahal*), meaning payment is at your discretion and your discretion has consequences that depend on your generosity. In line with Bourdieu’s notion of distinction, the underbelly of this sort of performed indifference to material value is frequently an eagerness to demonstrate social status where money is ample enough to be ignored (1984: 7). Contradiction would have it, that while attention to commissions was rhetorically beneath the bourgeois morality of this elderly man, he had nevertheless met with grave disappointments in his life, including being cheated out of a fair fee. This made him regard the professional domain of real estate as full of “lies and hypocrisy.” This was a turning point in his broker’s career, and since then he claimed he was real estate agent “just for fun,” making light of a field where his limited stability were somewhat dwarfed in the presence of larger more shrewd brokerage firms and enterprises, but where there is evidently a niche for less formal and costly services such as his and Faris’s.

While Abu Abed never spoke along the terms of Shiite and Sunni Muslim cleavages, his disdain was more for new money, and shared Faris’ anxiety about the upward mobility of some. Like Faris, he participated in the reproduction of a conservative position on Beirut’s transformation, but one that kept returning to a moment when social order was presumably as it was in the moment of the nation-state’s inception under French tutelage. This discourse selectively dispenses some elites, particularly those with cultural capital from the allegation of encroachment and “dirty dealings,” while strategically demonising others. From this standpoint, there is little

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<sup>45</sup> The Hariris, particularly former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, are also Sunnis, but from the southern city of Sidon. The political cliché is that Beirut’s Sunnis support Hariri, but evidence from fieldwork and electoral data show there is no predictable or stable contingency of support between Sunnis and the Hariris. Abu Abed belongs to an older generation whose allegiance goes to the older established political elite of the city, such as the Salams, by way of the elder, Saeb Salam, who was one of the founders of the nation-state.

difference between Berri's Amal faction with its triumphant street barricades and insignia, and the Hariri camp's demonstrative and self-praising reconstruction of Beirut. Yet under the workings of a global hierarchy of value, this equation does not hold. This is partly because from an aesthetic point of view, the neighbourhoods where the largest concentration of Amal insignia and quasi- (if not actual) military encampments exist are poor rundown and congested neighbourhoods, such as Khandaq al-Ghamiq. Meanwhile, the emblem of Hariri's intervention on the city, the "Solidere area," is a prim and polished upper middle class urban cluster, with the highest real estate prices and largely empty of residents. From the standpoint of intervention by real estate practitioners whose interests must remain allied to the market, Solidere fits a globally recognised, easily marketable, "clean" corporate aesthetic, in ways that poor and older neighbourhoods, such as Basta, are external to, although rapidly trying to emulate it in a different guise. Add to that, if we look at this distinction from the angle of Western geopolitical interest in the region, while the Sunnis and Hariri particularly are on the "good" side with America and Western Europe, the Shiites are politically allied with the axis of evil (Syria, Iran, Russia).

The selective reification and demonisation of particular places, people and forms of dwelling in Beirut, which infuses the discourse and action of some real estate practitioners, is partly an issue of sectarian politics in the city. Research on the ways rival sectarian community leaders and factions compete politically (and militarily) through urban intervention and acquisition of space has been extensively researched elsewhere and is not the central concern of this chapter (Makdisi 1994, Mermier 2013, Nagel 2000). Yet what emerges from my ethnography is how entitlement to the city is expressed through aesthetic and ethical perceptions that establish hierarchies of value so powerful that they transgress particular subject positions, to the point of self-deprecation. This was made starkly evident to me when I interviewed Abu Hussain, a Shiite man in his 70s, originally from the south, who had tried for decades to prosper in Beirut, by doing contracting and development work with his brothers. Originally an electrician, he had made some money from employment in the Arab Gulf, before returning to try and work independently in Beirut, like many had done. But when he partnered with his more successful brothers on a project, they framed for embezzlement and he was imprisoned. Disgusted with his fate, and keen to demonstrate to me his honest nature, he dissociated himself from his family, his brothers and with the political affiliation normally associated with Shiites in Beirut and his villages. A staunch opponent of

Hizbollah and of Palestinian and Syrian influence on Lebanon, and a supporter of the Phalangists, he claimed that his close friends and relatives nicknamed him Camille Chamoun<sup>46</sup>. From a position of marginality, it was as if Abu Ali associated himself with the top ranks of the global hierarchy of value, as redemption from the denigration of his own subject position.

The practitioners of real estate I discussed, whose work and life depends on the smooth flow of evacuating obstacles from the way of cleaning real estate, are themselves positioned within the field of their profession and their social position. As real estate professionals, they objectify the inhabitants (particularly tenants) of the properties they want to clean, relegating them, together with bureaucratic formalities and material extensions, to the order of obstacles in the way of renewal, of embitterment and progress generally. However, the actual everyday struggle to remove these obstacles, including ones relating directly to residents, implicate them also as residents (owners or tenants) of the city and subjects of the nation. Professionally they are well placed to edify the interests of gentrification, indeed their own prosperity or survival in the city depends on it. But as Beirutis all, they are not impervious to the effects of the cultural hierarchy, according to which they presume to work. That hierarchy is “[m]ore constant than any particular set of its expressions in the comfortably vague sense - the common sense - that, at any given moment, people know what it is, that they know what the good, the beautiful, and the appropriate are” (Herzfeld 2004: 3).

## CONCLUSION

Superimposed frames of recognition of others, produce a global hierarchy of value that is implicated in zones of exclusion and inclusion in the city, that manifest themselves through metaphors of dirt and cleanliness. This chapter explored how such frames are summoned and reproduced through contests and conflict over dwelling in or profit from urban property, as made manifest through practices of material sabotage and perceptions of particular bodies and modes of dwelling as clean or dirt. Drawing on Douglas and Herzfeld, I explored how various relations to property and various dwellers’

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<sup>46</sup> This is a reference to Lebanon’s President of the Republic (1952-1958), and founding leader of the Nationalist Founding Party, which was allied and closely affiliated with the Christian parties and militias, such as the Phalangists, who fought against Muslim coalitions during the Civil War. Gaining such a nickname would be quite uncommon within the Shiite community.

lives and bodies are valued within these frames, and how notions of dirt and cleanliness intervene in their relations, in light of the imperative to clean real estate for renewal. In addition to revealing the production and perpetuation of existing and age-old binaries and hierarchies of entitlement to the city, this ethnography shows how these frames figure in the fantasy of deliberate harm between competing dwellers. Such harm is here imagined (and in the following chapter confirmed) as a strategy geared toward securing particular property-related ends and establishing orders of entitlement and access to dwelling in the city.

In addition to resolving (or dissolving) the moral-material entanglements of co-inherited property discussed in the previous chapter, the prevalent form of dissolution for the purpose of renewal that is here depicted is the eviction of old tenants and squatters from decayed properties. In the stories above, tenant-owner disputes over eviction or compensation prompt tenants' suspicion that owners are materially and culturally "dirtying" property to evict them. This includes allegations that non-resident owners are sabotaging infrastructure as well as housing foreign migrant workers in the premises. Such views are the vestiges of Western colonial hierarchy's of race, nationality and wealth, as well as France's allegiance to Lebanese Christendom. These frames of recognition persist in shaping entitlement to the city from the perspective of those who feel they are losing ground in the city, including Sunnis and Christians versus Shiites, who are stereotyped as having gained political strength. A distinction is made between *classe* and *mish classe* Shiites based on the age of their wealth, and their ability to perform Western-style modern ethics and aesthetics.

Meanwhile, the chapter also discusses how real estate brokers and agents are embedded in the politics of entitlement as dwellers and professionals, from their positions as agents of cleaning real estate. From the perspective of those who stand to benefit from a particular urban renewal, the cleaners' professional success at accomplishing sales through *shatara* if possible, exceptionally absolves (or forgives) them of their personal position in the hierarchy of value, if this position is indeed subject to denigration. The historical backdrop to this idiomatic cleaning is the clearing of war rubble and dwellers from Beirut city centre, making way for its controversial reconstruction. Beirut's post-war reconstruction, which began in early 1980s, well before the Civil War ended and continued thereafter, was championed under the discourse of cleaning and even documented using that word. Followed by the ensuing reconstruction that Solidere began in the mid-1990s, this involved clearing war rubble and beautifying,

but also gentrifying and clearing out “illegitimate” dwellers from the city’s historic city centre. Such was the recent precedent to the imperative of cleaning understood as appropriating urban property into the neoliberal urban growth-machine by renewal.

I propose that residential and political insecurities, heightened by the strong incentive to renew property, channel dwellers’ competition over urban space through the prism of established cultural hierarchies of value and ownership status, religious sect, class and nationality/race. Specifically, as regards entitlement to the city, private ownership takes precedence over tenancy or squatting. Squatter or informal dwellers, housed with owners’ consent, take precedence over old tenants on decaying renewable property, in so far as the possibility to evict them is easier and instrumental to keeping property clean for renewal. In discourse and increasingly in practice as old rent gets liberalised, old tenancy has (a now shrinking) legality but social illegitimacy from the dominant owner-privileging perspective. As regards the practice of cleaning real estate to render it ready for market exchange, which brokers and agents engage in, this position is legitimised - again from those who benefit from or covet profit by urban renewal - as a clean and legitimate enterprise. Such a practice is bolstered by bureaucratic facilitation and the culturally sanctioned utilitarian category of *shatara* or adeptness.

In this wobbly hierarchy of discrimination and distinction, those discriminated against may themselves in turn discriminate against other groups that are situated at lower rungs of globally valued and locally inflected ideals. Dwellers use a logic of othering that mirrors the Othering to which their own kind is sometimes subjected by those who perceive themselves as still more “authentic inhabitants” of the street and neighbourhood. Caught up in a deadlock with competitors over urban space, they flag up the bodies of unwanted ethnic, class and national others as deliberate repellents, dirty entities used to clean them - the “rightful” dwellers - out. The clean and sweet real estate (*iqar nathif zarif*) is thus produced by privileging private ownership and old “classe” money, while placing them (along with white, Lebanese and Christian as the need may be) somewhere at the top of intersecting value systems. Ironically, most Southeast Asian migrants are themselves professionally involved in cleaning work, but as maids, janitors, and garbage collectors. By this culturally imperialist logic, which is dislodged even from speakers’ own travails (in their own poverty and menial labour, or travails in real estate), “dirty” bodies are deployed in a dirty game that cleans out cleaner bodies from neighbourhoods that once were cleaner and will now again need cleaning.

## CHAPTER THREE

## MAINTENANCE, DECAY AND DELIBERATE DEBRIS

## INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I attend to the ways that maintenance and decay of houses are implicated in the contest over property between tenants and owners in the decrepit houses of my fieldsites. In the previous chapter, I focused on how the notion of “dirt” is symbolically deployed in and imbues interpretations of legitimate entitlement to the city. I also drew on the idiom of “clean real estate” as property, which is ready for renewal, having been cleared of any bureaucratic or relational obstacles. This chapter continues the exploration of the tenant-owner relationship, particularly owners’ wishes to be rid of tenants, this time focusing on material decay as the interface of the contests between these competing groups. In what follows, I discuss cases of tenant families and resident landlords attending (or *not* attending) to their decaying houses, and assessing the implications that decay has on their lives and on their prospects for continued dwelling in their homes and in the city. I focus particularly on the way maintenance and decay become strategies of spatial exclusion in my interlocutors’ practices and discourses, as they reflect on the decay and debris within and around their domestic spaces. The ethnography shows how tacit terms of uneven reciprocity between rent control tenants and small owners in a lower-to-middle income Beirut neighbourhood produces diverging priorities and temporal horizons of dwelling for differently-situated protagonists. Moreover, contrary to many scholarly accounts and interpretations of urban ruin and ruination (Stoler 2008), the decay of my ethnography is not just the passive erosion and corrosion of matter that has come under the influence of the natural elements (Simmel 1958), nor is it just the circumstantial wear and tear of prolonged habitation. Nor indeed, is it always the sure sign of the withdrawal from urban spaces as literature on disinvestment and gentrification emphasises (Edensor 2005, Millington 2013).

In my fieldwork context, with its socio-political particularities and constraints, decay emerges as a tool for staking and safeguarding claims over contested urban property within the temporal horizon of urban renewal. Within my thesis’ overarching aim to develop the concept of institutionalised neglect, in this chapter I introduce the

sub-concept, “deliberate debris,” to discuss how landowners in precarious economic conditions use decay and dereliction to secure their temporal and spatial advantage over and amongst dwellers they deem Other and unwanted. This advantage implies continued dwelling for as long as possible in the near future, avoiding gentrification, and preferably in the same or similar neighbourhoods as before but as close to Beirut as possible, where land prices are exclusive. As will become clear in what follows, I have termed the main instrument of this strategy deliberate debris based on landowners’ claims that they have intentionally allowed otherwise habitable spaces on their properties to become cluttered and decayed, in order to dissuade tenants, refugees and squatters who might request, demand or plead to make their homes in them. So, unlike the case in the previous chapter where landowners strategically house informal (undesirable) dwellers in their property in order to expedite the eviction of (undesirable) old tenants, here they instrumentally repel dwellers with debris having imminent renewal in mind.

What do I mean by maintenance and decay, and how are these rendered ethnographic objects, through observation and interpretation? On the aesthetic level, taken literally as the encounter of the sensing body with the material world, decay in my fieldsites consist of the transformation of the materiality of a house through fraying, cracking, rotting, rusting, loosening, swelling, swaying, collapsing and peeling, which expose the interiority or the material constitution of a built structure. Often the bodies of inhabitants are, by extension, exposed to various natural and artificial elements such as rain, wind, cold, heat, dust, smog, insects, mould, stench, falling concrete debris, peels of paint and plaster shavings. Decay is also busted water pipes, frayed electric conduits that sever currents or cause short circuits, clogged waste water and sewage outlets that burst, leak, backup or overflow; in other words, poorly functioning infrastructure. On this level, maintenance is any activity of reparation that seeks to redress these issues, whether in makeshift or long-term fashion - in this particular context usually the former - and the technical repertoire deployed and available to do so. Particularly among residents living in hand-to-mouth financial circumstances whose decaying houses inconvenience and harm their everyday life while they cannot afford either to leave or repair them, decay is at once the condition of their houses and the persisting burden that weighs heavy on their daily sense of wellbeing in their bodies, in the house, in the neighbourhood, and ultimately in the city. Some of my interlocutors expressed a sense of embarrassment at the “dishevelled” condition of their houses, which they sometimes contrasted with newer “proper” houses, lamenting the immaterial permutations of this material decay, namely



their financial constraints in the form of a downturn or foreseeable doom. Others complained of physical ailments such as rheumatism, asthma, and headaches from chronic mould, dust or cold. As such, aside from patchy and minimal repairs to the material structure of the house, maintenance emerges as dwellers' ability to make do and endure the discomforts and hazards of decay, by the redress of bodily discomfort and even psychological distress, which included the use (and occasional abuse) of pharmaceutical drugs or alcohol.

As I discussed in the thesis Introduction, institutionalised neglect is the nexus of various patterned, accumulated and long-term practices that have routinised urban renewal and thereby expedited the decay of old properties. This chapter contributes to the concept with a view onto tenants' and owners' creative manipulations and interpretations of the conditions of maintenance and decay in their daily lives and in their attempts to shape dwelling in the present and foreseeable future. What status and meaning does decay, the marker of the passage of time through the process of ageing, have in a regime that relies on displacing the old and reifying the new and shiny? What sense of place and modes of dwelling emerge for those whose lives are most intertwined with the decay of an old house, as opposed to those who theorise about it, those who fetishise it, and those who imagine its salvation? How are maintenance and decay made to intervene in the relationship between urban dwellers with conflicting priorities?

The ethnography that follows is based on my observation and inquiry into people's responses to decay in their homes and its effect on quotidian living. In the field, I observed and asked interlocutors what decay was doing to their houses, what they in turn did with decay, what place and proportion it occupied in their concern and finances. They showed me and spoke at length about the subject. I interrogated the meanings of the idioms they had about decay, as well as their imaginings, anxieties and plans for continued dwelling in their homes, their neighbourhood and the city generally. Having myself inhabited a couple of decaying houses under rent control while growing up in Beirut, I was able to probe some of these issues from the position of first-hand experience in the material and affective qualities of maintaining life in such dwellings. The ethnography in this chapter, as in Chapter Two, reveals the distinct possibilities that emerge from the positions of old tenants and property owners. Although both may reside in decaying houses, their positionality summons different strategies toward decay, which in turn acquires different values as instrument or disruption to dwelling. For example, though they both live in material decay, taken literally as dishevelment and disrepair or

figuratively as decline or precarity of dwelling itself, tenants endure under the perpetual risk of eviction, while owners worry about being cheated out of their fair share of inheritance by kin (explored in Chapter One) or conniving developers (explored below). In what follows, I elaborate these ideas through ethnographic vignettes, showing that despite their distinction, and in the absence of laws or policies to restrain speculation, decrepitude or violent eviction, tenants and owners endure in material decay and indeed deploy such decay in the bid to continue dwelling in their neighbourhoods. Among tenant and owner interlocutors alike, anxiety about exclusion or loss linger in the decaying houses they inhabit, revealing the threat of the global driving force of gentrification through the lived experienced at a localised and intimate scale.

## DECAY, DELIBERATENESS AND DELIBERATIONS

Explorations of gentrification often explain how neighbourhoods are gradually abandoned and buildings and houses come to be derelict, through the notion of disinvestment, or the withdrawal of belief, finance, and eventually of dwelling from a place (Shaw 2009, Slater 2011). In more political economic renditions of this process, disinvestment refers generally to the state's withdrawal of infrastructure and subsequently of capital from a given neighbourhood, whose eventual dereliction and its abandonment by former impoverished residents attracts new investments looking to redevelop cheap land for higher income users (Harvey 2006). Thus, urban decay and the gentrification that it often attracts are construed to make up waves of investment and disinvestment in the cyclic growth of cities and the displacement of its most vulnerable dwellers (Glass 1964, Slater 2011, Smith 1990). In such accounts, disinvestment produces material decay, or ruin, which in turn signals the socio-economic decline of its dwellers. By the reverse observation, one could say that where so-called urban ruins are found, there would one also find disinvestment. In examples from the post-industrial cities of north America and northern Europe, such as Chicago and Detroit, Manchester and London, this equation has repeatedly been established in the literature (Massey 1994, Millington 2013). Others commenting on gentrification in the Global South have tried to nuance theories of gentrification and disinvestment in ways that take local experience and practice into account. Some have focused on disinvestment's variegated outcomes for displacement for instance (Shaw 2009), on initiatives that have grappled with varying

outcomes (Lees 2012), or indeed on how global and trans-historical forces leave their mark in such localities (Stoler 2008).

After Stoler's manner, ruin and "ruination" sometimes get theorised together as dual facets of the single event of disinvestment. In these attempts at nuancing the material experience of gentrification, the role of decay itself and of repair (or the lack thereof) get side-lined. So while the ethnography in this chapter insinuates the conjunction between physical decay itself and the strains upon inhabitants' sense of place in relation to other dwellers, and the embodiment of the conditions of possibility of continued dwelling in Beirut, the primary focus is on how this dwelling field shapes the meaning of decay. I see no intrinsic value in flagging up a local versus a global interpretation of disinvestment and decay, nor a particularist versus a universalist one. I take stock, however, of how the structural circumstances within which urban renewal in Beirut unfolds - which are not unique to the city per se - make of decay something more than the outcome of nature's work on human-made urban matter.

From a position that is critical of the reification and aestheticisation of ruins, practice theory guides this analysis of the relationship between tenants and owners who live in decaying houses. Taking into account the threat of gentrification that their inhabitants face, the ethnography here explores how maintenance and decay become strategies in the contests between the owners of lucrative land and tenants under rent control. This "artificial depression of rents," which is also found in other locations such as central Rome (Herzfeld 2009: 254), not only produces a debt from uneven reciprocity between tenants and owners as discussed in the previous chapter. It makes dwelling affordable where it has otherwise become prohibitively expensive. Under such conditions, owners believe tenants should count their blessings - and they often do - for having a roof over their heads. Yet this does not detract from the discomforts, costs and hazards of living in a gradually more decrepit environment. It is a condition of dwelling that contains its own imminent demise on two fronts: the risk of collapse and the risk of eviction. Insinuated in the houses' aesthetics of material decay, this demise is wrought in the institutionalised neglect that Beirut's neoliberal regime of urban renewal produces. Along side other forms of cleaning and resolving inheritance deadlocks that I discussed earlier, owners seek to capitalise on the potential for renewal by clearing their properties of its non-owner entanglements as well. Thus, the owners of this chapter's ethnography, particularly those who live on their properties, proclaim to use debris and decay as a strategy for repelling or evicting occupants, both legal tenants and unwelcome

“occupiers” or squatters. Retrospectively attributing intentionality to the act of neglecting and cluttering areas around their main domestic spaces, owners transform decay discursively and practically, into a purposeful material defence. Contrary to what neglect habitually connotes (i.e. leaving something to be), deliberate debris is how owners clear and possibly incubate their decaying property for speculation. Visions of future reinvestment, made tangible by examples in neighbouring plots and across the city, ignite their aspiration to elevate themselves from their own dwelling in decay and economic vulnerability, or to furnish themselves with much-coveted surplus capital.

Disagreement with tenants over compensation values, the misaligned visions amongst co-owners themselves, and a keen ambition to tap the value of property accentuates owners’ base-line resentment toward rent control tenants who will not go away or typically reject compensations. Even where long-standing social and kinship ties connect them, the conditions of the implicit debt of dwelling on lucrative land while paying negligible rent, and tenants’ inability to afford new houses with the modest compensations offered, infuses the relationship with resentment and mutual suspicion (Conk 1986). While owners imagine tenants to be overstaying their welcome, tenants imagine owners as deliberately harming them by neglecting repairs. Trying to defer eviction from their long-term homes, and ultimately from the city, tenants view owners occasionally as benevolent or permissive, if they can afford to wait and speculate on their properties or have made their lives elsewhere. But in the case where owners hover persistently and vigilantly, all forms of decay and disrepair are channelled through the suspicion of deliberate harm. In such cases, tenants imagine their owners clandestinely bursting water pipes, snipping power lines, and even secretly (and not so secretly) wishing to collapse the roofs over their heads just to be rid of them.

Deliberate debris, therefore, is the term I propose to conceptualise the dual facets of decay and disrepair in deliberations between owners and tenants over their presence or eviction from property that is slated for renewal. On the one hand, it is the harm that tenants imagine their landowners wish them by their sheer neglect of vital repairs, which sabotages dwelling in their houses. Intriguing deliberations over the outcomes of such decay emerge from these imaginaries, including the likelihood of collapse and the attribution of decay as heritage in a bid to summon public preservation. On the other hand, deliberate debris represents the ways lower-income landowners claim to deploy decay and maintenance in their effort to remove or repel potential occupants from their properties, confirming tenants’ imaginations that they wish them harm. Though nature

may have a hand in the physical, molecular or biological composition of decay, in this ethnographic context, social relations lay claim on its political and economic outcomes. Rather than cultural lore chiselled by the hand of pristine nature, this decay is rendered as a weapon, a security net, which if managed wisely guarantees owners' continuity in the city or initiates them into the much-coveted sanctuary of capital accumulation, which drives Beirut's urbanisation and maintains its real estate sector.

### CRACKED WALLS AND COLLAPSING CEILINGS

Fatima and Jumana Zubaydi, two unmarried sisters in their 60s, are in conflict with one of the many co-owners of the property they have inhabited since childhood. Their rent control lease on the ground floor flat of the decaying three-story house on Khalid Street has passed on to them from their father who passed away in the mid-1990s. Though they were among eight siblings, the sisters were the only ones legally entitled to inherit the lease, their brothers opening marital homes of their own and their sisters moving to their husbands' homes in what is a predominantly patrilocal kinship system. For several years now, Mazin, one of the "unfriendly" proprietors, wanted to evict the Zubaydi sisters in the hope of selling the property for a profit or planning a redevelopment (I never got the chance to interview him since he lived abroad). Meanwhile, they had insisted on remaining, continuing to enjoy a good rapport and the approval of another inheriting co-owner, Mazin's cousin, who lived elsewhere in Beirut. The two proprietors, and their respective family branches, were in disagreement amongst each other and had been for decades, which helped the Zubaydi's situation. But this convenient status quo was interrupted by a real eviction order a few months before I met Fatima in March 2014. At that point, the conflict between the sisters and the virulent Mazin, had come to be played out through some major cracks in the outer wall of the house, which had been gradually widening ever since the Civil War when a bomb shell landed in the second floor. Mazin based his eviction order on the grounds that the damage made habitation unsafe for the sisters and other tenants on the third floor, claiming that the house was at risk of collapsing. Although she could not dispel that possibility altogether, Fatima was making the case to the contrary. Showing more concern over being made homeless than being flattened under the debris, she said to me one day, "He wants to collapse the roof on our heads." Yet her statement, expressed in a

manner of apocalyptic despair, came more as a complaint about the socio-economic decline and struggle to remain housed in the city than a serious fear of collapse. Her expression, which I had heard from several other interlocutors, bespoke a suspicion over the ill will of owners toward their tenants that had become emblematic of such decline.

On one Saturday morning when I had a date with Fatima, she was in a hurry as always. She was glassy-eyed from the barbiturates she regularly took, initially for a painfully tense back that started during fierce battles in the neighbourhood in the 1980s. Eventually, she developed an addiction for them and was taking three tablets a day at the time we met. Animated and speaking in run-on sentences, she told me she had to take her great-grand niece to a doctor's appointment right after our meeting. Fatima had cared for this four-year old girl since birth, because her mother (Fatima's sister's daughter) had had a nervous breakdown and was perpetually in and out of hospital. As Fatima's sister was busy caring for her ailing daughter, who was in her 20s and divorced, Fatima and Jumana minded the woman's daughter for sometimes days on end. "She won't agree to go to the doctor except with me," Fatima said with pride at the privilege of the child's assurance, which presumably a mother or grandmother might alone be privy to. "I'm everything to her because I took care of her since she was born," she beamed. On that morning, Fatima was off from work as receptionist for a big architectural firm located in the Hamra area, and where she earns a little above minimum wage. She was unhappy in her job, where she had felt over-worked for years, believing such a big firm demanded more than just one receptionist. But she hung on partly because she had no better alternative and partly because her boss, a woman whose family she had worked for in various capacities in the past, continually promised to hire an assistant for her but never did. Jumana, whose wages were a little higher than Fatima's, had worked for over a decade as administrator with an Islamic charitable organisation. She was also unhappy with her job and disillusioned by the organisation, having evidence of top management's corruption, including embezzlement and sexual harassment. The sisters managed to cover their living expenses, thanks in part to having no rent to pay. This meant that they did not have to ask for financial assistance from their brothers, who would otherwise be expected to support their unmarried sisters. If evicted, however, this delicate balance of subsistence could very well be disrupted.

Fatima took me outside to look at the cracks in the outer walls of their house, which was built around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the bomb shells that fell during fierce battles between leftist groups and the Phalanges Party landed in the floor

above Fatima and Jumana's flat, right above their kitchen and bathroom area, leaving a big hole in the corner of the building that was subsequently patched up cursorily to accommodate their neighbours' continued living there. But now, years after these neighbours had left flat and no one lived there since, the damage still hampered the sisters' lives. For years, the floor above theirs had been leaking water, which seeped deep into the ceiling above their kitchen causing it to rot and begin falling apart. The water was coming from busted pipes - the room above her kitchen was her neighbours' bathroom - and from rain that crept into the stones of the exterior walls. Below the rotting ceiling, which unexpectedly rained loose plaster and bits of concrete on them, Fatima and Jumana have attempted to secure their belongings, moving the stove and a cabinet out of the way of falling debris. Parts of the stove had been permanently damaged by water. Fatima said she felt disgusted in her own house by pests like cockroaches and other bugs, and the stench that surged from the storage mezzanine above the kitchen. Despite these hazards, when she received the eviction notice, Fatima hired a civil engineer to inspect the cracks and to draft a report that ascertained the house was in fact not in any danger of collapsing. Showing me the vertical crack that spanned some two metres down, she repeated the short aphorism that the engineer had used to diagnose and explain his expert opinion of the situation. In Arabic the phrase rhymed: *Shaq bil-tul, ma tqul; shaq bil 'ard, 'al- 'ard*. This translates roughly to, "If the crack is vertical, don't worry; if the crack is horizontal, the building will fall to the ground."

By March 2014, when I first met Fatima, she had just submitted her appeal to the eviction notice, which Mazin had served her through the Beirut Governor's office, the executive authority of the city's council. Attached to her appeal letter was a report by this state-officiated civil engineer stating the house was still sound for habitation but needed repairs, which she was demanding the owners carry out. To me she said, "The rental contract stated this," which seemed unlikely unless their father had made special arrangements to that effect in the now 60-year-old agreement. Her appeal to the eviction made no mention of their rental contract. Meanwhile, the rent control act of 1992 places no such obligation on owners, renovations and repairs being left entirely to their discretion. I am not aware of any other laws that might require owners to repair their leased properties, whether or not there is a risk of collapse. However, buildings in danger of collapsing had indeed been left to crumble, sometimes tragically on their inhabitants. This was the case in January 2014 when the Fassouh Building in the Achrafieh

neighbourhood collapsed from structural instability, killing 24 people and injuring another dozen or so. None of the press articles I read about that incident mentioned any legal obligation for owners to maintain their buildings. The only obligation was on owners or developers to build structurally sound foundations and not to add floors or annexes without permits that would undermine these; something which many had done over the years. In the media, conspiracy theories abounded about real estate interests deliberately allowing the collapse to happen, while elsewhere the responsibility to prevent the collapse was deflected between the state and residents. One article argued that the Municipal Council had the obligation to inspect decaying buildings and to warn inhabitants of imminent collapse, or indeed impose evacuation. Meanwhile, Bilal Hamad, the Beirut Mayor at the time that Fassouh went down, claimed it was the residents' responsibility to alert the authorities and owners that their building was under the risk of collapse (Abou Ammo 2012).

In the wake of such a disaster, which got much public attention and raised concerns about the structural soundness of several of Beirut's other decrepit buildings, Mazin seemed to be riding a wave with an eviction order that sounded the alarm of collapse as its main argument. Trying to harness as much support for her own claim to the contrary, however, Fatima knew fully well that there was little precedent to go by of owners repairing - or indeed being made by the authorities to repair - their decaying properties. Therefore, in addition to appending her eviction retort with the engineer's diagnosis, Fatima had also been trying for months with no avail to get a hold of the Culture Ministry's heritage listing task force, to try to get the house listed. But they never answered her phone calls (it took me six months to get an appointment with them for fieldwork!), and she was always at work during their opening hours so she could not pay them a visit. Fatima wanted to shore up the house's potential heritage value to prohibit its demolition, which she had convincing grounds to believe was Mazin's main motives for evicting them. The listing would not only prohibit demolition, it would drastically drop the house's market value since it would no longer be eligible for renewal, and thereby blunt Mazin's efforts to evict the sisters with such haste, they hoped. The house was in fact listed under APSAD's survey of heritage sites, but its proprietors had the listing removed during the mass delisting campaign of 1996 (Appendix 2).

While Fatima had little hope of winning any major gains this way - neither repairs nor heritage listing - her letter to the Governorate represents an attempt to maintain the unresolved and now familiar status quo long enough so that she and



Jumana could live out their lives in the house where they grew up. More importantly, it was also a plea to continue affording dwelling in Beirut where they worked and where most of their family and friends resided. With the property's landowners dispersed in various countries abroad, several in disagreement over the shares and fates of inheritance in this and other plots of land, if their appeal went through, the sisters could at least be relieved of eviction pressure - for now. "By the time [the inheriting owners] get around to orchestrating a sale, we'd already be dead and buried," Fatima said in one of her moments of unfazed doom, which smacked of relief at the transience of her own life. So many years had already gone by in this limbo, with no drastic change, neither by way of repair, nor eviction. Although eviction would soon be more likely in their lifetime with the passing of the rent liberalising law, at the time of my fieldwork when this law was but a rumour, she perceived her own mortality to be more likely than any other tangible outcome. Could the advent of that law have been a backdrop to Mazin's strategising, a way to flag up the threat of eviction before the new law came to make true on that threat, ending rent control's exceptional grace period? The rent liberalising law was passed just a few months later, in April 2014, but since then word had already gone around about it, it was much-anticipated and much-dreaded depending on which side of the owner/tenant divide you were on.

Tenants' narratives of negotiating dwelling through maintenance and decay are not unique to the neighbourhoods where I did fieldwork. Neither are they strange to tenants from lower income-brackets nor indeed to this particular moment in time. However, they are accentuated by tenancy under rent control, and have become more pronounced in houses that have aged without maintenance through cumulative ways that render eviction more probable. I have heard of such strategies told by tenants from various other Beirut neighbourhoods, including Ras Beirut and Achrafieh. Deploying decaying houses as instruments of eviction also resonates back to the tales of Abu Abed, who grew up in a rental home in the neighbourhood of Moussaitbeh. On one occasion, he said the reason his parents had to leave the house in the 1950s, was that the proprietor stopped making repairs on the house and it began falling apart. He claimed with cynicism that this was because the proprietor "wished the house to collapse on our heads" so he could terminate the rental agreement. Seen thus from the position of non-propertied tenants of Abu Abed's generation, the landowner's malice predates many of the structural circumstances, such as rent control and urban land-grab that have become engrained in the neoliberal capitalism of the present moment. In that manner, decay and

collapse, or the perception of deliberate harm through decay, have long been institutionalised in the tenant-owner relationship.

Particularly under the terms of rent control, which ultimately apply to houses with most decay from compounded neglect and war damage over the decades past the 1950s until today, tenants in a situation similar to the Zubaydis have found themselves in weak bargaining positions. When owners receive such negligible income from old rent, tenants are rarely in any position to press owners to contribute to maintaining their properties. Particularly since they hope to demolish and renew, owners see no benefit in such investments. Tenants recognise in their heart of hearts the significant discrepancy between the market value of their houses and what they are actually paying (or very often not paying at all). In a bid to become entitled to demand that the owners make repairs, or indeed to remain in favour with their “friendly” proprietor, Fatima and Jumana have repeatedly offered to pay him a “proper” (though modest) monthly fee of a few hundred dollars. He, however, turned down the offer, preferring he too “to be rid of us by letting the house collapse on our heads” - and this is the “friendly” owners she referred to. With such disparate interests, even the best relationships are fraught by mutual suspicion and a kind of uneven reciprocity that freezes the potentials of often desperately needed profit from the perspective of small-time owners. They also keep tenants who have no other alternative in a material and moral debt to their landlords. This debt, piled on from decades adds to old tenants’ precarity and structural entrapment within the decrepit material condition of their houses. Few are the tenants who would consider demanding otherwise, few are the cases where any state deliberator would rule in favour of owners repairing the homes of their rent control tenants. Most resort to doing makeshift repairs themselves. Fatima, for instance, spent around one million Lebanese pounds a year (the equivalent of £600) on repairs. In 2014, the amount went to dressing the soggy inflammation in her kitchen ceiling, which was costing more and more every year as the moisture seeped deeper into the stone and the rate of repair works increased with economic inflation.

As the Zubaydi sisters aged in synch with their house, with no alternative property or the ability to afford new rent, this circumstantial debt may have kept a roof over their heads, but it was one that continuously risked falling down. Taken less literally, and contrary to perceptions of the proponents of gentrification and liberalised rent, without the option of affordable housing schemes or policies in Beirut, this sort of debt could have remained old tenants’ only condition of continuity in their homes, their

neighbourhoods and the city, but it has done so at the cost of precarity, risk, and discomfort. This vignette illustrated the conditions under which the interpretation of deliberate harm and mutual distrust comes to infuse the relationship between tenants and owners, focusing on the latter attempting to evict the former and the former trying to prolong their stay. In that respect, it tells a story of attempted gentrification whose terms are bracketed by particularly extreme rent control circumstances, while subsequently being negotiated through the very cracks of decaying houses. As rental law and its economic ramifications set up uneven reciprocity and debt between these two groups, it also coincides with and indeed helps to compound the kind of deliberate neglect of houses that were leased before 1992, some of which may be a century old. Their decay, the cracks and material traces of war, wear and weather, become instrumental in claims and counter claims over valuable property, perceived by owners as sources of future profit, and by tenants as the last vestige of continued dwelling in the immediate present. Embedded in these strategies are distinct temporal frameworks and notions of the future, as well as diverging relationships with the materiality of the house as dwelling place. Yet, if one takes into account tenants without alternative residences, and owners with little property, which they often must share with multiple inheritors, both tenants and owners can be said to undergo the increasing threat of marginalisation from the city. Tenants may not be able to afford exorbitant rental rates, but owners too may not be able to extract enough value from modest property shares to afford a new purchase or sustain themselves in the city for long.

Despite their distinct positionality and vested interests around a particular property, at the Tenants' Association's march on Prime Minister Tammam's house, mentioned in the previous chapter, the association's spokesman compared the predicament of owners and old tenants. Bellowing into a microphone, he warned in typical rhetoric that the discretionary verdicts being issued in landowners' favours, and the exclusionary real estate regime that they exemplify, could cause another "Civil War." The build-up of pressure, from loss of homes and exclusion, he argued, was leading the country to the "unknown." He suggested that the ruling elite, understood on a commonsensical register as embroiled in the lucrative real estate sector, is deliberately impoverishing, displacing, and instigating social conflict. With that in mind, this particular section focused more on the perspective of tenants in this relationship, and how tenants' views of their landlords' deliberate harm configures their notion of and prospects for future dwelling. In the next section, I take a closer look at this situation

from the angle of small owners who deploy decay and debris in their own efforts to gain from the prohibitive conditions of Beirut's real estate market.

## TREASURE TROVE AND TOOL-SHED

In the section on deferring to power in Chapter Two, I described at length Zina Rida's position within the patriarchal structures of her marital family, and the types of gendered discourses, material dependencies and intrusive daily practices that define this position. At one moment in that vignette, I mentioned Yusif coming by the house on Khalid Street through the kitchen door, interrupting my attempted interview with Zina and taking me on a guided tour of the abandoned annexes and cellars of the house. While in that chapter his presence was an oppressive intrusion on my hoped-for conversation with Zina, in this one he comes (to me at least) as a welcome impromptu interlocutor, full of insights on the material qualities and values of the house. Here, I also tap into a visit I had with Majid and Zina when Yusif was not present, when Majid also toured me around parts of the same areas of the house and the empty upper floors. In what follows, I discuss what different strategies, perceptions and interventions emerge on the house's material conditions, referencing to how a dwelling owner (Majid) and a non-dwelling-owner (Yusif) are differently positioned vis a vis the house. Let me begin with a brief recapitulation of some the relational and material circumstances that frame these strategies and implicate decay and debris in power struggles over dwelling.

As you may recall, Majid lived with his wife Zina and their daughter and son. Majid and his siblings grew up in the house with their father before their parents divorced, after which his father moved to another place in an adjacent neighbourhood and remarried. When Majid was around 18 years old, he left his father's new marital home and returned to his mother's house to be by her side. His three brothers followed suite and they lived out their adulthood bachelor lives there. Majid, who worked as a journalist, remained in the 350 metre-square family home after he married Zina and since his mother passed away, while his siblings opened other houses elsewhere. His eldest brother, Yusif, lived 50 metres down the road. As discussed in the Chapter One, Yusif had power of attorney over the inherited property, which contained a house of three floors, including ground-floor shop arcades, and a narrow backyard. A small two-floor annex, which was built at a later stage than the initial house, connected to the main

house by a covered stairwell in the back yard, behind the kitchen. The annex had an access door from the eastern side of the house, distinct from the house's main entrance that faced the north, and which led to the ground and second floors, also separate units. Yusif's relatively comfortable income enabled him to spend on some of the bigger repairs on this family house — he even claimed he was building four new summer villas for his daughters in the mountain town of Hammana, “with Jacuzzis” instead of bathtubs. Yusif's income clearly exceeded Majid's and Zina's modest means. That Majid had soon after their marriage forbidden Zina from keeping her paid job did not help their situation, though it did a good job of contributing to her dependency on Majid, and both their dependency on Yusif.

His demeanour betrayed the inequality. Leading me out of the kitchen door, Yusif went through the annex's entrance and ground floor apartment that now served as a cluttered and over crowded storage space, then out to the street through the eastern access door. Once out on the street, he strutted haughtily in front of the youths who manned the Amal Movement base right outside the house, and the elderly men who had kept shop in his property's arcades for nearly 60 years. Neither greeted the other, which I found surprising until I learnt from Majid during one of my last conversations with him - equally surprised that he would mention it so late in our interactions - that there was a court case between the Ridas and the shop keepers. He said the root of their dispute was that the shopkeepers were requesting ownership of new shop space in any new development that rises from the property, instead of receiving monetary compensation, but the Ridas have refused them this. Law 160 on rent control, which also organises the lease of non-residential (i.e. commercial and industrial) spaces leased prior to 1992, entitles non-residential tenants such as these shop keepers extra compensation for discontinuity. In addition to monetary compensation of 25 to 50 per cent of the property value, Article 15 of the law, requires that landowners compensate merchants for “the loss of the location, customers” and “the interruption of business” among other unspecified losses. Only in light of my belated knowledge of this legal standoff, did I comprehend the cause of the non-communication between Yusif and his long-term tenants. This detail also framed the temporal horizon of the house's sale and redevelopment. Why, I had asked Majid several times, had they not sold the house already like several others on the street and in the neighbourhood? At that point, he frequently pretended that they were in no hurry and were trying to find the best selling conditions to avoid being conned. Yet even if the Ridas were in some hurry to sell, as

Zina certainly was, this pending court case, which could by the rhythm of the Lebanese judiciary system - and particularly under the present political vacuum - postpone any verdict and subsequent prospect for redevelopment for years.

While Yusif could afford to wait, Zina and Majid could not, having younger children to educate and the rising cost of living to keep up with on a single insufficient salary, while managing the material condition of the house. While for Zina and Majid, this entailed living with and addressing decay and debris on a need-to-basis, Yusif's slightly removed position, despite his proximity to the house and his power over its fate, produced slightly different aspirations, which contrasted between Zina and him. For instance, Zina saw the debris in the abandoned floor, the annex, and the mezzanine as junk and wished they could all be trashed rather than kept there gathering dust and bugs so close to her kitchen, to which she alone had to attend. Yusif, meanwhile, considered them a treasure trove of used yet salvageable goods, whose usefulness and cost in the past made them worth keeping for the future, to be used again or sold. Walking me through the annex, he showed these things to me: a car engine dismantled some five years prior; chairs, closets, tables, and shelves enough to furnish a small flat but all chipped, broken or rusted; boxes full of odds and ends stacked high and skewed; an old refrigerator; weight-lifting equipment the bars corroded and foam cushions torn; an old mirror; broken glass; wooden boards (Figure 11).



**Figure 11:** Deliberate debris.

While he pointed to each item in this jumble of things, Yusif seemed to make a mental inventory, sometimes stating how much each one had cost, and what it needed to be usable again. His reason for showing up impromptu that day, he said, was to search for a plastic-bag-full of used water faucets that he needed for installing in his daughters' new villas that were under construction. "Why buy new ones if you already had these?" he told me as he eyed the indiscriminate pile of things, mumbling without finding them, "They should be lying around here somewhere." He recalled having salvaged some wooden window frames for part of the construction works before. All in all, he reckoned the whole collection of stuff, if sold on the market, could rake in "\$5000 at the very least" (the equivalent of £3800).

Majid considered himself the expert on the technicalities of maintenance and repairs in the house, even if he did not pay for the bigger portion of them. When I met Zina, she was frustrated with this arrangement and wished her husband's family would agree to a selling already so she could live in a "proper house" (*bayt m'abal*)<sup>47</sup>. Her mother's more modern flat in the neighbourhood of Saqyit al-Janzir exemplified such a house to her. She visited her mother very frequently and sometimes stayed for extended periods of time there, especially to escape the coldest periods of winter, one or both her children accompanying her while Majid kept the fort. Of her marital home she complained, "No matter how you clean a place like this, it always stays [read appears] dirty!" She said this without censorship or reserve in front of her husband, who unlike Yusif, she did not fear, indeed seemed somewhat disdainful toward. The improper qualities of their home converged with her sense that in her marriage, she never got the clean break from the control of Majid's patriline, which she believed would have earned them a "proper place" all their own and the ability to decide their fate and that of their children for themselves. Being thus reliant on Yusif for major repairs and for the final decision about the next move in the property's investment (the only share of property Majid owned) gave her the sense of being indebted to and confined in the space of her home and in the timeframe of its decrepitude.

While waiting for something to change, for the right development project to come knocking or for Yusif's decisive action, Majid and his family were the ones who

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<sup>47</sup> In Arabic, *bayt m'abal* has the dual connotation of being physically sound or well equipped, as well as inhabited or cared for.

lived in the house day-to-day, and knew first-hand its material needs, its deteriorations and its inventory and genealogy of repairs, including the short shelf-life of some of the makeshift ones that Majid himself experimented with. Majid kept a two-by-two metre walk-in shed, which he built inside his bedroom and where he kept all the equipment, tools and spare parts that he needed to make seasonal repairs and inspections on the house. The bedroom in question was the one he shared with his son, not with Zina, who for her part shared a bedroom with their daughter, a gendered spatial division that did not necessarily conform to typical arrangements of urban couples as far as I know. The tool-shed was cluttered and messy, there was a light hanging from its low ceiling. There were drawers and boxes of various sizes lining the walls and piled up on the floor. One could hardly enter the place, which was more like a giant toolbox than a repair shop. Majid had tools dating back to a long lineage of fix-it men in his family, including his father, and his maternal grandfather, both of whom had lived there. He proudly claimed some of these tools were over 100 years old, showing me wrenches and pliers and quizzing me on what they were called, then telling me before I even had time to say that I did not know. He looked for an ancient plier that was meant to be buried in an over-full drawer but did not find it. He said he knew where everything should be in the mess, provided that no one tampered with it. "This is my favourite place in the house," he beamed, "It's where I have my things and where I know where my things are. No one is allowed in here." This included Zina, who was not allowed to clean inside the shed.

At some point in the material deterioration of the house, some of its basic infrastructural functions got too old and stopped working properly. In order to grapple with these repairs and adjustments at minimum cost, Majid chose to buy the necessary materials and make the repairs himself. To tackle the most dangerous of these maintenance tasks, electricity, he bought and studied a giant illustrated textbook in English, which explained the basics of circuits and wiring. Over the years, he educated himself so that he now felt confident he could manage most repairs without having to hire anyone externally. He connected an extra water reservoir to the household network himself one summer when water was short and they needed one to store more water whenever government water came.<sup>48</sup> He even learned to do some electrical work,

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<sup>48</sup> In Lebanon, the government supplies water and electricity in interrupted flows at (usually) regular intervals that vary according to regions and neighbourhoods. With the exception of some autonomous regions and towns, the general rule has been that the closer one gets to Beirut's centre the more regular



replacing wires and plugs, but with great caution since he was once shocked and fell nearly unconscious. This kind of work was easy for him, and he neither liked nor trusted anyone else to fix his house. He proclaimed his great dislike for plumbers and electricians generally saying, "They would surely come here, do a lousy job and overcharge me for it." Doing things himself saved him a lot of expenses.

From his wooden sanctuary of technical artefacts and manuals, Majid's chief maintenance concern was the old red tiled roof that capped the house. During the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, fighter planes rained bombs over Beirut, which was also under siege. Majid and his three brothers were living with their mother at the time, when the whole house was in use, including the annex that they rented out to some tenants. One night, in the dead of night, one Israeli bomb came crashing through the roof and the stone fringe beneath it, nearly killing Majid and his brothers in their sleep had it not been for their mother's sixth sense, he said. Wide-eyed, Majid recollected that night vividly, "as though it happened yesterday": hearing his mother's voice from her bedroom downstairs calling repeatedly and frantically for them to wake up, insisting that they come down to the first floor immediately, he and his brothers climbing down the stairs groggy and disgruntled to have their sleep interrupted, and finally the bomb coming crashing just a few seconds after they had made their way down safely. Their bedroom was pulverised, nothing was in its place. How serendipitous was their mother's sense that danger was coming, how lucky Majid felt to have been thus rescued by her midnight calls. The second floor was never inhabited again after that, the roof and the affected side of the house were repaired only to a modicum less than their previous sturdiness. This was only to ensure that the building's structure held up and did not collapse over the lower floor where Majid and his family resided. While standing on the rooftop of the annex, Majid pointed to the affected roof above and explained to me that if left to soak, sandstone could come to weigh ten times its weight when dry, and was then likely to crumble and fall. Any leakage from the roof and onto the derelict floor would eventually reach their ceiling, causing leakage and rot as it had done in the Zubaydis' house. This was why Majid periodically climbed the tall wooden ladder up through the six-metre high ceiling of his kitchen and up to that top floor to inspect the roof and patch up any openings with his tools. I had the occasion to climb up with

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and frequent these flows are supplied. When households have larger reservoirs or several of them, they are able to store more water whenever the supply arrives to avoid shortage.

Majid as he showed me all the derelict parts that surrounded his home. This included a small intermediary level between the ground floor where he and his family lived, and the derelict second floor, a tiny place the Ridas had once rented out to a Sri Lankan manual labourer, a man. Accessible when you first climb up that tall ladder, this little abode had a lower-than-human height ceiling so we had to hunch over to go through it, attached to a minuscule kitchenette and toilet. The man was there for about a year, Majid said, but then was made to leave after he began bringing his girlfriends over to spend the night, which the family found inappropriate. Without any contract between them, and given the precarious status of this migrant worker (much like the Bangladeshi inhabitants that the Karakis allowed to rent in the White Building), the Ridas felt free to evict the man without hassle when they wanted to.

The case with the annex behind the house was slightly different. This two-floor structure was built explicitly to be rented out to tenants, who included “even a Christian family once” up until some of the most ferocious inter-sectarian battles of the Civil War reached Khalid Street. Majid mentioned the religious identity of his former tenants with some pride, as if to make evident (to me) through the house’s residential history the tolerance and cultural sophistication of his land lording family and by extension its members. However, following that lease, which ended without complications, another family allegedly came to take refuges during the Civil War from the Lebanese South (read Shiite), and occupancy was difficult for the Ridas to bring to an end. Majid recounted that after granting this family shelter in the annex based on a friendly agreement (no contract), the people stayed longer than agreed upon and brought more relatives to live with them than agreed upon. He complained still with indignation that what had started out as a case of benevolence on the part of the Ridas toward a family needing shelter until their war-ravaged village became safe again (which it did not until decades later), turned into a case of squatters taking advantage of their kindness and becoming extremely difficult to evict. Majid understood this situation in terms of Shiite-Sunni rivalry, claiming “Shiites cannot be trusted” in essence, but soon thereafter revealing an anxiety over their growing political power through local branches of the Amal Movement mainly. Majid claimed the squatters harnessed these connections to the movement to try and stay longer, and eventually to extract compensation for leaving as if a rental contract were in place when it was not. This and another similar experience Majid had with displaced families from the South moving into an office he once had in the nearby neighbourhood of Verdun - where he ran a printing business that went

bankrupt during the Civil War - made him unwilling to accept any other residents on his property.

Majid's reluctance was followed with the claim that he and his family had deliberately left the debris and decrepitude in the abandoned sections of the property, to dissuade anyone from inquiring about residence there. Time and again this claim had spontaneously punctuated my rambles through the dusty debris of houses in similar condition, where abandoned floors in multi-floor houses, annexes to single-unit villas, and surrounding gardens, stairways and nooks of residential property were piled high or strewn with an assortment of objects left over from domesticity or work and gathered there over long years. Such a position was likely affected by the fact that rental rates were relatively low in the neighbourhood, while people's expectations of compensation for terminating leases disproportionately high in owners' views. At least Majid did not think this hassle was worth it. "This place is our house, our ancestral place," he said, "Renting something out is a matter of trust, not for whoever turns up. We are looking to sell this place, but we're waiting for the right project." Meanwhile, over the years, they received numerous requests to rent for extended or short-term periods or to take shelter temporarily in times of armed conflict and mass migration such as the one Lebanon faced with the influx of Syrian refugees since 2011. Helping them avoid the pressures they might face if they refuse housing to people with powerful political backing, and to avoid the moral dilemma of refusing shelter to the politically weak and destitute, deliberate debris sends the signal to any aspiring occupant that it was unavailable by its sheer uninhabitability.

Both Majid and Yusif spoke in unison about the desire to sell the house and renew the property, however, the way that the two brothers were positioned as regards dwelling in the place, produced divergent ways of dealing with its materiality. On a number of occasions, Majid even revealed his ambivalence over the prospect of demolishing the house, while his son was point-blank against it, wishing the house could be restored. Zina's impatience to be rid of the house, meanwhile, converged with Yusif's inclination. However, Majid was most involved in the present decaying materiality of the house and its repairs, while Yusif, the main financier of its temporary upkeep, was already imagining the terms of its sale, starting with the treasure in the annex. His hypothetical sale of this debris symbolically dismantled the house, whereas Majid's repairs strove to preserve a modicum of material integrity for its habitation. The decay for Majid and the debris for Zina was in everyday terms a burden to deal with. As a sort

of redemption from this predicament and a filler for the interstice of waiting and yearning for something better attainable through something new, however, this debris and decay got narrated as instrumental for deterring the presence of unwelcome others as dwellers in the place. The debris became a shield from social and political complications that were perceived likely to lead to future economic losses, the decay being that avenue - that primary resources - out of which certain gains by renewal could be extracted. In the section that follows, I return to Abu Amir, the elderly man living alone in Moussaitbeh and scouting for developers from Chapter One. For him the claim of deliberate debris was all the more poignant given his old age and the shorter future that lay before him, and given the way he kept debris not only at the fringe of his domestic space, but actually dwelled within it.

### THE MORE THINGS STAY THE SAME

When I met Abu Amir in November 2013, the impatience to sell and redevelop his property, and the suspicion and fear over someone or something complicating that avenue was causing the old man visible anxiety. He spent his hours and days plotting and planning the ideal redevelopment, which might lift him out of his stagnant everyday and leave him with something to show for his decades of toil under exceptionally difficult conditions. As I entered his flat for the first time, I entered a domestic space where decay and debris were not just the conditions of abandoned peripheries. Abu Amir was living in the midst of a knot of stuff, a miasma of things that covered the floors and all the furniture. There were clothes, papers, rotting food, empty bottles, boxes, bags filled with more things and all of this under a thick layer of dust that rendered almost everything undistinguishable to the eye of someone just entering. He received me in his living room, moving stuff aside so I could sit on the sofa, offering me bottled juice and chocolate biscuits straight from a shopping bag that hung on the handle of the front door. As his visitor, I often struggled to turn down offers of sweets and wrapped up cakes, which I would have preferred not to eat, having once sampled a mouldy date. He would take his place on another adjacent chair moving more stuff like folders and files to be able to sit down. He was reluctant to take me on a tour of his flat at first, where he spent most of his days but from where he retreated into his brother's flat in the same building, which was significantly more tidy, in order sleep. As I got to know him better,

he took me on several rambles through the other abandoned flats in his building, which were strewn with the neglected belongings of former tenants and squatters as well as things he had stored there over the years. On one occasion, I followed Abu Amir into the heart of one such flat where for some moments we shared the space with broken couches and chairs, torn cushions and scattered fabrics, mangled metal rods, wooden planks, bottles and boots. As we walked through a long corridor, I saw a poster scotch-taped to the wall depicting a still young Nabih Berri, leader of the Amal Movement and speaker of parliament since 1992. On the floor I spotted a small figurine, which I picked up. It was a king from a Christmas crèche. Continuing to walk, not wanting to delay Abu Amir who followed close behind me, I casually placed the figurine on top of a chest of drawers in the middle of the room while artfully manoeuvring my body out to the main entrance in haste. As I looked back over my shoulder, however, I noticed Abu Amir removing the figurine from where I had just placed it and returning it to the exact spot on the floor where it had been. *Nothing must be changed at all*, I thought to myself, *everything must remain just as it has always been*. What was going on?

The property of Abu Amir was situated very near the former Green Line,<sup>49</sup> exposing it to the fiercest battles during the Civil War. This had led him and several of his family members to take up residence elsewhere in the city, at first presuming it would be temporary but eventually absents from their building until the war subsided. During my fieldwork, the property was on the cheapest per-metre square location in Beirut and Abu Amir hoped that the recent widening of the boulevard on which it stood would raise land prices. Although he had gotten several proposals for purchase, he was only interested in joint development, where his family would offer the property and developers would offer the construction giving the owners flats in the new constructions. When I first met him in November 2013, however, he had not yet found the right arrangement. He lived alone in the four-floor building, which he and his siblings inherited from their father. His sick older brother occasionally inhabits the first-floor flat, but the six remaining flats were abandoned and in complete disarray. He told me that during the Civil War, the entire building was “occupied” by displaced Shiites who crowded the building with several families per flat. When the fighting officially ended in 1989 and Abu Amir returned demanding to have his property back, they allegedly

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<sup>49</sup> The Green Line was the English name used to refer to the main demarcation line between warring factions during the 1975-1990 Civil War. See Figure 5.

refused to leave. He had been renting temporarily in other neighbourhoods while trying to create work opportunities like starting small businesses, which ultimately failed. He had interrupted his job as clearing agent at the Beirut port, where he had cleared imports for large companies throughout his young adulthood until the Civil War. This is one of those private-public mediatory jobs that require an aptitude for pushing official paperwork through a meandering clientelist state bureaucracy, extracting valuable goods with minimum delay and extortion, and highest gains in bribes and favours. Despite his aptitude for such work, he said it took him 15 years to evict the squatters from the property, partly because it was dangerously located, but also, he claimed, because the squatters pulled powerful strings within Shiite circles and not wanting to go, had the political backing to remain. Since evicting them, however, Abu Amir turned away all propositions from potential tenants. His sole objective was to redevelop the property, waiting in somewhat dire conditions for land prices to rise and the best offer from a trust-worthy bidder to arrive.

Much like Majid Rida, the difficulty Abu Amir faced in the past trying to “liberate” his property from unwanted tenants and “occupants,” made him extremely suspicious of any renewed political pressures to accommodate anyone there, and vigilant over the rapid transformations in his property’s vicinity. The property had an Amal outpost in the adjacent building and the political movement’s neighbourhood strongmen had demanded that Abu Amir lease them an empty space in his building so they could expand their base, but he refused. As reconciliatory tactic to avoid friction with them, however, he allowed them to hang the movement’s flag on his building’s exterior. In the meantime, he carefully studied and planned the next move, caught between the need to wait for land prices to rise and the urgency of his own old age and increasing physical frailty. While the Ridas were more reticent to tell me much about their plans and perhaps a little less pressed (or indeed optimistic) about any imminent redevelopment - the slow rhythm of their pending court case undoubtedly playing into that - Abu Amir’s conversation was all about plans and documents. These were mostly about what he envisioned in the future and much less about what present circumstances might enable, indeed even compromise, that vision (e.g. inheritance disputes for instance). The notion of obstacles to the renewal of his property was mostly personified in the figure of this unwanted and politically-backed Other with much more capital than himself, who is able to deploy networks and make gains in ways that threatened Abu Amir. Thus, like the Ridas, he too claimed he was keeping his building in a state of deliberate debris, not

moving a thing, lest someone should get the wrong idea that the place was open for habitation or occupation. Throughout the period when I communicated with Abu Amir and onward, whenever I passed by his house there was a green broken-down Mercedes parked under the building's entrance in such a way that no other car could fit beside it. Also a form of deliberate debris, the car was intended to prevent anybody - chiefly his Amal neighbours - from parking their cars there, he avowed.

On the numerous occasions when I visited him, he showed and carefully read out to me the names on the cadastral registries of neighbouring plots of land, whose documents he had ventured to pay for and acquire from the Beirut Land Registry department. "It is because I want to know who owns what around me and who has come and gone," he said, showing off as much of that aptitude for harnessing bureaucratic knowledge as the suspicion against the advent of new comers whom he evidently envied as much as he feared. Indeed, on several occasions he espoused that self-same sectarian anxiety about the newly wealthy and empowered Shiite "encroachment" on Beirut, which I discussed in Chapter Two. To that end, Abu Amir felt he needed to arm himself with the kind of knowledge and material he knew best, in order to safeguard his property's best use and value. For hours he explained to me what nearby construction sites (Shiite-owned ones of course) had paid for land and how much profit they had made. He showed me his renewal plan, which he drew up himself in collaboration with his brother-in-law, squeezing six 14-floor buildings on the land, a build-up that would be structurally impossible even if lying within the legally permitted land-use density. He had yet to find the partner who would execute such a vision in the manner he deemed most suitable.

Abu Amir's suspicions eventually led to us parting ways on a somewhat unfriendly note and I heard no more from him. In a last phone conversation, he accused me of being a real estate spy because he had received a recent phone call from an interested buyer. While I attempted to remind and reassure him of my discipline's oath to keep interlocutors' lives private, I realised how important it was for him to maintain the process of renewal under his strict control. In this particularly precarious context of real estate trading, despite one's eagerness to develop one's property, the offers of people one does not know through personal social connection represent more risk of being conned than welcome opportunities. Just as Majid had said that renting out one's property is not for "anybody," in Abu Amir's case teaming up for renewal is also not for "anybody," amid people who were "not from here," with their threatening sources of

power and capital. Faced with this risk, Abu Amir chose to lay low and inconspicuous. Except for the single source of light that glimmered behind the balcony door of his living room by night, one could not tell that the building was inhabited at all, and such was the message he wished to relay. The debris and decay was for him a cover under which he could take the necessary time to orchestrate the renewal that would transform this last vestige of property he had a share in, into a dwelling for his old age too. The material condition of the place in the present and how he dwelled in it now, was not as important as the potential for continued dwelling in the future, which he foresaw (or hoped at least) could become much better. His solitude and old age, which contributed to his inability to put into order the disorder in his house, produced a discourse here of wilfulness, of deliberateness, in the manner he deliberated over his property. If the debris and decay had in fact collected there from institutionalised neglect, from “occupation” and its temporary abandonment, then Abu Amir’s redemptive moment was to reclaim the property’s material present and future, but also its past by inserting his own proclaimed intentionality into it.

## CONCLUSION

In Michael Herzfeld’s ethnography of gentrification in the Roman neighbourhood of Monti, there is a fleeting mention of the use of urban materiality as a strategy of eviction. In addition to disrepair being seemingly convenient for - if not intended by - owners, the strategy takes the form of “highly irritating” repairs that are inconvenient, messy and noisy for long-term tenants (2009: 272). In his field context, we also find similarities in the affective qualities of the relationship between old tenants who are resisting evictions and new developers coming in to reinvest, thereby gentrifying the neighbourhood among other parts of the city. Vague laws, uncertainty about ones rights, misinformation, exorbitant land prices, and high stakes breed secrecy, fear and a sense of danger, he argues (2009: 256-258). The owners of his fieldsite, much like mine, are often secretive about aspects of their future plans and intentions, and suspicious of researchers being spies. In my context, set against a backdrop of uncertain rental regulations (between the old and new rental laws), weak preservation laws, non-existent public housing policy, and property laws that favour real estate development, such secrecy and suspicion combines with apparent material disrepair to speak volumes about



intent and aspiration. Through the vignettes in this chapter, I showed how urban decay is rendered deliberate through the staking of claims over urban property, and how the uneven distribution of responsibility for maintenance (essentially of owners) contributes to the institutionalised neglect of ageing houses, playing right into their eventual dereliction and the gentrification that ensues. This two-faceted purview on the materiality of dwelling, the ways maintenance and decay are lived, experienced and interpreted from the dwellers of some of Beirut's decaying houses, elaborates related orders of experience and knowledge that go beyond the domestic sites where they unfold. This purview also encompasses broader struggles over continued dwelling in the city, which reflect political struggles at the national level as well.

Landowners' and real estate practitioners' usage of the word "occupation" or "occupiers" is one indication of such an encompassment.<sup>50</sup> Referring to squatters, tenants on rent control, and Syrian and Palestinian refugees as well as (poor) internally displaced people, in a national context where colonial rule (Ottoman, French) and military occupation (Israeli, Syrian) have left profound traces on the landscape, these words bespeak a well-established imbrication between war and construction, imperialism and gentrification (Stoler 2008). The political tensions, which refract national conflicts is even more blatant than that, coming across in xenophobic attitudes towards people who get reduced to "others" and "anybodies" shaped in part within the hierarchy of values discussed in the previous chapter. In this chapter, such anybodies, at once political rivals and unwanted "occupants," change with geopolitical and demographic make-up, and also depend on the speakers' own position and perception of the success or failure of their trajectories. At the time of my fieldwork, for Sunnis who still considered their sectarian community to be the "authentic" inhabitants of Beirut and other coastline cities, the main rivals were war-displaced Shiites. Many squatted in houses left empty by owners who themselves fled the Civil War to other neighbourhoods, others acquired rental contracts, and still others have by now purchased their homes. Impoverished or downwardly mobile Sunni inhabitants and landlords have watched this transformation with dismay, feeling all the more threatened by the conspicuous presence of Shiite political factions. This suspicion was sharpened by regional conflicts in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere, and then compounded with the advent of refugees from the Syrian conflict. Attributing their precariousness to the presence of an encroaching and dominant Other,

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<sup>50</sup> Recall Faris from Chapter Two.

poorer Sunni landlords pronounced their debris as deliberate in defence against presumed losses in a protracted struggle over urban territory but also on political grounds - quite literally.

This chapter has asked how material decay and maintenance are used as strategies in the competition over and manipulation of space and its transformation. An evocative literary depiction of this struggle appears in Hassan Daoud's novel, *The House of Mathilde*, which is set in a building where a predominance of pre-war inhabitants are Christian and European, are then replaced by Muslim displaced refugees, as the country get ravaged by war and social disintegration (1999). As the story unfolds and the war nears its finality, the tenants and squatters begin to leave bit by bit, but the storyline and the terms of their departure remain vague. One of the only remaining inhabitants in the building is a very sullen and reserved Christian lady named Mathilde, who avoids the boisterous and gregarious socialites of the other Shiite and Sunni inhabitants whom she feels disdainful towards. At the end of the novel, she is violently murdered. Nearly at the same time, an explosion goes off at the heart of the building leaving the remaining inhabitants trapped on the upper floors, the staircase having collapsed. Who could have done that, the narrator wonders? Who would still think of bombing the house when bombs had all but stopped falling outside? The story ends with inhabitants' suspicions that the owners planted the bomb themselves to get the last inhabitants out at minimum cost, dodging compensation fees and the cost of getting the place demolished all in one fell sweep. In similar vein, the pronouncement of past neglect as intentional enfolds the decaying urban space into the troubled affective landscape of the city, where owners' aspirations for the future are projected onto the past, where tenants and owners are anxious about the future, and where national political struggles - made intimate - are refracted on the material leftovers of homes. Deliberate debris stems from the desire to have retroactively accounted for ruination, and from the belief that its presence is accounted for, over and above endured dwelling within it. It is the material and moral site through which gentrification is deterred or postponed, and out of which emerges a redefinition of the notion of ruin in the face of ruination. In the quest for continued dwelling and financial security (or prosperity), it is the decay that can save you from ruination until another opportunity comes knocking.

## CHAPTER FOUR

MAGNITUDE, MATERIALITY AND  
THE MAGNANIMITY OF LIFE

## INTRODUCTION

It was a mild autumn day in 2013 when I had been interviewing a *mukhtar* of Basta who was relaying to me his historical overview of the neighbourhood and its recent transformations. Upon my request, he arranged for me to go visit the abandoned hospital around the corner on Khalid Street, accompanied by his Syrian assistant, Faysal. The hospital is a white five-floor structure, which was built in several stages starting in the 1920s until the 1970s, when the last floor was added. It is surrounded by a back yard where tall old trees still stand but which have in the last decade been dwarfed by a row of tall residential blocks that have risen in adjacent plots. Turned into an Islamic charitable foundation and thereby a *waqf* in the 1950s, the hospital shut down several times, the last time in 1996 allegedly because of internal disputes, competition from other politically backed healthcare institutions and mismanagement. Gated from all sides, the exterior shows no sign of its former function except a handwritten plaque that instructed readers not to park in front of its bolted entrance. As assistant to the *mukhtar* and effectively his chargé d'affaires since the man became frail with age and illness, Faysal had the authority to grant me access. He knew most people on the street, including Um Fadi Yamin, the wife of the hospital's concierge who still squatted on the hospital grounds with his large family since the 1980s. She was there thanks to the *mukhtar*. Their allotted residence was a small shack made up of two single rooms stacked one on top of the other at the western fringe of the property. The shacks included a toilet each, but the kitchen was a separate room attached to the main gate of the grounds. Since the hospital's closure, Abu Fadi Yamin continued on as chauffeur and gofer at the foundation's central location in one of Beirut's southern suburbs. According to Faysal, he and Um Fadi remained the informal guardians of the hospital partly because the foundation turned a blind eye to their continued presence, partly because their presence was convenient for it as they guarded the place from unwanted "occupiers" or encroachments from adjacent

plot owners.<sup>51</sup>

Since the start of my fieldwork on Khalid Street when I noticed the hospital immediately, I tried on numerous occasions to steal a moment of Um Fadi's time to chat with her. Remaining inattentive behind the closed gate, she repeatedly brushed me off with dwindling and somewhat distracted laments, "I'm really too busy, I have to go to market and get back in time to cook lunch... I'm so tired...I didn't sleep well last night... My children will be here soon to have their lunch..." Although most are grown, married and have their own homes, Um Fadi's children come from work to have lunch with their parents on a near-daily basis. Asking her if I could make an appointment when it was more convenient for her, she replied, "I'm busy everyday of the week and on the weekends I go to the South." It took showing up with someone she knew to grab her attention, so when I turned up escorted by Faysal, she was a little more accommodating. She wanted something from him actually. Their familiar exchange included her asking him to go to the fish market and buy her some sardines for her lunch menu that day. He replied that he would go after he finished showing me around the hospital. After some deliberation about when and would there be enough time and how fresh was the fish at the market would be by then, she accepted to let us through the gate, her compliance stemming no doubt also from indebtedness to the *mukhtar*, whose connections at the Islamic foundation had gotten Abu Fadi employed there to begin with and condoned the Yamins' extended stay on the hospital grounds. In lukewarm fashion, she let us through the gate and into the main hospital building, which she kept locked, avowing insincerely, "My children use it to study for their exams sometimes." She concealed from me on this occasion what I learnt from her in a later conversation: over the decades the entire family gradually extended their site of habitation beyond the assigned concierge shack and into the hospital building itself, where they retreated to rest, study and sleep at night. As Faysal and I were left to cross the hospital's main reception hall that was now full of beds, Faysal remarked that while Um Fadi and her family were indeed living in parts of the hospital, they remained discrete about it. Were they to show conspicuous signs of

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<sup>51</sup> In the act of developing land, an unguarded property may be subject to infringements from developers on adjacent plots, who try to encroach beyond their allotted area. In this particular case, there actually was a dispute over the boundary between the hospital property and a plot to the west of it. Each side claimed the Yamins' shack was within their property. This dispute is also partly why the Yamins have been able to stay there longer.

comfort (*ya'khudu rahithum*)<sup>52</sup> in the place, they feared the foundation might decide to withdraw its consent to let them squat there. “They have a pretty good deal,” Faysal said alluding to all that space and for no rent, “They obviously don’t want to lose that.”

Faysal and I went up the dusty cluttered stairs, exploring floor by floor by grey institutional floor, through a spacious stairwell with a broken elevator that slumped in the pit of its ornate wrought-iron shaft. On the second floor, one of Um Fadi’s sons kept a puppy in one of the clinics. The puppy whimpered through a padlocked door as he heard our footsteps crunching on broken glass and other debris. It was a non-verbal exploration, each of us wandering about in the vast apartments and through multiple corridors before winding up in the entrance halls to climb further up the stairs together. The ceiling height decreased as we ascended, ranging from over seven metres to no less than three or four metres at the penthouse with surrounding multi-level balconies, which appeared more homey than institutional and was presumably the founder’s home. It was here that Faysal voiced for the first time his impression of the place: “You could be comfortable here. You could let your children run freely and get lost in the place while you sat somewhere, socialising in peace.” As he spoke, he gestured with his arms, scanning them horizontally before him as though to index in particular the spaciousness of the flat. He said the hospital reminded him of his house in rural Syria, which was built in a similar style but which he left behind in 1990 to come work in Beirut. At the time of my fieldwork, his family still owned the house, but Syria was at war and his return visits had dwindled from the peril of the trips. Puffing worriedly on his cigarette, he said he currently lived with his wife and four children in a cramped two-room apartment in one of Beirut’s southern suburbs.

This chapter explores interlocutors’ perceptions of the aesthetic attributes of domestic space, particularly the spatial magnitude and material durability of old houses that they inhabited, relating that to their nostalgia about “the magnanimity of life,” meaning a sense of wellbeing in dwelling. This relationship emerges ethnographically in the interlocutors’ narratives as they reminisce about a past residence that they lost, or as in the case of Um Fadi, dread the prospect of foregoing current habitation that has these attributes. To understand some of the anxieties and aspirations that this condition constitutes, I draw on the definitions that Boym develops in *The Future of Nostalgia*

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<sup>52</sup> This translates literally to “make themselves comfortable” and connotes overstaying one’s welcome or being burdensome.

(2001), from her position as cultural theorist of post-Soviet Europe and an analysis of its literature. She calls nostalgia a “hypochondria of the heart,” a condition of modernity. This is a diagnosis by European poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century of the modern human condition in the face of rapid change, modernisation and most of all the sense of inevitable loss and unsettlement that the mere passage of time creates (Boym 2001: 22-3). As modern subject, the nostalgic does not just long for the past, or desire to stop the passage of time. For Boym, nostalgia is essentially a longing for the present. It is a longing for happiness. The French for happiness, *bonheur*, captures that idea better than the English. Meaning literally the good or right (*bon*) time (*heur*), it consists of that perfect timing of the “love at last sight,” or simply that fleeting joy, which is all the more sweet and all the more painful because it cannot last. There are two kinds of nostalgias in response to the impossibility of prolonging *Bonheur*, Boym argues (2001: 20-1).

She distinguishes “restorative nostalgia” from “reflective nostalgia.” Restorative nostalgia, she writes, wants to repeat the unrepeatable, to close the distance and displacement that the loss of the past creates by edifying, commemorating and restoring artefacts of the past (2001: 49-50). This restoration wants to get rid of the symptoms of longing that are produced by nostalgia - from the greek *nostos* meaning “return home” and *algia* meaning longing. On the other hand, reflective nostalgia embraces eternal homelessness and the knowledge that there is no home to return to, enduring the fragility of modern longing without trying to eliminate it. Boym takes a negative stance toward restorative nostalgia, believing its reflective variant, with its acknowledgement of the impossibility of return to produce more critical thought. She identifies more reflective (literary) forms as irony, ambivalence, humour and poetry, understood here from *poesis* as the creation of something that was never there before. Without needing to slot every nostalgic expression, act or person that I encountered neatly within either the restorative or reflective category (which is not Boym’s meaning either), I find these distinctions and her elaboration of nostalgia deepens our understand of how the objects of people’s aspirations emerge from their relationship to what happiness they believe they had and lost. Both nostalgias are ultimately born of a sense of loss. Take for instance that sensation many report feeling when walking through the decay of other people’s houses, as the passage of time on their own lives is momentarily made apparent to them. While the narratives of my interlocutors sometimes drew on some of the oratory variants of the literary genres Boym lists as critical and reflective, their nostalgia for the magnanimity of life fell more precisely within the restorative discourse.

After my ramble in the hospital with Faysal, when I subsequently returned to the street to speak with Um Fadi, she was more forthcoming, but only just. One day, pushing through the gate uninvited, I found her in her small kitchen, and there despite her usual distractedness she agreed to talk to me while frying garlic and coriander in preparation for the stew of the day. On this occasion, she spoke openly of her family's usage of the hospital property, that the main entrance hall was their sleeping area, that the shack's ground floor was their living space, and that her son's Sri Lankan domestic worker and who aided Um Fadi occasionally was housed in the second floor. She said how she loved to sit in the yard which was her favourite spot year round - weather permitting - and her family's habitual gathering place with grown children and now her grandchildren. She waxed lyrical about her own cooking - even the most complicated dishes made from scratch - and the elaborate meals she made that brought her family together almost daily. Answering my questions about any prospects to move elsewhere if the foundation wants them out, she exclaimed, "No please! I never want to leave this garden!" adding, "Whenever I go to visit someone in their flat, I can't wait to get back to the garden. I feel like someone has put me away in a box."<sup>53</sup> On another occasion, however, she divulged another angle to their situation, saying that with the help her children's labour and Abu Fadi's they had bought a flat in the Malla neighbourhood where they could move, should the foundation insist on their departure. Since her only friend on the street, Um Walid, had moved away a year ago she did not really feel compelled to stay in the same neighbourhood, where property prices were in any case beyond their means. In contrary manner to her former dread of separation from the garden, on this occasion she was resolved to the idea of changing neighbourhoods, telling me, "Novelty is good. It's like changing television channels. You see something new." But for someone who hardly ever socialises because she could barely keep up with her chores, her best friends' departure had broken her heart (*n'aharit ktir 'alayha*).

Pining for or admiring the spacious halls and rooms, tall ceilings, wide windows, surrounding balconies and gardens, and lush vegetation that either feeds or shades, my interlocutors laced their views with comments about an intense past sociality with friends and family and neighbours. Domestic spatial magnitude figured particularly in the context of narratives about abundance, whether of resources, or indeed of the time to socialise, insinuating life's generosity that enables social acts of reciprocity and public

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<sup>53</sup> In Arabic, the word Um Fadi used for garden - *junaynah* - literally translates to "little heaven."

displays of social status. Meanwhile, the material quality of old houses, namely their durable building materials and modes of crafting, suggested a time when building was intended to house its owners rather than for profit through investment and sale. Interlocutors who lived in the large and sturdy houses of yore could derive prestige from this past dwelling in great part thanks to the increase in the symbolic value of “old houses,” the generic label for structures of classical architecture (versus modernist ones, for instance). The Beirut House stereotype, which is necessarily vague, is frequently used to denote Beirut’s sense of community in quaint alleyways and neighbourhoods, standing in for Beirut (and sometimes Lebanon) in television advertisements for example, movie sets and children’s books. To have spent one’s childhood in one such house is to be considered - or to consider oneself - as having witnessed and been a part of an imagined original moment of the city and its original social fabric. *Bil-’awwal*, meaning literally “at the beginning” often marks the start of interlocutors’ statements of comparison between the past (the beginning), the unsatisfactory present and the uncertain future. Today, such a residential history grants the interlocutor a claim to authenticity at a time when normative modes of building and living are constantly in flux, former modes no longer viable.

In what follows, I begin by contextualising the transformation of the symbolics of building and dwelling in my field within increasing congestion and densification, accompanied by population increase from rural-urban migration in the past half century. I situate the discussion within the relative shrinkage of domestic and urban dwelling spaces over the course of this rapid growth, from spacious architectural interiors and interspersed residential clusters, to present-day cramped living quarters and enclosed domestic interiors. Such expressions and the attributes of past houses that are deemed superior, vary according to the social trajectory of interlocutors. In the subsequent two sections, I present two vignettes about the relationship of downward social mobility to nostalgia about the magnanimity of life. I contend that whether interlocutors were tenants, squatters or owners of the house in question, combined with the circumstances of their departure, produced various intensities of nostalgia. However, the association of the good life where dwelling places were more spacious, durable, sociable and interspersed, was equally widespread amongst these different types of dwellers. I propose, therefore, that spatial quantity (magnitude) and quality are not arbitrary foci of the longing for past dwelling in Beirut. They are a) emblematic of a preoccupation with interior reception areas as stages for public performance and prestige, and b) index the



transformation of the home, its complex spatial and social rearrangements, into a quantifiable asset for accumulation as capital. These correlations become obvious within Beirut's extreme socio-economic stratification and spatial proximity between the houses of the poor and those of the wealthy, which render discrepancy between people's status and capital more visible.

## BUILDING FOR SELLING NOT DWELLING AND THE AESTHETICS OF THE PAST

I have discussed in my thesis Introduction the rapid growth that Beirut has undergone since the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. I also described the political and economic regime that has been driving the real estate sector in ways that inspired terms like “resilient” (Tierney 2015) and “growth-machine” (Marot 2014). As backdrop to this chapter's focus on my interlocutors' aesthetic sensibilities and their pining for more spacious and durable houses, it is important to understand the city's rising densification and population in the timespan of the pining in question. Beirut's densification predated the Civil War to the phase between 1958 and 1975, which is rhetorically celebrated as Lebanon's prosperous days, when the state effectuated policies aimed at modernising and playing a bigger role in global trade and tourism (McCormick 2011). Yet these efforts mostly targeted urban centres, particularly Beirut, making it a period of stark socio-economic inequalities (Yassin 2010: 68). In this so-called Golden Age, and faced with economic and social marginalisation, nearly half the country's rural population (1.2 million people), came to the capital and its immediate suburbs seeking to partake in the intensifying and globalising commercial sector that burgeoned at the city's centre. Migrants came from beyond as well, including Turkey. It is during this phase, Yassin recounts, that Beirut experienced its rapid urbanisation, densification and sprawl, including the growth of under-serviced and poorly cared for misery belts around the city's municipal boundaries (Yassin 2010: 69). The sites of my ethnography such as Basta, Moussaitbeh and Zoqaq el-Blat, otherwise middle to upper class neighbourhoods and satellites to the city centre and Beirut port, began receiving migrant inhabitants around that time. It was not unusual for landowners in these neighbourhoods to split their flats and houses into two sections, in order to rent them out to more families,

thereby accommodate the influx of inhabitants and making more profit.<sup>54</sup> Spacious 200 and 300 metre-squared flats in buildings constructed to house multicultural middle class urbanites of the 1950s sometimes became the homes of poorer rural in-migrants as early as the pre-war phase and onward. The shift often happened gradually such that the two classes often coexisted in the same buildings.

The city's growth drive was already in place with extreme liberalism during the 1960s. The late 1950s saw the advent of laws that drastically increased building exploitation rights, or the amount of built up space (floors, surface area) relative to property size. Zoning, or the spatial differentiation of exploitation (you can build four floors here, but only one floor there), was also increased around that time (Tabet 1996). In my majority Sunni Muslim fieldsites, internal displacement started gradually as early as the 1958 revolt, when several Christian and minority Jewish families felt threatened and moved either to Christian neighbourhoods and suburbs (some of the Jews converting) or emigrated abroad (Schultz 2001). Where leases were formally breached, new ones were forged with remaining residents, but in the irksome narratives my interlocutors who were old enough to remember the pre-1958 days, something was permanently unravelled and lost at that moment. Architect, Jad Tabet, describes the urban transformation of that period in areas I studied as follows: "The neighbourhood alleyways and nooks were replaced with new roads, tall buildings without form nor character, and the urban fabric of old neighbourhoods was removed without being replaced with any modern system that guarantees a modicum of civic cohesion" (1996: 9). This revealed an early precedent of state neglect of the social conditions of Beirut's urban population and the power of the material environment to shape those conditions.

The change was accompanied by downward social mobility for most, particularly manifested through the shrinking in the proportions and aesthetic quality of domestic quarters and their immediate surroundings, expressing lost social status. It was not a neutral transition from one mode of life and sense of place to another under singular circumstances. Rather, it marked the transformation of the urban social fabric of the city and its class dynamics. In addition to the change in the craft and purpose of construction and the presumed "natural" renewal of the built environment implied by policies of regeneration, there is the story of Beirut's shrunken middle class (Traboulsi 1994: 50). From the standpoint of one elderly elite woman, Mrs. Saidi, who managed to maintain

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<sup>54</sup> Recall Um Ali Hamsa's half-flat from Chapter Two, and the Zubaydis from Chapter Three.

status and wealth after moving out of Khalid Street as it became more impoverished, the unruly revolt of the poor caused “the demise” of the upper and middle classes. In an interview she commented on the time before her departure from Basta, saying, “Poor people in those days were content to be where they were, not like the rebels that came after and that we still find these days.” In line with interpretations that consider social inequality and class struggle to be the root cause of the Civil War, Tabet viewed the ruptures in Beirut’s urban fabric and social cohesion as contributing to - or indeed foreboding - the war’s eventual eruption (Tabet 1996).

The Civil War period, 1975 to 1990, witnessed more mass relocations of people within the city and from outside into the city according an ethno-religious sorting that homogenised the demography of numerous neighbourhoods (Mermier 2013, Nagel 2000, Yassin 2012). Families fled one war-torn area of the city or country to take up shelter in another, sometimes fleeing repeatedly as the conflict moved. Residential histories from my field that depict these turbulent periods included frequent movement between several houses and an array of dwelling practices, career changes and financial rises and falls. Fleeing their homes and abandoning their work places and schools, “until things calmed down,” interlocutors temporarily took shelter with friends and relatives, housesat for people who also fled or squatted wherever possible. Some were able to rent these temporary shelters, others returned to their houses if they still stood (on the safe side of the conflict-ridden city that is). Where homes were destroyed, rebuilding was not always feasible or desired, but sometimes it was through makeshift manner, speedily under fire.

The more recent, post-war phase of urbanisation, 1990 till the present, with even more state-facilitated liberties and financial incentives for private real estate development, are exemplified in the 2004 building law (Krijnen and Fawaz 2010: 250-1). Mentioned repeatedly in this thesis, this law was particularly encouraging of the agglomeration of multiple small plots into larger single plots to enable the construction of high-rises, which structurally need wider areas to rise from. Tax cuts from the state and facilities from the banks accompanied this process. This period saw the rise of even more *laissez-faire* construction and an increasing commodification of private housing. In 2013, for instance, while all housing units in the exclusive Solidere area of the city were already sold to private individuals or corporations, only 20 per cent of them were actually

inhabited, implying they were bought as assets for speculation.<sup>55</sup> All the while, private development had fast been filling up urban space, earning Beirut a reputation as one of the most densely populated cities with one of the smallest ratios of green spaces per capita. A recent report claimed 50 per cent of Lebanon's population lives in Beirut, where each inhabitant has access to less than one metre-square of green space (Nahnoo 2012: 2). In addition to a lack of open, public or green spaces, Beirut's congestion intensifies as you go from the more high-end centre to some of the poorer fringes and pockets of the city. There, you find a palimpsest of houses and apartment buildings that were built at various times in the past century surviving (till now) wars or recurrent waves of renewal and revealing various degrees of maintenance or decay. The interiors of these flats are cramped in comparison to the adjacent old houses that exemplify their architectural predecessors with more spacious dimensions. In these visibly poorer areas, which may in fact be right beside or indeed interspersed within a concentration of high-end large-scale apartments (Alaily-Mattar 2008), relatively new buildings are also leaking, rusting and corroding on the outside. Buildings advertised as luxurious and grandiose when they were first being built may have similar traces of cut-corner craftsmanship soon thereafter. They may in fact have less than spacious interiors, surprisingly - or not - betraying similar neglect for durability or impermeability as less extravagantly marketed developments.

The discourses of my interlocutors on the symbolic and aesthetic value attributed to the spacious living and hosting quarters (*dar*) of houses and the quaint and open entourage often eulogises old modes of building as well. Praise for the thickness of sandstone walls, the breadth and curve of archways, the intricacy of metalwork, woodwork and glasswork, and the ornament of encaustic floor tiles or marble, all elevate the bygone "old house" and with it the crafts and materials expended in its making to a higher status than the commercially built flats of today. Not like the "biscuit," "cardboard" or "concrete" construction of today, interlocutors would frequently criticise. The first two similes signify compromised structure, while the latter stands for the common sludge that is poured and set when building fast and lovelessly. In the words of, Abu Abed, building today is like "fast-food." While walking me through a five-floor building he had just bought in the mountain town of Brummana, and taking me up the stairs, Faris for his part turned to me and said, "You can tell from the authentic wooden

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<sup>55</sup> Interview with Guillaume Boudisseau, RAMCO, July 22, 2014.

balustrade on this staircase that this building was built to be lived in by its owners. It was not intended to be sold.” He also commented on the narrow dimensions of staircases in many new constructions, especially that they could only fit people climbing in single file and posed a fire hazard. The message was clear: when you build for your own dwelling, you build well, investing the care and cost of durable and beautiful craft and material. When you build to sell, you build cheaply and hastily, cutting costs on labour and materials to maximise profit.

Yet given the gaping inequalities that Beirut and Lebanon experienced even during its so-called Golden Age, only the propertied middle class and wealthy merchant classes could hope to build in order to dwell in such construction. If you were a rural migrant into the city, chances are you were fighting poverty in the city, living in the misery belt and trying to stay afloat in whatever trade was available. Many migrants acquired land in Beirut’s suburbs where land was very cheap, some sold their produce, while many worked in construction. One such example was Abu Hussain, a struggling contractor whom I mentioned briefly in Chapter Two. He claimed the city’s migrant population should be credited for building the city and strengthening its economy to prosperity. Born in the southern village of Sultaniyya in 1941, he grew up among nine siblings in several fringe neighbourhoods of Beirut including Moussaitbeh, Nuwayri, and Mazraa. When he moved to the city, his father rented and worked a plot of farmland in the suburban town of Antelias, selling his produce on a pushcart, which Abu Hussain sometimes helped to push along their ten-kilometre trek to the city. Around the 1960s, “when building became a trade,” and “concrete the primary building material,” his father changed job to become a mason. Abu Hussain followed in his footsteps, becoming a self-taught electrician, and with time and exposure an independent contractor/developer/agent/facilitator in multiple building projects. His narrative attested to much of what the literature on Beirut’s urban and economic development recounts: “The times before the 1960s were good times. The times after 1960s were bad times,” he told me during an interview, adding that during “the 1970s and 1980s,” rendered life “unpredictable” and difficult professionally and economically for him and his family. At the outbreak of war in 1975, he retreated to his village where he began trading in household appliances with Syria, before taking a job as electrical contractor in Saudi Arabia.

In the post-war era, the opportunity to make profit from construction opened up again and gained momentum and popularity for being a hugely lucrative - and relatively

easy - trade for someone with capital or land to invest. As one bank branch manager and friend of Abu Abed's told me, "There's no trade more lucrative than the building trade. That is why everyone wants a part of it. You can make an investment and it will turn into a fortune all by itself. While you may be lying on your sofa at home doing nothing, you can reach a 200 per cent profit." For anyone with a spot of urban property or with the slightest penchant for - leave aside experience in - the building trade, participating in the real estate market became available as a mode of capital accumulation or sustenance. Its availability and popularity intensified the commodification of houses. Yet after over 35 years during which he worked on some 40 construction sites around Beirut Abu Hussain, much like Abu Abed, is disillusioned with the real estate market, particularly since he was imprisoned for two and a half years for fraud on a project he ran with his brothers. They were the true culprits, he said, painting the ethical parameters of the trade as corrupt and fraught with potential traps, while kinship solidarity dubious as well. His experience reveals the perils of entering the fiercely competitive real estate domain without big capital, large property or strong political connections. In self-congratulating fashion that chimes with Abu Abed's assertion of his own impeccable honesty, Abu Hussain tried to dissociate himself from this domain, claiming to abide by the highest standards of quality in all the building projects he worked on. "Better to be called expensive than a cheater," was the idiom he adopted, by which he proclaimed a commitment to use the best building materials "wherever possible." This possibility, however, is where the trouble lies as Abu Hussain found maintaining such standards and still making a decent living extremely challenging during "bad times," which kept coming back. Without said capital, large property or strong political connections, nor indeed the credibility of working from a registered firm, he was vulnerable to scapegoating before the law or the cheating by clients and partners. Therefore, he could not always avoid compromising in the material quality of construction, building on every last inch of a property and parcelling floors into as many housing units as possible, at the expense of proportionality and finish. Where he resorted to illegal strategies, he had to bribe the public building inspector unless he had *wasta* to save him this extra expense. The outcome was still "excellent" in his opinion. The only time he built differently was when he contracted two flats for his daughters and their husbands, selling these to them for less than his investment. In these flats, he avowed using higher-grade materials and found an "ingenious" way to make the kitchens larger by four metres square than other flats in the same building. Abu Hussain framed his travails in construction within a

general political and social degradation where brotherly betrayal and the perils of the trade go hand in hand with “other” builders’ disregard for quality and standards.

Though political and merchant elites increasingly pushed to make building for selling the modus operandi of urbanisation in Beirut since the 1960s, for the poverty-stricken neighbourhoods of rural and transnational migrants to the city, the pre-1960 era of celebrated building for dwelling did not imply spacious or durable homes. The case was often the contrary. Particularly during the Civil War, with the destruction of homes and displacement of people, but also in its “experimental” aftermath, informal housing was common, as were commercially-built houses with scant control for standards of dimensions and durability. These include an elite profit-driven informality as well (Roy 2005), all of which have coagulated into a common discourse about chaotic and unscrupulous (read avaricious) building today, which I heard from those who work within as well as outside the field of real estate. My interlocutors who celebrated the good quality and spaciousness of their past homes did so with the conviction that this sort of urban dwelling was part of a bygone time. Building material and craft related to the discussion on the magnanimity of life by way of the sense of relative wellbeing and security that they associated with a familiar (and previous) built environment. This included the way houses built in that mode were said to act upon the body, in contrast with ideas about dwelling inside newer flats. The former was associated with experiences such as the prolonged insulation of the stone walls, which keep homes cool in the summer and warm in the winter, unlike concrete construction that cools and heats fast, and cracks and leaks when built hastily or cheaply. The sets of associations between degree of physical and psychological wellbeing, and forms and quality of architecture or building craft abound in Beirutis’ narratives on dwelling. In such narratives, the past belonged to an era when the city was greener and its environment more “temperate,” as opposed to the present-day’s discomforts from increased traffic, denser build-up and the effects of high-rises blocking the flow of wind and sunlight from thoroughfares and other buildings.

This nostalgic and comparative discourse prevailed around the decaying spaces of my fieldsites, where a semblance of this material past continued to linger, teetering on the cusp of dereliction and endurance, sometimes offering a modicum of respite with a little more breeze coming from the neglected greenery. It also prevailed as an index not only of what that mode of dwelling offered in the past or what it might be able to offer today, but more surely what has ceased to be possible and the relative losses, which

dwelling in the present material scale of the city evokes. Marginal to the lifeworld that affords the vast high-end homes around Solidere, Hamra or Achrafieh, my interlocutors' own domestic spaces have shrunk or deteriorated in inverse proportionality to the vertical and horizontal growth and glitz of the city's most emblematic neighbourhoods. These people pined for a past when such dimensions and aesthetics of dwelling were conceivable, indeed available to them as well, even if for exceptional and temporary periods of time. Harsh as the inequalities of Beirut may have been to some of them in that past for which they pined, nostalgia for its Golden Age framed this pining within a fundamental sense of loss that emerged through downward social mobility, loss of status and anxiety over the future. Viewed from the anxious present, such comfortable settings engender a memory of life in the past as more magnanimous, and social and economic relations more ethical (Bahloul 1996). In what follows, I relay some of these nostalgic expressions while situating them in the positions and practices of the people who articulated them. These expressions reveal interlocutors' sense of fragility in the present and in the face of loss and change. But they also "combine a fascination for the present with longing for another time," in what Boym terms a "nostalgia for the present," where nostalgia becomes the modern "hypochondria of the heart" (2001: 20-1).

#### STATUS AND THE NOSTALGIA FOR MAGNANIMITY OF LIFE

Faris had introduced Abu Abed Laqis to me with decorum as "Abu Abed the man who knows everyone in Beirut," to which he would add on subsequent encounters, "your uncle Abu Abed" to command seniority and respect from me. The very neatly dressed man prided himself for being a former class-mate of the current prime minister, Tammam Salam. He regularly visited the PM during this latter's weekly *salons*, where he claimed he was heard and respected. His family had been hardware merchants for generations, but he had worked in the trade of foodstuffs, with offices in the city centre before the Civil War broke out. "Most of the Laqis family were merchants," he said, adding that his business was hard-hit during the war and in its after-math. His immediate lineage and several extended family members were disowned when Solidere effectuated its land-acquisition for the downtown's reconstruction. Having first turned to, then abandoned, free-lance real estate brokerage, disheartened by its "crookery," Abu Abed sounded embittered but attempted to hold back his sense of defeat. He and his



siblings shared ownership of a building from which they earned rent as basic subsistence, but until it became a liability, real estate brokerage had granted him a little extra to live the way he would like, the way he was used to.

Abu Abed spoke repeatedly of the large “Lebanese house” that his parents rented in Mar Elias, just up the road from Zoqaq el-Blat, where he grew up with his parents and sister, but which he moved out of when his parents divorced. The house was eventually demolished in the 1990s. “Our living room was 30 metres long!” he exclaimed with gravity. “I used to take a stroll in there, and on rainy days, my sister and I rode our bicycles indoors. My sister and I had each our own nannies to care for us. One for each of us, and this was aside from all the cleaning staff and others. Our parents were always busy - the house was always full of visitors.” He would say this repeatedly, as though forgetting that he had already mentioned it to me, or perhaps making sure that his wealthy origins would be well recounted in my thesis. On one occasion he said the following to me, which I find captures the crux of the discussion about the relationship between the materiality of dwelling, sociality, the sentiment of loss and the nostalgia for a more magnanimous life in the past:

“We now live in a building that contains 24 flats, while I was born in a house whose single floor measured 700 metres-square. We knew the neighbours. On the first floor was Mohammad Salam, the brother of Saeb Beik [former Prime Minister Saeb Salam], the building’s owners, George and Albert Assis, were in the second floor and we the Laqis family were on the third. We had a garden where we played basketball and all you can imagine. There were trees... Try to find something like that today! [challenging voice]. There’s none of that left. If you go around Beirut and look around, your gaze is only met with concrete. Old houses, whose ceilings are six and seven metres high are more comfortable health-wise and environment-wise and psychologically, than the houses of today whose ceilings and rooms are just 2.9 metres high. That’s the difference between the old and the new house. The old house is even socially more advantageous because it used to unite the whole family. If four people come to my house today, whose living room is about ten metres long, I get flustered. They fill up the living room! If my kids come with their kids and wives, the air pollution in the house is unbearable.”

On one occasion, Abu Abed affirmed his strong kinship ties to his cousin’s branch of the Laqis family. Now deceased, he once lived in a large and very delicately crafted stone-clad villa in the prestigious neighbourhood of Qantari. Faris and Abu Abed

took me to meet the cousin's son, Maher, a bank manager, who in turn introduced me to his mother and sister. The family sold the big villa after the father fell ill and passed away. The kids, including Maher, married and moved elsewhere. But they sold for much cheaper than market value in that neighbourhood because the house was firmly listed, meaning no amount of bribery or political connection could remove the listing. Indeed, with the help of Abu Abed's connection to Tammam Salam, they had not succeeded in convincing Rafik Hariri, the prime minister at the time of Sunni hegemony, to remove the listing. The profit from the sale had to be split between three inheriting households that included the father's paternal cousins and their lineages, after which several of Maher's siblings could not afford houses in the city and moved out to the suburb of Aramoun. His mother was able to remain in the central neighbourhood of Ein el-Mreisseh because she inherited a flat from her own father there, on a plot of land where an old house used to stand and was demolished.

While we sat in Maher's air-conditioned office at the bank, he and Abu Abed reminisced in unison about the annual New Year's Eve celebrations, which the Laqis family hosted at their big villa, and to which 300 friends and relatives were invited. "Nobody ever wondered what they were doing on New Year's Eve. Everyone knew the party would be at our house," Maher said of his family's social entourage. He described the magnitude of the preparations, recounting the time and resources spent to offer lavish food, service, decoration, music and dancing on those memorable nights. The large terrace, alight with party garlands, would fill up with people making merry until the early hours of the new year. Maher and his "uncle Abu Abed" praised the house's seven-metre-tall ceilings, which Italian artisans had crafted with wood and plaster, and the impermeability of the wall paint. Decorated with marble *trompe-l'œil*, the wall paint was allegedly so durable that it withstood the deep-cleaning sessions that the household servants carried out under the supervision of Maher's mother and sisters. From his mother, I learned the procedure: all the furniture would be taken out of the living space and washed with soap; the walls, ceilings and chandeliers would be washed down with soap and dried; the Persian carpets would be beaten, washed and shined. Everything would be allowed to dry before it was replaced. It took over a week of labour to do this. Yet, with all those decades of washing, by the time the family had emptied the house after selling it, Maher swore that the ornamentation and wall paint looked as it had always looked while they lived there, the colours keeping their contrast, the surface smooth as if new. "Where do you find such craftsmanship nowadays?" he asked

rhetorically. In her new flat in Ein el-Mreisseh, Maher's mother had some of her wooden furniture from the big villa, at least the ones she was able to keep; the remainder was either too worn out to move or too big to accommodate under a lower ceilings. Already the armoire, a number of large arm chairs, and a big carved mirror looked somewhat dwarfed in the flat.

The physical magnitude of reception halls in this architectural typology - called *liwan* in professional terms and *dar* in layperson's language - is closely associated with the notion of *bayt maftuh*, or the propensity to regularly welcome visitors. Literally meaning "open house," this is usually attributed to wealthy households and intended to reflect (or boast) the generosity and status of the hosting family. Indeed, until today the *dar* of the house is closely linked to status in domestic space because it is the place where the household's material wealth and class belonging are showcased (Alaily-Mattar 2008: 266-footnote 7, Davie 2003b: 348-350). Beyond its function as intimate site of production and reproduction, the house as *bayt maftuh* implies that more public parts of the house, including the *dar* but also gardens and terraces, become the arena for intensive sociality, reciprocity and occasionally political networking.

Sustaining a *bayt maftuh* required a certain level of financial stability, which converged with the pre-war era of business prosperity that elite merchant families, including the Laqis family, enjoyed. Having relatively maintained their standard of living, both Maher and his mother did not espouse the restorative nostalgia that Abu Abed had. Despite their visible pride in their villa's grandeur, its exceptional aesthetic and material beauty - "many architecture students came to our house to draw it" - and the prestige they enjoyed in it, neither had the pained longing for a return that characterises such nostalgia. After the sale of the villa, aided by his good position at the bank and given that as a male he received more inheritance than his sisters, Maher could afford continuing to live comfortably in the city. Maher and his siblings only regretted not being able to delist the property and sell it for more money, having young and pre-adult children to provide for. Some of his siblings would have preferred to live inside the city. In her old age, with the fortune of her own patrilineal inheritance and with adult children who looked after her dotingly, Maher's mother was contented with the good fortune to have a "regular sized" flat inside the city. Her financial means and health were sufficient to maintain it, unlike the big villa whose upkeep became far too strenuous and costly for her towards the end. When I met her, she was in the exact location where she had grown up, amid surviving siblings and cousins in the building that replaced her

father's old house. In one sense she had actually "returned home." If there was one thing she and Maher uttered with some longing, it was the loss of the father with whom they now strongly associated the house, because his illness and death coincided in more ways than one with the end of their dwelling in it. While the mother and children took turns sitting by his hospital bed for two years, the house ceased to be the family's gathering place, falling into ever-more neglect and decay. As with other decaying wealthy merchant houses in my fieldsites, by the time an offer for a selling presented itself, the house had already ceased to be the social node it once was. Its homeliness had come undone through gradual or sudden disinvestment, brought about by deaths or family dispersals.

Evidently belonging to a less wealthy branch of the Laqis family, Abu Abed's and other middle class interlocutors' downward mobility was more pronounced - as pronounced as their repeated wish to associate themselves with wealthier branches of their kinship group. Unlike Maher's father, Abu Abed did not own the big house of his childhood, even if he managed to keep up for a time the bourgeois life-style that went with it. Thus, because he was harder hit by his and his father's losses and less able to recover these losses, Abu Abed's discourse contrasted with Maher's narrative of relative ease and coping. As will become more apparent in my last chapter on Mansion, it stands in complete opposition to the discourse and practice of those who are upwardly mobile. Abu Abed espoused a clear longing for the past magnanimity of his life, to which Maher - having witnessed it and stayed afloat - bears witness. As though striving to prolong the effects of his own status, he recalled the magnanimity of his childhood house as an extension of that of Maher's lineage saying, "I was always at their house." A merchant by "instinct" to use his own word, and a real estate broker in recent years, he knew all too well what the size and quality of dwelling space in the city was worth. A home's location and spatial dimensions - 700 metres-square versus 200, and seven metres high as opposed to 2.9 - have automatic translations in US dollars at current rates today. He measured what he lost not just in social relations, a sense of generosity and prestige, but in the sheer inflation that rendered such a past magnanimous life-style the realm of only the most exuberance social class today. Nearing the winter of his years, the past was well in the past for Abu Abed. No amount of income from rent or the odd real estate consultancy - to say nothing of being cheated out of commissions - would be sufficient to resuscitate that kind of *largesse de vie* for him in Beirut today.

## EXCEPTION AND THE NOSTALGIA FOR MAGNANIMITY OF LIFE

The previous section discussed the evocation of the aesthetics of houses in nostalgic pining for the magnanimity of life among downwardly mobile members of a Beirut merchant family. I turn now to their evocation in the nostalgic expressions of Katia Hajjar. Her mother, the second wife to a Sunni farming family in Turkish Kurdistan, migrated with her four children (three girls and one boy), when Katia was three years old. They have Lebanese nationalities but continue to have strong ties with their father and his family who live in southern Turkey. The first house her mother moved into upon her migration was a tiny two-room ground floor flat that she rented. That flat got completely destroyed with all of their belongings in it at the start of the Civil War. Luckily none of them was present at the time, but several neighbours were killed. Further down the street, in none other than the White Building, the second floor east-wing apartment had stood mostly empty but still under lease by the Saidis. That family had moved to the predominantly Christian neighbourhood of Achrafieh during the 1958 Revolt, leaving behind furnishings and many belongings, and starting a new life there never to return - to live at least. Seeing that Katia's mother would be homeless on the street with four children after the shelling, the landowner at the time, Mr. Bayhum and known by several neighbours as decent, kind and generous, invited them to stay in the Saidis' empty flat. Thus, Katia lived her entire life on Khalid Street, moving between three different houses. She was one of my interlocutors who had a long-spanned perspective on the street's transformations, including the comings and goings of people and their houses.

Right after the move to Beirut, the Hajjars sustained themselves on their father's modest remittances from Turkey, her mother's domestic labour and the eventual work of Katia and her siblings. Katia followed in her mother's line of work, her brother Adib tried his hand at a number of businesses but eventually came out losing, while the two remaining sisters got married, had kids and lived in Germany. The brother was also married, but he and his wife and children lived with Katia and their mother, until this latter died in old age and the wife succumbed to cancer at a young age. During the Civil War, Adib managed to open a small jewellery shop in the adjacent neighbourhood of Barbour known as a gold market hub. Katia, still young and active at the time, supplemented their earnings by working for wealthy families, including ones who came from the Arabian Gulf to summer in the country (mostly before 1975 and from the late-

1990s onwards). At various moments in their trajectories, things looked up and the family managed to buy Katia a flat of her own near Barbour in preparation for betrothal. But when this did not ensue, she agreed to sell it to raise funds for her sister-in-law's chemotherapy treatments.

When the 1958 revolts broke out, in addition to the majority Muslim residents, many of Khalid Street's non-Muslim and middle class residents (mostly Christians but also Jews, and Druze tenants) fled with everyone else, leaving their homes fully-furnished in the hope of returning when the battles died down. When this looked to be unlikely and the city's sectarian cleavages solidified, several of the street's Muslim residents returned to the street. However, many non-Muslims permanently relocated abroad or on the predominantly Christian side of the city, east of the Green Line. In the interstice between tenants abandoning their homes in flight, and formally disinvesting from the neighbourhood, landowners regarded their empty flats as endangered from military occupation, looting, vandalism and unwanted interminable squatting. To fill the void, they resorted to "placing" families they knew and trusted in their streets, such as the Hajjars, to live in their middle class apartments, to upkeep and preserve them, and eventually lease them. At first the family squatted in the flat for free, using all the furniture that the Saidis had left behind and were yet unable to pick up. But eventually, once they breached their contract, Adib signed a formal lease in his name and the Saidis came to formally move out. When after 40-years, Mr. Bayhum sold the White Building to the Karakis (from Chapter Two), and these latter wanted to "clean out" the property for sale, the breach of contract earned the Hajjars a compensation of \$70,000 (around £53,000). Adib administered these funds according to patriarchal custom and the rental law, supporting his sister and mother until the mother's death. Again, much like the story of the Laqis family where the death of a parent led to disinvestment, when the mother died they left the Bayhum flat. Adib rented outside the neighbourhood where he raised his three sons. Meanwhile, Katia moved into her present abode, which Adib rented for her and where I visited her, drinking coffee, (mostly she) smoking cigarettes and chatting for hours.

At the time of my fieldwork, Katia spoke with dual pride in herself and frustration at having sacrificed the only spot of property she had owned in Beirut for her sister-in-law's health bill. This was a valuable asset the likes of which she never saw again, and the loss of which she filled her with remorse. In her characteristic lament, she often also bemoaned having lavished too much caring and domestic labour on her nieces and

nephews, to say nothing of their parents - her siblings - with whom her relationships were always fraught. "They left me behind in this hole to fend for myself," she said, brooding over the better lives she imagined they had made for themselves. In an instant, she could switch analytic standpoint in a second, one moment giving credit to her brother for supporting her and the next complaining that he did so begrudgingly, without sympathy for her. Her own work had dwindled in the past few years. Her mental and physical health was constantly an issue. "Hypochondria of the heart" is a condition that resounds with literal precision in Katia's case, and this as a result of a number of intersecting roller-coaster rides and circumstances. Starting from the bottom of the social echelon, (her family and) she rose up only to plummet again after the Civil War. Meanwhile in true matters of the heart, she had had the tragic misfortune of being irremediably in love with a man she could never have because he was already married. The loss of her mother, the only remaining source of affection she recalled, was a continued source of grief for her. Her inability to work caused her anxiety, a sense of failure and shame, and anger at having to be consistently dependent on Adib and intermittently on her wealthier sisters' handouts. In return for their charity, they expected her to keep clean their flats in Beirut while they were Germany. In her own words, she found herself in the worst place that she could ever be, that she could ever have imagined.

I was visiting Katia for the nth time. This time, however, she finally agreed to take me over to her previous flat in the White Building, which was just across the street from her current studio. We walked out of her narrow alleyway, across Khalid Street, and entered the building's entrance with its single arch hovering some ten metres above us. Katia remembered the time her neighbour and friend paraded down the stairs and out this very entrance for her *zafaf* ritual<sup>56</sup>. Dressed in her big white gown, kith and kin, particularly the groom's family, danced her out of her parental home, claiming her as their own. I pictured the scene of merriment and ululation, a simultaneously exhilarating and alarming sound capable of drawing crowds out of their homes to watch from doorways and balconies. "We decorated the whole length of the staircase balustrade, all the way up from their flat down to the entrance with gorgeous white flowers, you should have seen the place, Samar," exclaimed Katia with a voice turned melancholic and eyes

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<sup>56</sup> This is the customary musical parade that accompanies brides and grooms at intervals during their wedding celebrations (not the contract signing). It often involves boisterous drumming and continuous horn playing, with relatives and friends of the newly weds dancing and ululating.

squinting with sentiment. “All of Bangladesh live there now, God knows what they’ve done with the place!” she complained as we climbed up the dark stairs to the second floor, she naming the former inhabitants of every door we passed on the way. This was a place she knew, people she knew, a life she understood and one that had had potential. But when a South Asian woman opened the door of Katia’s old home, allowing us in only reluctantly, this latter became openly distraught.

The large four-bedroom flat with spacious reception and living area was now parcelled into small yet exposed nooks with concrete walls, temporary boards, curtains or tall furniture so that the 15 or so female migrant workers who lived there could have a semblance of privacy from each other the size of a single bed and a leg. The kitchen was also transformed into multiple bedrooms and shared cooking arrangements including a cooker were moved deeper into the appending service quarters and toilet. Katia began to cry as she walked me assertively through what used to be their dining room, peering behind every barrier as though she did not see the women sitting there, or more likely did not care. Their visible discomfort did not faze her in the slightest. She seemed not to share my sense that we were intruding on their private dwelling and disturbing them. Embarrassed, I wanted to leave, but Katia was in tears, talking and walking around from one room to the next, narrating and gesticulating what used to go on here and what used to be there, and what plush building material went into what part of the house. She told of the impressive slab of marble that made up the kitchen counter, the woodwork, butane gas stove and oven, and how her mother used to sit in a single corner on her rocking chair. The tour was over in less than five minutes, but it felt longer. As we made our way out, I thanked our disgruntled hostesses with apologetic nods as Katia blurted unabashed criticisms about what “you people have done to the place!” Descending in darkness, since the government electricity was cut during that time interval, she dried her tears and mock-blamed me for opening up wounds from her past.

We never really spoke of that tour again. But on a number of occasions before and after it, whenever I asked her to describe her family’s dwelling there, trying with each attempt to tease out a new angle, her answer began: “The house had such spacious floor space. Everyone who came to visit us would marvel at how we managed to keep the house so clean, despite how large it was.” Those who marvelled belonged to the social class and environment of the Hajjars themselves, who could never - under ordinary circumstances - have afforded such a place. Civil conflict, internal displacement, war destruction, economic decline and the humanitarian (or utilitarian) considerations of



Mr. Bayhum made the exception that allowed a female-headed household of migrant labourers to inhabit the house of an upper bourgeois family. That exception amounted to the drop in prices and status of the neighbourhood to an economic and symbolic threshold that the Hajjar's could reach. Katia reminisced about the beautiful sunlight and breeze that played through the apartment, as well as the view from the northern and southern side before so much other construction engulfed it. She admired the architecture, the triple-arched tinted window pains that compartmentalised the *dar* and the plasterwork in the high ceilings. Her description was entwined with tales of *more* intense neighbourly socialisation and solidarity, *more* loyal and long-term friendships, *more* familial complicity and cooperation, and *more* means to make ends meet - than today. "We had no trouble keeping the place clean. We kept the floors always shimmering clean! It came very naturally to us," she had always asserted to those who wondered.

Whether she was addressing them or me, the audience of her retroactive assertion, I was never sure, but I was sure that the assertion was not just about the cleanliness of their floor. What Katia was effectively telling her marvelling and somewhat envious guests and relatives was that with their move into the flat, her family made a significant social climb and that they were up to the task, symbolised here by the domestic labour, which was the source of their livelihood. What she was telling me was to make note not of her working class or peasant origins, but of this new one she had grown into. If as Campkin argues using Forty, "hygiene reform is used to reorganise and discipline the poor, and this is enacted spatially, from the micro-architectural to the city scale," then to effectuate a status improvement, Katia felt compelled to demonstrate an excessive cleanliness as evidence of worthiness (Campkin 2013: 9). Such compulsion was accentuated in the face of accusations from Nada Saidi, who was bothered that the Hajjars had squatted in her parental home before her family formally moved out, and accused them of being opportunist impostors and lowly squatters. In Nada's views, reflecting her previous statement, the Hajjars qualified as "contented" poor before they moved into her flat, and revolutionary poor after they moved in, not keeping to their place. People whose livelihood depended on serving the homes and lives of middle and upper class families such as her own had no business rearranging the social order. Like the Yamins and numerous others in their situation, the Hajjars benefited from a wartime opportunity and faced its shrinking possibility today. Getting that chance, particularly to squat for a while without paying rent, gave them for a time the financial stability to rise

above their initial hardship. But owning no property or other assets meant nothing guaranteed they could sustain that upward mobility for long.

By the time of my fieldwork, Katia regarded her prosperous days with much longing, and her decline with bitterness. Before the Civil War and to some extent during it, Katia benefited from a steady demand on her labour while the importation of foreign domestic labour from Southeast Asia first and later other countries of the global south was only just beginning (Jureidini 2009). Upon the increase in the availability of foreign labour, which was significantly cheaper than local domestic labour, Katia began losing work. Her resentment towards the Bangladeshi domestic workers who lived in her former flat was thus amplified by her dual sense of replacement at work and displacement at home. Seeking to counter this competition, she reached maturity in the White Building flat at a time when she was ready to specialise from the arduousness of cleaning and cooking, to cooking exclusively for some of her wealthiest clients. This line of work, which is regarded with more prestige than mere cleaning, requires special skills and knowledge of local culinary tastes and presentation. However, after the Syrian crisis began in 2011, among the millions of refugees who fled to Lebanon, there were thousands of women in Beirut with this capability who were prepared to do it for much cheaper. Katia's pining for her past social status and exceptional economic and domestic comforts, were relative to this total loss in the present. It was in this light that they constituted her nostalgia for the magnanimity of life.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter explored interlocutors' perceptions of the aesthetic attributes of past houses, relating that to the sense of wellbeing in their homes and in their lives as urban dwellers. Through ethnography about people who once lived in and pined for the Beirut Houses of their childhood and young adulthood, I revealed the way the reconstruction era - arguably more so than the Civil War - destabilised their socio-economic positions in the city. I elaborated the context and content of their nostalgic narratives about the magnanimity of life, understood as the sense of wellbeing that they associated not just with these houses, but with the course of dwelling in Beirut generally. In this aesthetic, notions of quantity, material quality and durability were extensions of a normativity that edified home, reproduction and successful production, while revealing the centrality of

the house as site of social prestige in a very socially stratified milieu. I presented some vignettes that brought out inhabitants' conditions of magnanimity and its loss, making a distinction between tenants and owners, and this time squatters as well, because these statuses and subjectivities have different financial capabilities and claims of entitlement over the city.

That there are varying qualities and dimensions of urban construction is no reason for pause. However, in the imaginary of Beirut's long-term inhabitants who are in a position to make comparisons over time, the commodification of housing has also been lifted to a symbolic register about the social status of people who have owned or lived inside larger and better-built houses. Interlocutors' comparison between their more spacious well-built homes of yore and smaller more compact abodes of today, tells a tale of scale understood as the form of living that the city enables and how this relates to their sense of fit in the city and in the world. The interlocutors who expressed a pining for a more magnanimous life in the past by referencing better aesthetics of dwelling space had experienced loss in their lives, a downward social mobility, or a series of rises and falls. Aged in their 60s and above, they presented themselves as in the autumn of their years when they strove and sometimes struggled to command authority or legitimacy within their social circles. A sense of injustice - indeed even conspiracy - done against them, from a professional field, from family and friends, framed their speech and its sometimes melancholic sometimes bewildered affect toward the city. The conspiracy that interlaced with this nostalgia for a past sense of place was built on "collective projections and 'rational delusions'," making "home" an object for recovery or restoration (Boym 2001: 43). Seeking to alleviate the "ache of temporal distance and displacement" that emerged from pining for a lost past, this "restorative nostalgia" wanted its object of pining back and desired a return home or at least something that resembles it (Boym 2001: 44). Despite the differences between the present ethnography and Boym's context, including the difference in objects of analysis between hers (literature as cultural production) and mine (everyday life and mundane expressions), I find her ideas resonate with my ethnographic material. Beyond the usefulness of her elaboration of nostalgia as a mind set, I find that what she identifies as the eternal quest for *bonheur*, or the "good time" chimes well with Bourdieu's notion of the good "fit," or the sense of being at home in the world. I found this quest to be trans-temporal in the aching hearts of my nostalgic interlocutors, as they anxiously grappled with past ruptures or the lurking spectres of change.

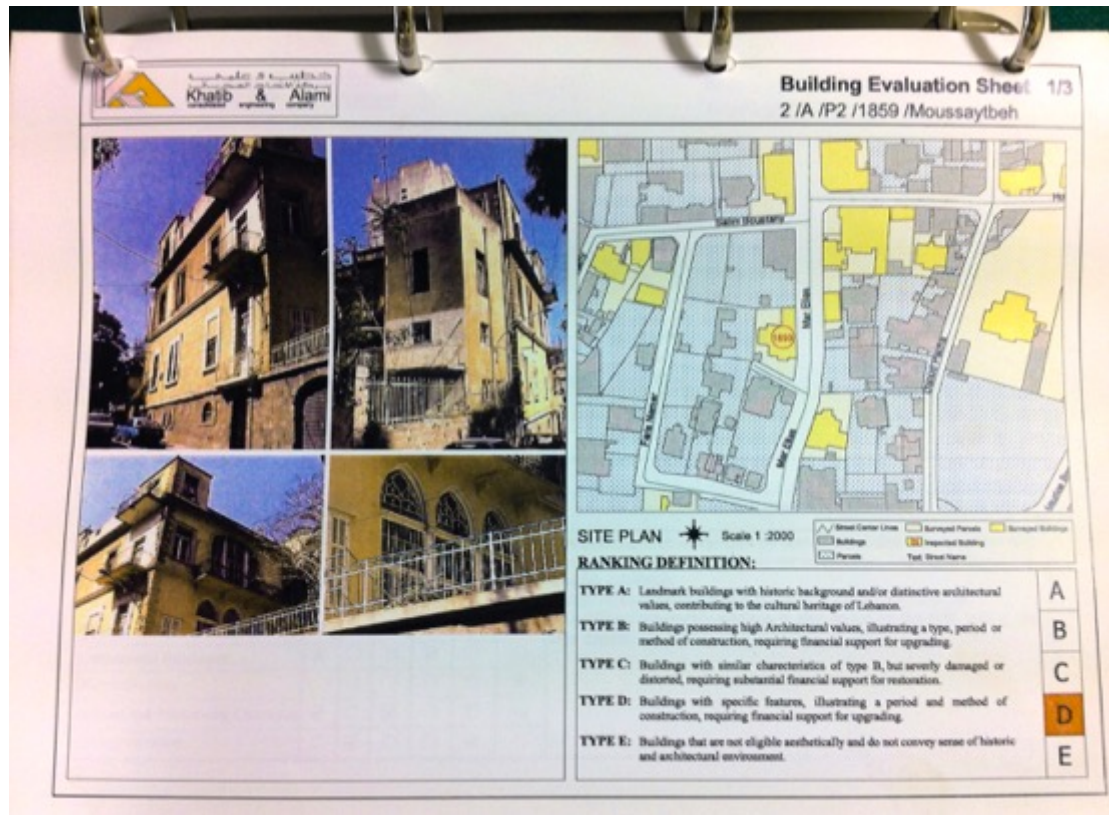
With interlocutors who felt loss and fragility in the present, a conversation about residential history, description of past homes and the reasons for moving, invariably trailed close behind it a prolonged treatise on the deterioration of social relations, the degradation of urban morality and the abandonment of the state. Yet how to interpret the recurrence of quantity, quality and durability of dwelling space as central architectural and aesthetic attributes in this nostalgia? What economic, social and spatial transformations are they signalling about the present? I argue here that interlocutors' attention to these attributes of past houses, given the social, economic and residential trajectories of their lives, indexes social and spatial orders of domestic space that prevail in present-day Beirut. In particular, I would claim that the magnitude, quality and durability of domestic space are not arbitrary attributes of the past magnanimity of life that is associated with these houses. Rather, they reflect how the commodification of homes and the increasing urban congestion in an era of fierce real estate competition, renders surface area a value that translates into wealth and social status, while confirming the material and spatial quality of the home and the aesthetic comfort of "body and soul" as a privilege that only few can enjoy. The pining for building for dwelling is tinged with a lament over degradation in the quality of life generally, and over a past when there was more time to socialise and more money from better work, namely a more abundant quality of life. In comparison, today urban dwellers must do "more simply to stay in the game" (Strathern 1999: 205).



**Figure 12:** Billboard advertising a stalled construction site, Zoqaq el-Blat.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## MANSION: CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY OF A SEEMING EXCEPTION



**Figure 13:** Mansion in the Khatib & Alami survey.

## INTRODUCTION

Mansion<sup>57</sup> is the present-day name of an old once-abandoned three-story late 19<sup>th</sup> century villa on Abdel Kader Street, in the neighbourhood of Zoqaq el-Blat, a neighbourhood just southwest of the part of Beirut's city centre, which Solidere reconstructed. A cultural collective took charge of the house in 2012 gradually growing in reputation, number of occupants and activities. One of its event announcements described it as an abandoned 800m<sup>2</sup> villa that was transformed into a multipurpose collective space with studios and offices for artists, researchers, designers, architects and

<sup>57</sup> For simplicity, except when I am discussing the genealogy of its naming, I refer to the house as Mansion throughout this chapter, even when I am speaking about an era that predates its existence as "Mansion" the cultural collective.

cultural NGOs (Figure 13). Mansion is a self-funded project, located in the centre of



**Figure 14:** Mansion's central hall.

Beirut. Mansion has also been an important launching pad and meeting place for various activist initiatives that focused specifically on the right to the city and other rights-based causes, but with a heavy emphasis on urban spatial issues. With the exception of a number of private studios and an artist residency bedroom/studio with adjoining bathroom, the ground floor, with kitchen, library, study tables, free Wi-Fi, a garden, and a large central hall, are open for public use in the day, including for events and activities at particular times (Figure 14). Except for the wooden-floored performance/dance space that is for public use, the first floor is more private, containing studios but also living quarters of Mansion's founders and managers, Ghassan and Sandra. The second floor consists of artists' studios as well and was mainly used by graphic designers during my occupancy there. I have had a studio on the first floor since January 2014, where I have spent hours preparing for fieldwork, writing field-notes, and writing up my dissertation. Yet the house itself, its age, its condition of disrepair, its historical trajectory, its location, its present legal status and its similar structural precarity to other informal tenants, puts it squarely within the parameters of my research questions. As such, while I initially became a Mansioner - a member of Mansion's permanent user-group - in order to work

*in* Mansion, from the onset of my interaction with the house and other users, I found myself also doing participant-observation *about* Mansion. During the second half of my fieldwork period between January and August 2014, I interviewed the branch of the Muallim family that formerly owned and inhabited the first floor where my studio is located. I attended weekly meetings that Mansioners held to discuss matters of everyday practicality as well as to debate the mission, ethos and future of Mansion as an activist collective and public space in the house and the city in general. Finally, until I took a doctoral fellowship at the Orient Institute in Beirut just around the corner from Mansion during my last year of thesis writing, I was going to Mansion almost daily, mainly to work, but also to eat, exercise, clean, and socialise. In the conventional ethnographic sense of the term, I “hung out” there more intensely than in any other single fieldsite. Not unlike a second home, I have used Mansion as the launching pad from where I go to engage with interlocutors in other sites in the city, and the place where I return in order to make sense of that fieldwork.

If I arrive early enough in the morning, 8 am or 8:15, I have to open the rusted metal door with my own key. A little later, I find that someone has opened the door already. The kitchen door also has a gate outside it that remains shut till the house awakens. The yellow wooden door is shut, but a gimmick pad-lock that does not actually lock anything hangs on its latch. One of Mansion’s many hand-written signs, which hang in various parts of the house, is attached to the door saying: “PUSH! IT’S NOT LOCKED” and “CLOSE BEHIND YOU,” in English and Arabic. Most days, I go straight up to the first floor where I keep one of the three studios that overlook Abdel Kader Street, a north-south thoroughfare leading from the neighbourhood of Zoqaq el-Blat to the St. Georges bay, giving me a small sliver of a view from my desk to the blue sea. My room feels like mine by now, though it isn’t of course. But I “rent” it for a small fee of \$160 (around 120) per month, including all bills, in an area where prices for the same space without bills would be three times that amount. When I step into the place, it’s well lit from the balcony door and equal-length window that takes up most of the 7-metre wall. Though good handful of buildings have risen high around the house since I came here in January 2014, the height of the ceiling inside my studio mysteriously complements the verticality outside, if not in scale then in the sense of relative magnitude. The sea and Abdel Kader Street provide an exceptional corridor of wind that travels up and rustles the thicket of untended trees in the derelict properties across the street, where the Hneineh, Ziadeh, Khoury and Bedrossian families once use to live.

Even in mid-summer, the overgrown rubber, Jacaranda and Persian Lilac (*zanzlakht*) trees entangle with electric cables ushering the merciful breeze into my balcony door, which I always leave open weather permitting, come din or come dust. In the winter, I keep the doors shut, the curtain's drawn and the gas heater on, but just in intervals lest I suffocate from the smell of the butane gas my heater runs on. With such high ceilings and damp stone walls, it is a big challenge warming up the room, and the breeze that was merciful in August pierces into one's bones in December. I wear a long woollen cape with hood to keep me warm as I type, and tuck my arms into its front slits when I step out of the office for a stretch or a break.

It's time for a short break from work now. A workshop leader at the University of Manchester once advised us to take a five-minute break after every fifteen minutes of intensive reading, and to pause for fifteen minutes every two cumulative hours. I've extended that rule to writing my thesis as well but my solid stretches are a bit longer, my breaks varying in length depending on who I bump into on my way to or from the kitchen or toilet, who comes to call or whose studio I drop by. The conversation might vary from a brief hello to a long conversation, a meal, a coffee or a cigarette together, with or without an unplanned exchange about life, the universe and everything, or at least some small part of that. When I first became a Mansioner and during just one such impromptu encounters, I bumped into another Mansioner called Ghalib in the kitchen. I asked him then how it feels to be working at Mansion. He said it's great but that he often runs the risk of finding himself in too many socialising situations, which distract from more steady rhythms of his work, as illustrator, designer, activist and artist. As a result, whenever he had a deadline, he worked elsewhere. I thought to myself, "As an ethnographer, I don't share that concern since socialising is a form of labour for us." But unlike most of the other settings where I did research for my doctorate, conversation in Mansion was rarely planned or purposeful in the moment of its unfolding. It was more frequently a labour in retrospect. Upstairs in my studio, feeling like a spy, I took notes of things people told me, things they did with each other and with the house. I imaged how the house must have been while inhabited and then while abandoned and how it continues to change with Mansion's cultural collective dwelling in it. I did not take such notes every day or every time something happened, surely. Only when a serendipitous exchange or happening leapt out at me, or things were said or done that readily inserted themselves into some rabbit-hole thought I was having about my thesis. At that moment, I managed to remind myself that I am also an ethnographer, not just a Mansioner, and



by that token should take the time to jot down the house's social reality or at least what part of it lies within my reach. Ultimately, Ghalib was right. When I finished fieldwork and a first draft of my thesis chapters, Mansion began to be a distraction for me particularly since it had become an ethnographic fieldsite. In order to keep writing and wrapping up the bulk of this thesis, I had to remove myself to a degree from the house. This confirmed to me my own internalisation – or indeed the true necessity – of the classic anthropological convention of separating from the field in order to produce knowledge about it. Without this distance and the artificial arrest of my encounter with the house's issues and tissues, I could not meet writing deadlines as Mansion's materiality and sociality constantly drew my attention.

The objective of this chapter is to show how the story of Mansion relates to some of the main themes of my thesis as a whole, embodying the rules that govern the production and accumulation of value within Beirut's property market. I begin the chapter with a brief background of Mansion in its present form, including the resident/owning family's former disinvestment from it, its abandonment and the present owner's purchase of it, as well as his initial aspirations to transform it into his own home. Then I tell the story of the encounter between Ghassan and the present owner, Imad Farah, and the gradual founding of Mansion as cultural collective. I explore the unusual and seemingly exceptional conditions that enable an initiative such as Mansion to dwell in an otherwise derelict and abandoned house on prime real estate in Beirut. I also discuss the legal/formal status of Mansion, including its classification as "rubble," where use and residence are strictly speaking not permitted, thereby making Mansion an informal space. Then I lay out the economic conditions of possibility, including the financial and symbolic checks and balances of the patriarchal agreement between Imad and Ghassan, namely a temporary borrowing of the house so long as it is being used for non-profit cultural production. I explore the ramifications of this arrangement on the collective's sense of stability and continuity, before relating its fundamental precarity to that of other categories of city dwellers that featured in previous chapters, focusing on foreign migrant workers, such as those instrumentalised in battles between owners and old tenants in Chapter Two.

My first argument is that the borrowing arrangement, without which Mansion would not have existed in its present form and location, is dependent on the "benevolent surplus" of its owner. I coin this term on the one hand to capture the abundant wealth, which enables the property to be dispensable to Imad's immediate needs for dwelling or

benefit and amenable to indefinite speculation. On the other hand, it signals his simultaneous wish to act as patron of Mansion - much like a patron of the arts - whose cultural activity yields symbolic capital that he desires, distinguishing him from other upwardly mobile and prospering capitalists in the city. However, his ability to withdraw the gift of the house at any moment, puts Mansion as a collective in a perpetual state of uncertainty and liminality regarding where and whether it can continue operating. My second and related argument is that this resonates with the situation of other conditions of possibility for dwelling in decayed houses that my interlocutors in previous chapters were grappling with, particularly migrant works. Unlike several of my other interlocutors, however, many Mansioners are vocally critical of at least some aspects of the neoliberal urban regime and the rampant destruction by renewal that it has wrought in Beirut. Touching on the dual practical, material and ethical concerns over dwelling in the house, Mansioners - particularly core founding members - aspire to be and indeed represent to an extent - within cultural circles in Beirut and beyond - an alternative "good-place," distinct from the violence of financial utilitarianism, forms of discrimination, and environmental degradation that characterise such regimes (Sargisson 2007: 396, 418). This may serve to distinguish Mansion from several other precarious dwellers by the symbolic capital they can harness from such political views, from their personal socio-economic position and trajectories, and from the social prestige that comes with cultural labour more generally (including art, crafts, architecture, academia, political activism etc.). Yet the collective's present unequivocal dependence on the benevolence of the villa's owner to donate the space for such dwelling and production, reaffirms the incontestable (even if contested) privilege of private ownership over any other form of land tenure in Beirut, which I have been demonstrating throughout this thesis. It also re-inscribes Mansion within prevailing patriarchal relations that permeate the deliberations and manipulations over the accumulation of value in real estate (e.g. 'power of attorney' in inheritance sharing). In this sense, and through a comparative standpoint, this chapter also reveals how Mansioners resemble migrant workers in their structural position as instruments of accumulation of value within Beirut's neoliberal property market, despite the fact that they wield considerably more symbolic capital and visibility. By this comparison, it is also noticeable how while structurally invisible within one context, migrant communities are in fact essential for the accumulation of capital in Beirut and beyond and to the production of value more broadly.

## ANATOMY OF A HOUSE COLLECTIVE

There are over twenty people working in Mansion in the nine or so rooms available as personal studio spaces, constituting what they and I have called a collective. Ghassan collects monetary contributions, allocating some for running costs. He insists that this contribution is not “rent,” and while urging late-payers after the start of the month to pay, he has often felt frustrated for “being made to feel like a landlord” pursuing his tenants every month. He says this with some displeasure both with people’s lack of punctuality and with the category of “landlord,” whose stereotypical calculation and miserliness he dissociates from his way of doing things. A treasury committee of four Mansioners restocks on vitals and pays the electric generator and telephone bills. Mansioners with studios work in architecture, graphic design, furniture design, film and print illustration, video editing, film conservation, performance arts, curating, industrial design, painting, silk-screening, social anthropology, and bicycle courier service. In addition to this, activist associations and coalitions use Mansion’s garden and common hall to meet and store campaign materials, while private NGOs and cultural events-organisers occasionally use the space for their private or public events. The rule of such use is if the organisation has money it pays a contribution for its use; but if it has no budget and if the content of the activities aligns itself with Mansion’s rights-based social ethos then it can use the space for free. As such, the diverse activities and personal commitments of both Mansioners and other Mansion users (those without studios) impose various rhythms of work and leisure in the house, producing distinct atmospheres and degrees of animation at various times of the day, various days in the week and various moments in the year. It also renders the house somewhat organic in its spatial configuration. A house proper, with kitchen, bathrooms, shared living area, passageways, mezzanines, cellar and yards, Mansion gets dirty, cluttered, and broken. Parts of it get neglected and gradually collect dust until they are derelict and virtually useless. Then suddenly the cellar, which has stood stuffed to bursting with old furniture and stocks of magazines for years, will be cleared, cleaned, and readied for public and in-house use as a “recording studio.” For these drastic changes to happen Ghassan receives a small grant or another Mansioner finds the time and a burst of enthusiasm to transform a dilapidated nook of the house for new and improved dwelling. All the while, a half lemon might sit decomposing in the fridge for weeks without anyone removing it, but someone taking the time to attach a funny note on the fruit like “who’s science

experiment is this?" telling whoever left it to throw it away.

Thus, it would seem that Mansion's objects and people alike inhabit the house at different tempos of activity and idleness, change and stagnation, optimism and indifference. This anatomy becomes all the more justifiable in a space such as Mansion where things have been left for years to fall apart and erode, to accumulate and overgrow, to stain – in a word to take on the materiality of decay. Though Ghassan and the first Mansioners stepped in to redress these material transformations to a modicum at the start of the project in 2012, and though they continue to do so on a need-to basis, the process of decay continues in parallel with repair. Meanwhile, some material substances have decayed beyond (affordable) repair. In other cases, Mansioners (or Ghassan, or Sandra or whoever) prioritised the repair of one thing over another. The indeterminacy of the agent of such prioritisation is also part of Mansion's somewhat spontaneous mode of dwelling, such that while the central voices and actors are known to be Ghassan and Sandra, unannounced collaborations with other Mansioners constantly produce unexpected changes in the space. In all cases, however, Mansioners have favoured using recycled materials and in-house knowledge and labour, particularly of people with architectural or crafting abilities, to maintain the house. Saving costs, this method is also part of an ethos of self-sufficiency, ingenuity, frugality, sustainability and collaboration that finds resonance with other communal type models that Mansion resembles. Mansioners are, however, too divergent in their views and practices to be understood as an "intentional community," defined as a group of people with shared beliefs and practices who decide to live together in some level of estrangement from the rest of society (Sargisson 2007: 397, 401). Yet a significant number of Mansioners share enough social and political ideals to entertain aspirations of a common mission with its efficient implementation, distinct from normative trends in building, dwelling and communing with other people.

I first heard of Mansion mid-way through my fieldwork when I was looking for office space where I could escape the entanglements of my familial home and focus my attention on my doctoral research. At that stage, I needed a place to prepare my questions, write fieldnotes, read and eventually to write my dissertation. In January 2012, I took my children to participate in Mini-Mansioners, the weekly kids-and-parents recreational activities that Mansion holds on Saturday mornings during the academic year. Devised by one parent Mansioner, the programme invites participating parents to take turns running creative children's workshops, and occasionally invites

visiting artists to take charge of some sessions. The small contribution of \$50 (£38) per semester goes towards materials for the workshops, cleaning, and makeshift repairs, which the initiatives own email announcements calls, “healing Mansion.” The diverse list of activities has included building a city out of recyclable scrap, hand-crafting your own marble run, making music out of things that aren’t musical instruments, planting and the like. My family and I once ran a shadow puppet making session, and I gave “a jungle-animal kids’ yoga” class. Clearly this program distinguishes itself from the prevailing form of children’s entertainment available across Beirut and in other cities. Air-conditioned, noisy, over-stimulating and over-stuffed with equipment and entertainment, these are usually strategically embedded in shopping malls or commercial fairs. Spatially segregated and sanitised, as well as supervised and serviced by under-paid domestic workers and dispassionate young chaperones, these often costly play-spaces seem explicitly designed to herd children to one side so that parents can consume in cafes and stores with more efficiency, undisturbed by the unruly demands of childhood.

This stands in stark contrast with the Mini-Mansioners set-up and ethos, which its creator, Sabine, devised as a place where parents and children can engage together around a common hands-on activity. Participating families are invited to set things up themselves, invent and improvise, play and socialise, and service and clean up after themselves, all in a space that is somewhat disorganised, disheveled and in relative disrepair. The participants this set-up attracts are by necessity a particular type of people, with a particular sort of symbolic capital, namely with civic education or sense of awareness towards the environment for example. In various ways and to varying degrees, the Mini-Mansioners’ parents share some form of dissent against or remove from the prevailing “system” understood very broadly as hyper-consumerist, socially unjust, driven by sectarian hierarchy, and environmentally irresponsible. Like most Mansioners, they belong to an educated and/or creative middle class, and if not of such background originally, then at least successfully cultivated their dispositions. Despite their diversity, these families share an ethos of creative and affordable entertainment, whether out of financial need or by principles pertaining to these fields (Susen & Turner 2011: 22). By participating in Mini-Mansioners, this group of people implicitly performed a particular political stance even as they found an affordable way to pass the time with their kids on a Saturday morning. I knew nearly everyone at the Mini-Mansioners session in question, and if not, then we quickly got to know one another. Some were families from my children’s school, others age-old family friends whom I was reunited with.

I already knew Ghassan with whom I have shared common friends since over two decades. It was in this atmosphere of recreational reunion and learning that he “invited” me to take a small studio on Mansion’s first floor. This sort of informal yet centralised process of “selection” was how most Mansioners were invited to use studio space, which was most times full to capacity. When some studios emptied out, new people were invited to come in but always through deliberations with Ghassan and Sandra, who take the final decision. Happy for this opportunity, I procured some used furniture that a relative of mine wanted to give away. Sharing the cost of transporting them with Ghassan, I also shared half the furnishings with Mansion. I gradually got settled into the small room, which the Muallims, its former resident owners, had named “the telephone room” because it housed the only telephone in the house at the time.

### THE HOUSE WITH MANY NAMES

In its heyday as family home and social hub, Mansion was among a row of large villas for Beirut’s wealthy and influential merchant class, in a neighbourhood famed for its cultural, social, education, and political significance prior to the Civil War of 1975-90. After the neighbourhood’s initial establishment around the mid-19th century, as the first alleyway to be paved outside Beirut’s historic city walls, Zoqaq el-Blat (Arabic for the paved alleyway) attracted several prominent merchant families who sought residence there to be close to but outside the over-congested commercial and political centre (Féghali 2009). The place reached its peak prosperity around the mid-1900s (1950-1970), and subsequently attracted people of various socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, who built and lived in houses and apartment buildings of varied size and architecture. Not the largest or most externally lavish villa on the block, Mansion nevertheless falls within the typology of the well-to-do abode, with its surrounding gardens, separate servants’ quarters, and plush interior scale and building materials, including white marble floors and hardwood. While other houses with more classical architectures resembling the “Beirut House” typology earned the title “palace” and were depicted with pictographic splendour in hardcover coffee-table books on national and urban heritage, Mansion is recognisable by a more subtle “becoming modern” sort of way that often goes unnoticed. Yet like many of its neighbours, Mansion was built, owned and inhabited by an affluent bourgeois merchant and propertied family, the

Muallims, who had global and local trade and political connections, and enjoyed at least two decades of economic and social prosperity in the heterogeneous neighbourhood (Stolleis 2005: 178).

Like the hospital building on Khalid Street from Chapter One, the house's ground floor has taller ceilings than the first and the first has taller ceilings than the second, causing architects who surveyed it to believe it was built in stages. A stone staircase connects the first two floors, while wooden stairs connect to the top floor and roof. Two siblings from the Muallim family, a sister and a brother, each inhabited the ground and first floors respectively, along with their spouses and offspring. Their Kurdish housekeeper and her family lived in the penthouse. An architect and relative of the Muallim family described the house's architectural style as non-categorisable but then with some prodding approximated its influences to the "art nouveau" aesthetic movement of the turn of the 19th century, which favoured forms that harmonise with the natural environment. This was a period when the Ottoman empire was on a mission to modernise its cities, which took various forms of which emulating European urban aesthetics was one, and elite neighbourhoods like Zoqaq were among the first to manifest this (Gebhardt 2005, Féghali 2009). But the house clearly combined a medley of influences, classical as well as modernist, explicit design as well as functional add-ons. Like a number of Beirut's large villas that I explored and whose owners I met, this one too had summoned specialised artisanship all the way from Italy to ornament a ceiling, fresco-paint a wall, or craft a delicate detail in plaster. "The Italian artisans were flown all the way here for that purpose," was one statement I frequently heard as signal of the inhabitants' wealth and aesthetic appreciation, and by extension a marker of the Golden Age of Beirut. Meanwhile, Mansion was continuously inhabited till the 1975 Civil War broke out, after which family members dispersed, some remaining, others fleeing mostly outside the country but occasionally to other parts of the city to take shelter, while others lived there intermittently.

Times changed and the house gradually emptied out mainly when the Muallims lost their wealth in risky business undertakings during the global financial crash of 1978, compounded by familial disintegration and the outbreak of the 1975 Civil War. Until its total abandonment in the mid-1990s, parts of the house fell into disrepair, parts were abandoned before others, until the premise was sold and vacated of the Muallim belongings. Under its present ownership, militias occupied the house at several intervals during the latter part of the war, and it has stood derelict for the remaining part. The

story, as told to me mostly by the Muallims (particularly the eldest daughter, Hiba) bespeaks a socio-economic downturn for the family, with consequences to their family's status, its unity and with it the maintenance of the house. The lack of funds was detrimental on multiple levels, some of which were withheld (from me). Of the ones revealed to me, I learned that Hiba's grandfather, Said Muallim, was a wealthy merchant and landlord with strong connections to the Ottoman sultanate, but her father Anwar, who was sole male heir to his father, struggled to pay his children's university tuition, including Hiba's. Divorced from his wife, Layla, in the early 1970s, he also lived alone with Hiba in the house for a time as his three other children pursued their studies and work abroad. His sister, Zaynab, practically raised him since their mother died when he was but a toddler, and her role in their household affairs reflected her authority all the more since she was a powerful merchant in her own right, and in a sense the true heir to their father's dynasty. To her other niece, Hiba, she was "very involved," while to her sister-in-law, Layla, she was "interfering," and something of a mother-in-law figure. But Anwar outlived her, until his heart attack in 1986, which took his life while he was gambling with friends at a hotel.

While I did not meet any of the family members from the ground floor, namely Anwar and Zaynab's younger sister Munira, her husband and only daughter, I knew from the Muallims that Munira died young in a car accident. I also knew that her daughter married an American, moved there, and had two children whom she named after her parents. Until around the mid-1990s, some of these ground-floor residents were present in the house, along with the Kurdish housekeeper. While the older generation was still alive, their descendants used to pass by the house when they visited the country. Rumour has it that the Kurdish housekeeper was the last person to leave the house before Imad bought it. Even after that, indeed even while Ghassan was setting up Mansion there, a number of the Muallim descendants passed by to see the place, sometimes struggling to get permission from the owner to enter, other times entering more assertively with mixed emotions of longing and remorse, in either case often with offspring in whose consciousness they wished to implant the house and their childhood home. Throughout all these transformations, these changes in status, ownership and usage, the house's name also changed. The house's former name, Villa Muallim, is no longer in use around the neighbourhood and no one but old-time residents of a particular generation and class, as well as extended members and friends of the Muallim family will even remember it. A few architects who were once tasked to make a



restoration survey and design for the house for Imad Farah called it “Villa Farah” after the present owner who had dreams of making it his luxury palace in the heart of the city. In an interview with me, Imad said he called it “The Yellow House”<sup>58</sup> since before he acquired the property, admiring it on his daily walk to work from his flat right across the street. Only those who have some relationship with the place today, or have heard of it through cultural circuits and circles, know it as Mansion. Otherwise, the house is either unknown, unnamed (for example to taxi drivers), and because has no sign, it can be tricky orienting visitors to it.

On its blogspot and in some of its email invitations to cultural events, directions to Mansion read as follows in English: “To get there: take your right at the traffic light end of Spears Street, Mansion will be the first *intact* villa on your right facing the yellow block tower called Solitaire (map attached)” (my emphasis). The word “intact” has always given me pause. Intact compared to what? In the etymology dictionary, “intact” comes from the Latin *intactus* meaning “untouched, uninjured, undefiled.”<sup>59</sup> On the level of its physical condition, how can Mansion be intact when Mini-Mansioners are being invited to “heal” it? The house has actually incurred much wear and tear in its infrastructure and façade, as well as significant structural deficiencies, mainly compromised by adjacent new constructions. Such new construction (as early as the 1950), unlike the old, needed to dig deep into the ground for its foundations in order to rise higher up, causing the bedrock of adjacent older style houses to shift, slide and unsettle. A crack along Mansion’s western corner reveals this faulting down, bringing with it leaky roof and walls, and the danger of collapse that has been postponed by the building of a wooden brace around the ceiling of one room, and waterproofing treatment on the roof above. Yet Mansion is intact only in relative terms, in as much as its fate is not (yet) that of other similar era houses, which bypass it in disrepair and dereliction, or have been demolished altogether. In comparison to some of the other remaining old villas on Abdel Kader Street, it is in liveable condition. The two-story Khoury house for instance stands roofless and with gouged out windows across the street from Mansion, while the larger building near the intersection with Spears Street is half torn down leaving only a precarious facade. By a most startling act of deliberate debris,

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<sup>58</sup> Several similar era houses in Beirut acquired this form of nomenclature over time, with particular ones (those still remaining) known locally as “The Red house,” or “The Rose House.” Such naming suggests a period of abandonment when the owners, who would otherwise bestow their family name on the house, were no longer known locally.

<sup>59</sup> [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)

this building was allegedly sabotaged by its owner who wished against regulation to clear the land for new construction.

After a period of abandonment, Mansion was reawakened when Ghassan set up the cultural collective there, made some repairs, dwelled in it and invited people to work from there. By the term “healing,” in addition to the trajectory of abandonment just relayed, habitation and the human care it can entail, correlate with the material state of the house as physical object. As such, the prosperity and familial cohesion during the Muallims’ residence at Mansion coincided with the house’s relative material integrity, while their social-economic decline and dispersal of various family members unravelled the house in noticeable material ways. Such observations index that the material transformations of houses coincide with the important events of the people who dwell therein, constituting the house as “processual,” much like social relations, rather than as a fixed entity (Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995: 37-9). “Healing” also evokes the metaphorical association between the body and the house (in ageing if nothing else), between “inhabiting and embodiment” whereby mending Mansion constitutes an investment in active dwelling and meaningful social relations (Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995: 42). Using the descriptor “intact” to direct visitors to itself, Mansion’s voice - the one that also communicates through handwritten notes - bespeaks a kind of gratitude for the house’s habitability against the odds, as well as an intention to dispel or postpone defilement and injury for as long as possible.

## MANSION’S FORMAL AND INFORMAL STATUS

From the perspective of tenure, Mansion sits on “clean” real estate, without tenants to evict or unending law suits to await or appeal in the courts of justice or informal channels of power. From the perspective of illegalities or unpaid dues like utilities bills and taxes, the house rests on a fair degree of informality and indeterminate issues. These are hard to determine partly because government bureaucracy is not always transparent and comprehensively clear about them. But also because these issues revealed themselves to me through Ghassan, who was himself discovering their existence while trying to resolve an emergent problem, on a need-to-basis, such as a water shortage or electrical malfunction. To start, in its cadastral registry Mansion is classified as *anqadh* (rubble in Arabic). This is a strange classification for a built structure that not only looks

rather habitable even if somewhat decrepit, but is in actual fact dwelled in on a daily basis and inhabited full-time by a few Mansioners. According to Ghassan, Imad registered the house as *anqadh* in order to avoid paying a backlog of unpaid municipal taxes, which are otherwise due for all inhabited houses. Legally speaking, therefore, the collective is not permitted to be there and the house should be vacant awaiting demolition. From the ethnographic case of the Zubaydis in Chapter Three, I learned that *anqadh* is the classification their landlord tried to place their contested house under, to signal that it risks collapse and is therefore unsound for occupancy. Initially, Imad did not intend the house to be used for residence, only for work and staging events. Yet while Mansion is predominantly a working place, it has also been the residence of Ghassan, his French partner Sandra when she is in town, and Sari, a Syrian performance artist, in addition to the occasional temporary art resident.

Satisfied with what is “happening” in Mansion, Imad does little to prevent residence there. In fact, he has somewhat facilitated it, particularly as he contributes to arrangements for linking up the house to basic utilities, which the house would otherwise not enjoy under its legal status as *anqadh*. While he does not make any financial contributions to the collective – which raises its running costs from events and the monthly fees of studio-keepers – he paid the government electricity bills of the house for the first four years of the agreement. Until early 2016, Mansion did not have an independent electric metre but was linked to the metre of Imad’s private duplex across the street, which also sends a current to the parking attendant’s shack in the adjacent parking lot that Imad also owns. In early 2016, Ghassan sought to set up a separate electric metre for the house’s needs, after years of Mansioners’ frustration with the shared usage system. Increasingly, the parking lot and Mansion were drawing more current, which kept exceeding the metre’s limits and causing the main switch to snap repeatedly. The process of formalising electricity revealed yet more contradictions, namely entailing oversights and neglect at the heart of Lebanese state bureaucracy. Being *anqadh*, Mansion technically had no active electric metre, and yet Ghassan was faced with a massive back-log of unpaid bills from after the Muallim’s left the house. The actual device in Mansion’s cellar was fixed on zero consumption, yet a separate consumption count was accumulating at the electric company. Without any hope of solving this mystery, and set on getting a new metre while dodging the extortion of one employee at Electricité du Liban who wished to take advantage of the unpaid bills, Ghassan deployed some of his own connections in the national electric company’s branch in his mountain

town of Aley. Through such social networking, he managed to settle a reduced fine and start the Mansion metre anew, the company accepting to activate a metre in a presumably uninhabited space.

Without legal permission to be inhabited, Mansion also had no official water metre. Yet water flows through its pipes, albeit with difficulty sometimes, but not more than other people face given prevalent water shortages and bad plumbing. In fact, Mansion's pipes were never totally disconnected from the water grid. Or rather it was not impossible for Ghassan to get them reconnected, because adjacent properties were also tapping informally into the grid. Neighbourhoods strong-men were happy to share and facilitate the procedure for Ghassan, who incidentally and importantly is well-respected on Abdel Kader Street, in my opinion because of the disposition for sociality and solidarity that he accumulated while living in war-time Ras Beirut neighbourhoods. What was impossible, however, was to formalise the house's water usage with the Beirut municipality and get a metre fitted. After many failed attempts made through visits to the municipality, Ghassan gave up. In the interim and much like many of its neighbours, the house continued to have running water. Such a flow persisted by informal channels that embody the unaccounted ways that infrastructure operates in Beirut and other cities. While signalling states' prevailing ignorance about the viability and reach of networks that they themselves plan and lay (Anand 2015: 308), I would add this also points to a institutionalised and politically convenient form of neglect. Thus later on, a municipal employee resumed surprise visits to Mansion every few months or so, this time not to threaten to report habitation where it must not be, but to take a bribe or two for leaving things as they are.

After electricity and water, two sorts of infrastructures and resources that reveal the intricate machinations and materialities of formal and informal relations, Mansion's heritage status also constitutes its condition of possibility. No one from government has come by to inspect the house for heritage value since the collective took up camp there. The very notion of a built structure being classified as heritage commonly referred to as '*ishara*' (Arabic for mark or sign), is commonly conflated with the prevention to demolish because this is the state's only preservation mechanism at the moment. What happens in such cases is that owners of properties that are listed will not get a demolition permit from the Beirut municipality when they go to seek it if the Cultural Ministry has identified the property as valuable for heritage. Imad claimed with certainty that the house has no mark on it that he has total freedom to do with it as he pleases. I on the

other hand, found an entry on Mansion in the listing of APSAD, the first association to generate in 1990 a survey of Beirut's properties with heritage value (Appendix 2), as well as in the Khatib & Alami listing, the subsequent state-commissioned heritage survey of 1995 (See Figure 13). However, no matter what survey the house might figure in, such an entry is not legally binding and does not in fact constitute a listing. Such an obstacle would likely only "appear" if Imad were to apply for a demolition permit, the Culture Ministry were to advise against it, and is contingent to a large part on his desire, interest and power (or use of it) to either demolish or preserve it.

The transition between these two surveys witnessed a politically charged and contested struggle over what properties should be kept and which ones demolished for renewal, with numerous land-owning politicians and their political constituencies of smaller landowners intervening in favour of liberating their own properties. Classifying it as *anqadh* could also have foreclosed its secure listing, as that legal category prescribes habitation and heritage both. For his part, Imad seems to have his own idea about what level of material preservation Mansion ought to be in while under the collective's care. He would have liked them to "repair it a little more," he once said two years into the initiative, yet did not allow them to fund-raise for repairs. Meanwhile, he does not want the house to become conspicuously restored. Ghassan believed this was because the house was not legally inhabitable and should not become conspicuous to the authorities as a profit-making enterprise. If it did, in addition to the municipality, the Finance Ministry might claim owed taxes. Within the logic of all-powerful property ownership, which proved over the years effective in liberating over a thousand properties from recognition as heritage, bringing the house to a higher degree of maintenance may also draw the heritage lobby's attention, if it has not already been drawn.

It remains unclear whether the Culture Ministry would approve Mansion's demolition given that it meets present criteria for preservation, namely manifesting architectural features like encaustic tiles and triple-arch windows, and have historical association to a prominent public figure. In principle, Mansion meets both these criteria. According to Hiba Muallim, her father secretly hosted the founders of the Lebanese Republic, president Bechara al-Khoury and Prime Minister Riad al-Solh in a small vestibule on Mansion's first floor. There they allegedly discussed pivotal matters concerning the fate of the fledgling nation-state. Moreover, should Imad decide to demolish, Mansion's "Beirut House" status in the public imaginary would likely stir a public resistance as well as certain resistance from Mansioners. This is not only because

their place of production, activity and activism would be disrupted, because also because some Mansioners are inclined to support a preservationist agenda, albeit nuanced with demands for socially equitable entitlement to the city. In any case, it is certain how effective either resistance or fight would be in the face of this landowner's decision to demolish. Assuming he wished to, the indefinite stalling of the only new heritage law that has been drafted and the routinised disregard of laws that obstruct profitable real estate ventures would both work to his advantage.

When Ghassan first moved into Mansion, he got impromptu visits from a Beirut municipal employee who was trying to regulate the discrepancy of inhabited rubble and threatening to report it (or earn a few bucks out of the situation). But after some unpleasant altercations with him the guy eventually went away never to return. When he told me the story, I speculated with Ghassan over the likelihood that Imad pulled strings in his own back-alleys of power to keep the authorities from bothering Mansion over all its contraventions, contradictions and possible heritage related contentions. Surely Imad's social trajectory and position granted him some immunity and privilege before law and force, in his private and business dealings, I posited. Not disagreeing with me, Ghassan however believed that Imad's own personal ethos is one of correctness, modesty and inconspicuousness, manifested in such behaviour as walking daily to his office a kilometre away rather than using a fancy car. But I contend that Imad's position, as well-heeled and well-connected property owner who can wait, works unequivocally in his interests. Without actively tapping into them, the reverence that the state bureaucracy and its finagle-prone extensions have for political connections in general, are sufficient to dissuade full-on legal pursuit. Not wanting to tap into them, wanting to be "correct" is a sign of distinction on his part, discrete power being arguably the most powerful form of domination. According to Bourdieu's notion of distinction, which is influenced by Adorno, domination under capital seeks to be invisible (Susen & Turner 2011: 194). Meanwhile, without discussing his connections, Imad revealed to me their powerful effect, claiming that when he first bought Mansion, he managed to evict some powerful Palestinian militias who were squatting there unwanted.

At the intersection of laws and informal agreements, the inhabited rubble, the non-residential residence and the unlisted heritage are abstract sets of conditions that belie the material reality and lived experience of Mansion. Mansion's status as *anqadh* presumes it to be unsalvageable, worth destroying - or clearing - rather than repairing and inhabiting, as the collective has done since 2012. In this legal category, the house is

as good as a pile of stones. Imad's lenient attempt to restrict Mansion's mode of dwelling to cultural production forecloses more profitable production and indeed reproduction, as a more residential arrangement would entail. While Mansion avoids the first foreclosure, with Mansioners sustaining themselves from their own professions rather than from the house's activity, Mansion has doubled as a home, and not only because Ghassan, Sandra and Sari sleep there. By dint of Mansioners' active involvement in other home-like activities that go on there, the house exudes an informal and sometimes-haphazard domestic feel rather than any clear organisational structure. This domesticity also produces and manifests itself in familial-like relations of solidarity, commitment as well as ambivalent sentiments amongst Mansioners. Finally, the potential that Mansion gains recognition as a heritage site would inscribe the house exclusively in its prestigious past, ignoring the transformations it underwent thereafter and continues to experience. With the gentrifying potential that heritage preservation has had in Beirut (and elsewhere) this could expedite the replacement of Mansion with more financially lucrative enterprises, or inscribe the collective's practice exclusively within reificatory heritage discourse and cultural production. Instead, I would argue Mansion is a precise ethnographic example of Gordillo's concept of "rubble," which bears a quite different connotation than *anqadh*. As discussed in the Introduction, Gordillo proposes "rubble" as "a conceptual figure that can help us understand the ruptured multiplicity that is constitutive of all geographies as they are produced, destroyed, and remade" (Gordillo 2014: 2). Seen through this prism, Mansion's aesthetics of decay, domestic humdrum, and modes of cultural production, postpone its fixing as unsalvageable pile of stones (*anqadh*), as well as any formal institution or glamorous "ruin."

### MANSION'S CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY

The physical conditions that Mansion is in – particularly the faulting foundations of its western wing – are not the primary cause for Mansion's precarity, however. The constant need to make repairs on plumbing, electricity, windows, doors and the like, are not unique to a once-abandoned house, but pertain to dwelling in houses and their "recruitment" of our actions upon them generally (Ingold 2010: 94). In principle and unless some catastrophic event like an earthquake occurs, Mansion may continue to be as habitable as it currently is for many years to come. Indeed, the legal

and economic terms of use that inscribe it as a space and an initiative, make up its precarity more than its physical state, even if this precarity proves to be long-term. For those who have experienced its functioning intimately, Mansion is an exceptional place and initiative, and this is not just praise from someone who has experienced it. What is exceptional is the combination of legal, economic and relational conditions, which make this collective possible in a house on prime real estate, which would otherwise be derelict or by now demolished. It is worth mentioning here, that Mansion's ownership integrity, namely that it is owned by a single person rather than an unwieldy tangle of relatives with their conflicting priorities, such as I elaborated in Chapter One on inheritance, is the precursor for all ensuing conditions of possibility discussed in this section. That Imad also owns the plots of land around Mansion, builds on that integrity making him the monopoliser of decisions over the urban space where Mansion stands, as well as over the form and fate of the house. Yet the unique relationship between Ghassan on the one hand and Imad on the other, as well as their respective social positions and trajectories, disposition and aesthetic inclinations, is what this place and all its intricacies rest on for existence and continuity.

#### A GENTLEMAN'S AGREEMENT AND HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Ghassan, 50 years old, is the youngest of five sons born to a German mother and a father who was a well-known veterinarian doctor of Maronite Christian decent from the mountain town of Aley. In their mountain home, his father and uncles owned moderate amounts of property, where they cultivated various produce and raised animals. He grew up in Ras Beirut, studied architecture at the American university there, and experienced much of the Lebanese Civil War and its aftermath in various Ras Beirut neighbourhoods. His family's pastoral life style dwindled with Ghassan's generation who acquired other professions, though Ghassan continued to appreciate and maintain it at a recreational rhythm. After a short stay in London, he returned to Lebanon to establish artist residencies, workshops and events in Beirut and Aley, in collaboration with other cultural practitioners. His narrative of life in war-torn Beirut is replete with the usual anecdotes of duress under conditions of violence and shortages in basic amenities, made bearable through intense sociality, neighbourly sharing and unconditional solidarities. In 2012, Ghassan and his colleagues left a property in Ein el-Mreisseh (where Sawalha did her fieldwork), where they had rented and run an artist residency space for two years. The owners had decided to reclaim the place and sell it for development. In search of a



new space, he went scouting the city for an empty property where he could establish affordable artists' studios and a cultural venue, for his own and others' artistic practices. In his account of this search, he said, "Whenever I found a place and tried to contact the owners, I was always lead to their lawyer," relaying the generally suspicious affect surrounding property exchange, and the disregard for proposals that do not backed by social connections and promises of sure profit. He did not meet a single owner until he stumbled on Mansion, and was surprised by Imad's willingness to meet with him, despite them never having met before. Feeling lucky, he put his proposal bluntly: seeing that the house was not in use, and that property prices were so prohibitive to people such as himself who try to do good in the city, he wanted the place for free to set up a cultural collective in Zoqaq el-Blat, a neighbourhood known for its cultural legacy.

Imad, a man in his 60s, is in the export and import trade who dabbles occasionally in real estate, mostly buying property but occasionally also developing them. He is not just a successful merchant, but also very well connected politically, from his father's side as well as his mother's. Both come from a lineage of upwardly mobile Shiite families from South Lebanon who gained significant wealth and power in the capital. His father's lineage, which I learned more about, had made concerted efforts to educate and professionalise their children (Imad's generation and younger), acquiring in the process social status, as well as public positions that were influential on real estate and urbanisation.<sup>60</sup> Imad was educated in French while growing up in Lebanon, and subsequently got his university degree in France. He moved to Zoqaq el-Blat in the late 1980s, and continues to live there in a duplex apartment right across the street with his son and wife, a woman of Christian decent, a painter and an art aficionado, who is rumoured to have encouraged him to lend the house to Mansion, whose public activities she regularly attends. My impression of him from our single meeting and others' accounts of him is that he is a gentle, discrete, outwardly timid yet wilful man, who is also punctual, professional, meticulous and intimately involved in his business enterprises.

When Ghassan approached Imad in 2012, Imad was somewhat hesitant to accept. He needed a few months to think about the proposal. By then, his own plans to renovate and turn the house into his new and upscale home were displaced by "other

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<sup>60</sup> For reasons of trust, I cannot disclose more details about the relationship and identity of his family connections.

priorities,” he said. On the one hand, from his flat across the street to Mansion, he had for years admired The Yellow House and bought it in the hope of enlarging his home beyond the size of a standardised flat. But when he had the occasion to buy a bigger flat in the same building, he did, fulfilling his aspiration for magnitude to the extent that he indefinitely postponed the costly dream of making Mansion his home. However, his priorities were reordered more significantly by the fact that the price of land on which Mansion stands shot up in a very short period of time to become part of the most expensive land-price zone in Beirut at \$20,000 (just over £15,000 per metre-square). At that point, spending large sums of money on renovation became a less attractive prospect for him than incubating the property so-to-speak, in anticipation of bigger profits on his investment later on. “Anyone who can afford to wait on property in Beirut is in a win-win situation,” one architect friend once told me. A businessman after all, Imad assumed this very situation, and more so having also bought several of the large plots around Mansion when their multiple inheriting owners sold to him for “a pittance,” as Layla Muallim said somewhat bitterly. While the Muallims sold the house when none of them was using it anymore and repairs were too costly to make it inhabitable again, they also sold to liquidate the unwieldy kinship relations that were entangled in it, and to help out an inheriting cousin in need of cash. Imad for his part bought from a position of strength.

Imad, patron of Mansion, is indeed a buyer who can wait, but one who also has particular tastes and expectations. Unlike a real landlord, he wants a say in how the house is used. At the beginning of the collective’s stay in the house, Imad allegedly complained to Ghassan that “nothing was happening.” But after four months, when he recognised that things were “beginning to happen,” he was ready to go into a more long-term agreement with Ghassan and the other Mansioners who had gotten involved in the project by then. They signed a formal contract for the first year, in which Ghassan’s legal category was “building attendant” (*natur*) and which established him henceforth as Imad’s main liaison with Mansion. After that year, and without additional formality, the two agreed to extend the initiative for four more years, and then again in 2016 for an additional three years till 2019. Imad’s conditions of acceptance were as follows: a) the collective could use the house free of charge, but without his financial support, b) the collective is to use the house for work and public events, not for residence, c) the collective is to make only sufficient necessary repairs on the house, but no conspicuous renovations, d) Imad must approve any major physical interventions that the collective

does on the house, and e) Imad can take back the house at any time and on short notice. A local idiom told to me by Abu Abed vividly captures the desirability of having and holding on to property, advising to, “Congratulate the buyer and give condolences to the seller.” This is an idiom about real estate speculation. Why Imad would be drawn to supporting a cultural collective, set up by a man who was a total stranger to him, however, is a matter for speculation of a different sort.

#### CHECKS, BALANCES AND BENEVOLENT SURPLUS

In the only interview I did with Imad in 2014, in his expensively and minimally decorated office in a modernist building in Clemenceau, one of the first things he said to me was, “I can take back the house whenever I want, on short notice.” That he chose to start our encounter with this point is telling of its fundamental value to any ethnographic understanding of Mansion and its conditions of possibility. If he did that, however, Ghassan told me that he would not go without a fight. He expected three months notice, similar to the terms of a formal tenancy, as a minimum show of ethical consideration for their relationship. Although he knew that in principle Imad could do that without consequence, in the absence of any binding contract or formality between them, Ghassan claimed he would be shocked if Imad actually acted on his prerogative, given their good rapport. Meanwhile, whenever Imad is discussed in Mansion meetings, it is frequently with a measure of awe, as one might talk of a god that must be appeased or at least not stirred, lest he should suddenly decide to withdraw his blessings. Presuming that Imad will remain satisfied so long as “things happening” at Mansion and Mansion can continue to exist, Mansioners - particularly Ghassan and Sandra - continue making an effort to make thing happen there. Underneath the good rapport, however, there is clearly a discrepancy between Imad’s omnipotence (which dominates Mansioners’ own perceptions of him) and Mansion’s dependency. If a gift puts someone under pressure of social debt, then a gift where there is such a big discrepancy in power between the giver and the gifted amounts to an act of domination (Bourdieu 1977: 14).

In Ghassan’s view, Imad consented to his proposal because he believed such a collective would “improve the neighbourhood,” his neighbourhood of Zoqaq el-Blat, which he allegedly wanted to help along in its recovery to former glory. During our interview, Imad also said he was happy to enter this agreement “to be useful” to Mansioners so long as the collective, under Ghassan’s supervision, kept its side of the bargain, by which he meant usage for cultural production. In my understanding, despite

their different trajectories, Imad, Ghassan and several Mansioners and Mansion users have a common belief in a modern secular state and society, and in the socially transformative role of “culture,” through education and art. Ghassan and Imad seem to share such dispositions despite occupying very different subject positions, personal experiences and forms of practice. Ghassan is highly critical of the neoliberal urban regime and mercantile environment that structure many aspects of dwelling in Beirut. Ghassan’s sympathies lie unequivocally with those who are excluded from such a system, including the urban poor and tenants on rent control, but increasingly also the educated and creative middle class - or “class fraction” to which he belongs (Bourdieu 1984: 6). The middle class generally, which allegedly shrank in the course of the Civil War and its aftermath - recall Katia and Abu Abed from Chapter Four - has had to struggle in order to maintain its status. Meanwhile, Imad’s family’s upward mobility came about under these very conditions, where he too continues to thrive.

For all his reputed meticulousness and involvement, during my uninterrupted work from my studio in Mansion, I never once saw Imad at the house. I only heard of rare evening visits, when I would usually have returned home. But I believe this also stems from Imad’s wish to remain inconspicuous in his support of Mansion and he explicitly requested that the collective remain discrete about it. Typically, most acts of charity or donation found in Beirut’s public spaces, private institutions and during events are clearly marked with the name or logo of the donors thanking their generosity on signs or billboards, which are proportional to the cost and scale of the intervention. Such iterations of patronage have become an opportunity for advertisement, particularly within the trending framework of corporate social responsibility and of trademarking almost anything, including urban spaces. Imad has not opted to use Mansion for self-promotion in any way, and you will not find mention of him or his corporate identity anywhere in Mansion or on its digital or printed announcements. Mansioners believe his motive for discretion is that should he choose one day to demolish the house and develop the land, he would not want to have been inconsistent, by extending one hand in altruistic cultural promotion and artistic patronage, and another in opportunistic real estate profit-making. Understood in its dual sense, of withholding information *and* of the power to decide without moral impingement, discretion grants him the liberty to act where his best interests lie.

Mansion is ultimately a borrowed house. This is an unusual thing in a financialised era, where real estate is solidly intertwined with national and global

financial markets, and debt is its centrepiece (Parr 2015). Mansion, the collective, is in no debt to any financial institution, though it is indebted to Imad. The financial and symbolic conditions that make a non-profit cultural collective like Mansion able to acquire a house on prime real estate for free, are well described I propose, by the term benevolent surplus. Imad's upward socio-economic mobility and the rapid rise in land prices, put him in a position to acquire land but have no urgent need to activate it, all the while retaining the prerogative to make significant returns on his investment at some indeterminate (or unannounced) time in the future. Mansion as property is thus surplus capital to him, in excess of his immediate needs. At the same time as he postpones the activation of the property's exchange value (through development or sale), having abandoned the idea of *using* the house himself, Imad espouses a desire "to be useful" to a cultural project he evidently approves of. This seemingly altruistic act is, I would argue, benevolent (i.e. also benefits the giver, contra beneficent which implies only the benefit of the receiver) (Thorpe 2015: 106), because it grants Imad additional symbolic capital even as he remains in a position to reclaim his offering at a moment of his choosing. I would contend that enabled by a capital surplus to inhabit the easy position of landowner who can wait to sell, gifting Mansion without pomp or profit emerges partly from the modest and discrete disposition and inclination for culture fostered in his family's trajectory. Yet what it grants him in return is a sense of unquestionable cultivation, in as much as not needing returns either in public recognition or profit, and supporting artistic and cultural production with conceptual and critical leanings, constitutes his espousal of non-utilitarian practice, which in turn translates into social status (Susen & Turner 2011: 198). As such the benevolence of his position is a disinterested interest, its benefits in status and domination are concealed by the "obfuscating fiction" of altruism and doing good (Silber 2009: 175).

I have not had the fortune of attending any meetings between Ghassan and Imad (yet), and have mostly heard of the outcomes from Ghassan. But drawing on his accounts, on my own dwelling in Mansion and on my understanding of Imad's conditions and motives for supporting the collective, I posit that their agreement, which undergirds Mansion's existence as a collective in that borrowed house, rests on a sort of mutually convenient encryption of what culture Mansion produces and what aspect of that production fuels Imad's interest - or rather his disinterested interest. My participant-observation in Mansion revealed to me an aesthetics of dwelling that deserves inclusion in the analysis of such questions and their relation to Mansion's mode of existence, to

Imad's support, and ultimately the level of precarity that the collective faces under these conditions. The aesthetic of such dwelling, how Mansioners encounter the space on material and moral registers has had the power to instigate heated debate amongst Mansioners precisely over their role as agents of cultural and social transformation, and as practitioners of alternative forms of dwelling (or not). Therefore, there is no consensus amongst Mansioners themselves about what role they should play in the local cultural and political scene, let alone a clear agenda or mission statement that can be disseminated beyond Mansion's social circles or espoused informally by Imad. Despite a proclaimed exception to the rule of entitlement to dwelling in the city, the following sections how Mansion as a space is as structurally precarious – if relatively more prestigious – as other informal tenants in the city.

#### OF MANSIONERS AND MIGRANTS: COMPARING PRECARITY, CONTRASTING VISIBILITY

Mansion's case can be linked to other thematic and ethnographic features of this thesis by comparing its conditions of possibility and concerns over continued dwelling with those of other dwellers that I discussed in previous chapters. Mansion's complete dependency on its owner's benevolence for its access to the property on which it stands, constitutes a precarity that it shares with other informal tenants in the city. This section will focus on this structural precarity by comparing Mansioners with migrant workers, such as those living in the White Building (Chapter Two). In the first instance, both are a manifestation of patriarchal relationships that mediate the distribution and entitlement to urban property. In Mansion's case, and as I discussed in the previous section, the collective's initial as well as continuing access to the villa depends on a special informal relationship between two men: Ghassan and Imad. According to the original agreement, its mandate with the owner, Imad, was supposed to end in late 2016. But he extended it until 2019 - again through a verbal agreement the main care-taker and founder, Ghassan. Ghassan is widely recognised as founder and "keeper" of Mansion, from the perspective of public users, immediate neighbours and broader neighbourhood and social networks. Ghassan also takes the initiative to link infrastructural goods to the house, pulling personal strings within and beyond the city to procure things like electricity, firewood, and other amenities the house requires to operate. While Sandra may be active

in the management of the space and arguably as much a decision-maker as Ghassan is over internal affairs, and while Imad's wife is described as a "lover of the arts" and potentially gives Imad additional incentive to keep Mansion this way, it is ultimately the relationship "between men," which bears legitimacy for Imad, and to which Mansioners defer. While Ghassan is Mansion's true custodian, Imad is the penultimate patron within the hierarchy of value that privileges private ownership, accumulated wealth and various intersections of identitarian and symbolic capital that govern the urban property market and dwelling in Beirut.

For Bourdieu: "Symbolic capital is valid even in the market. A man may enhance his prestige by making a purchase at an exorbitant price, for the sake of his point of honour, just to 'show he could do it'; but he may also take pride in having managed to conclude a deal without laying out a penny in cash, either by mobilizing a number of guarantors, or, even better, by virtue of the credit and the capital of trust that stems from a reputation for honor as well as wealth" (Bourdieu 1990: 119). In his critique that critiques Marxism for being "ethnocentric" in accounting for only economic calculation within relations of production and exchange, Bourdieu colludes his discussion of symbolic capital with the topic of gift-giving, contending – clearly in line with Mauss – that the seemingly disinterested act conceals domination and "durable relations of reciprocity" (1990: 112). In former chapters of this thesis, we saw this clearly embodied in relations between tenants on rent control who pay next to no rent, with landowners who as a result felt entitled to neglect their properties and threaten eviction because of this implicit – and yet very material – debt. We also saw it in the ambivalent inter-familial relations of indebtedness and control. Thus, in addition to the concealment of interest that social relations might require of giving gifts, other identifiers of the involvement of symbolic capital within capitalistic relations include the sense of ambiguity about such relations and the unpredictability over their outcome (Bourdieu 1990: 113). Seen this way, Imad's proclaimed freedom to "take back his gift" – which he tellingly chose to foreground at the very start of my conversation with him – sits ambiguously with his continued extension of Mansion's informal tenancy. Mansion's apprehension of this dual generosity and unpredictably, and of the structural nature of their precarity, produced growing concern and attempts to introspect on their mission, their ethos and the transferability of their experience from the physical space of Mansion – which can only be temporarily until further notice – to other sites for cultural production.

In addition to his class-distinguishing discretion and subdued comportment – indeed his lack of interference in the collective’s day-to-day and management – Imad’s empowering gift to Mansion renders him a benevolent patron, a kind of “patron of the arts.” This position works in his favour as well as in the favour of the collective, but only temporarily. As I mentioned earlier, with Imad’s approval the collective publicly foregrounds cultural production as its main mission and activity. “Culture” here is broadly defined by the arts-, crafts- and research-inclined occupations of its members, the availability of a library and other study areas open for public use, and by its events programming. This typically include film screenings, performances, exhibitions, talks, and seminars, but also tours and NGO or activist workshops, meetings and campaigns of various kinds. Even if some Mansioners do make some profit from their work therein none would qualify as capital accumulating enterprises and as such these activities conform to Imad’s prescript that no conspicuous profit-making and no overt or significant fund-raising initiatives should take place at Mansion. In this respect, Mansion belongs to the field of “cultural production” (particularly by its artistic production), its core residents contending to appreciate art and culture primarily for itself, while prioritising the ethics and aesthetics of their practice over economic calculation (Bourdieu 1990: 3). Bolstered by an educational and national discourse on the “good” of culture and opportunely situated in a neighbourhood historically known for its role in cultural and educational institutions, in the imagination of its residents and users, Mansion occupies a place among Beirut’s “cultural nobility” (Bourdieu 1990: 2). From such a place, Imad can draw prestige by claiming to patron a noble cause, until he “takes back” what is rightfully his according to the primacy of private property. At that time, Mansioners would be able to flag this cause up - and will likely receive public legitimacy and solidarity from other cultural organisations and urban civic societies - in their effort to redress or postpone potential eviction.

The patriarchal relationship at the heart of Mansion’s existence parallels others that have figured in this thesis. Examples include the “power of attorney” within inheriting kinship groups, and the real estate broker with regards to cleaning real estate. The real estate market is thus revealed to rely on as well as reproduce patriarchal social structures, as a form of consolidating control over entitlement to and accumulation of urban property and the life within. Some form of this patronage extends to all dwellers living in the city under informal tenancy, from the most vulnerable and structurally invisible (such as migrant workers and refugees) to those with more symbolic capital,



such as Mansioners and tenants on rent control like Fatima who increasingly face the chance of eviction with the imminent liberalisation of the rental law but who have stirred a heated debate in the media. As regards the comparison at hand, through their patriarchal hold over property, the owners of the White Building feel as entitled and are as capable of evicting their migrant tenants as Imad is capable of evicting Mansioners. Hence, despite the symbolic capital they enjoy and the symbolic capital that Imad can also accumulate from supporting them – but which does not foreclose his intent to profit from it when the time is ripe – Mansioners are revealed to be in a similar structural position as migrants. This puts Mansioners and migrants in a similar structural position, even if what differentiates them is that Mansioners enjoy some visibility and status through their positions: most are Lebanese nationals, and or Arab or Western nationals with clear social and formal residency statuses, as well as social prestige derived from education, professions, family or wealth for instance. Migrant workers on the other hand, are structurally invisible, often occupy illegal status of residency meaning that their periodic evictions or relocations between decaying properties or neighbourhoods on the fringes of gentrification go largely unnoticed and unredeemed.

While I did not do fieldwork with the migrant workers that figured in this thesis, I have been involved in extensive field and literary research on migrant domestic labour in Lebanon and the Arab world as part of a three-year research assistantship during my masters education with sociologist Ray Jureidini (2002-2005). I have also been in close relations with domestic workers in my own home and those of relatives and friends such that my impression is not just that they are structurally invisible but that doing fieldwork amongst them must be tackled with sensitivity. The choice not to do fieldwork among the migrant workers who inhabit the White Building on Khalid Street stems from two considerations related to my position as subject in the broader social context and as researcher with the Lebanese and other Arab informants with whom I began my ethnography on the street. Starting with the latter consideration first, Umm Ali who introduced me to the presence of Asian migrant workers on the street, and Katia who took me to visit their flat where she used to reside, had strong racial and class prejudices towards the workers. These prejudices intersected with resentment that stems from particular sorts of competition that these workers had come to embody for these two women. Umm Ali construed their presence on the floor above hers as part of her landlords' strategy to root her out of her life-long home and rights to adequate compensation, to repel her and rob her of what she saw to be her rightful reward and

living place. Seeing herself as higher up on the global hierarchy of value that organises entitlement to urban property in Beirut, she was incensed that a group of people for whom she had such low regard would have access to the building with the landlords' blessings while she did not. Katia for her part used to do domestic work when this labour sector was available to Lebanese women, Arab migrant such as Palestinians and Syrians, and other ethnic groups such as Kurds. The presence of migrant labourers from Southeast Asia (in this particular case) in the country generally represents her own labour's redundancy and the ensuing destitution and debt she experiences. That the migrants also "occupy" the spacious bourgeois flat, which Katia associates nostalgically with a prosperous phase of her life, made her resent them all the more. Thus, their presence in the White Building and on the street generally makes for a tense relationship between the two communities, namely the migrants and the "locals," who included Katia and Umm Ali and her family, as well as other families on the street with whom they had close neighbourly relations. For this reason, fostering trust with Umm Ali and Katia – and to the other inhabitants of Khalid Street with whom I did fieldwork and who denigrated but had no particular contestation with the migrant workers – required that my loyalty to their stories remain unquestionable. Hanging out with the workers and gathering their stories threatened to jeopardise this trust.

As for my subject position within the broader social context, this raises a consideration that has to do with the power difference between myself and the migrant workers, which stems from my "local" identity, class, and relative privilege and stability in the city. When I was first introduced to the female workers residing on the second floor of the White Building, it was through a visit with Katia, who barged into their living space unannounced and undeterred (see Chapter Two). While some of the women acted deferent and accommodating, others were visibly and understandably bothered by this intrusion. All things being equal, my association with Katia, whom they already knew to live on their street and who was visibly dismissive and hostile towards them, put me on her side of the camp. But the fact of the matter is, all things are by far not equal and the structural difference between us puts me squarely within the category of the employing class – as a "madame" archetype. I believe that starting with the intrusion that Katia led, the power differential would have rendered the prospect of doing fieldwork with them into an extension of other coercive or exploitative relations that they are routinely drawn into with other "locals." Wanting at all cost to avoid this prospect and attempting to "get it fieldwork right" with Umm Ali, Katia and other "locals",

discouraged me from returning to visit the migrant workers again on my own. Were I to do ethnography that included migrant workers anew, I would want the time to navigate and develop my relationship with them without the prospect of losing other key informants I had worked to get close to as a result. Moreover, I would want to avoid the risk of inflicting “symbolic violence” on the research encounter. While there is an inevitable degree of symbolic imbalance that arises between researchers and respondents, including the intrusion of fieldwork itself, the imposition of a particular line of inquiry and an ensuing objectification in writing (Bourdieu 1990), in this particular context, the possibility of such violence is compounded by the structural invisibility of migrant workers in Lebanon.

This invisibility is constituted by several factors that manifest or indeed help reproduce exploitative and exclusionary realities and relationships. For starters, the sponsorship system (*kafala*) that I discussed in Chapter Two makes labourers’ legal status entirely dependent if not hostage to the whims of the sponsor upon whose name they are issued a residency and work permit – the only way they can enter the country. Secondly, while their labour is indispensable to nearly all economic sectors, they are excluded from any benefits outlined in Lebanese labour law (Longuenesse & Tabar 2014: 17). Thirdly, it was estimated in 2011 that while the total number of foreign workers in Lebanon was 760,000, of which half were Syrian, as many as 200,000 non-Arab workers are living and working illegally in the country. These conditions coupled with very low wages and systemic maltreatment (in migrant trade offices, homes, courts), have prompted some to dub migrant labour in Lebanon, particularly that of female Sri Lankan domestic workers (who constitute the majority of all non-Arab workers) as “contract slavery” in the case where a legal contract exists (Jureidini & Moukarbel 2004). The repeated incidents of violence and abuse towards migrant workers, wherein women are most vulnerable, across the Arab region but which characterise continuing relations of exploitative labour including actual slavery across the northern and southern parts of the globe, has prompted scholarship and the media to highlight the victimisation of migrant workers (Bales 1999, Jureidini 2003).

Structural and violent as this invisibility may be, it does not foreclose migrants’ active role in any story about the accumulation of value and flows of capital, be these inside their host countries or across international borders, towards the economies of their home countries. From their historically particular positions of structural invisibility, male Syrian construction workers, for instance, have played an unequalled role in the

building and rebuilding of Beirut for many decades, but most notably since the post-war reconstruction era (Chalcraft 2011). My discussion of Southeast Asian migrant workers' role in the story on decayed houses and urban renewal was very clearly one of instrumentality to the goal of speculation, by which landowners make a small profit from their rents while waiting to make more profit from rising land prices; even as they tacitly strategise to "repel" other too costly tenants. Finally, migrant workers play a significant role in transferring wages back home to support kin. In Lebanon in 2009, outgoing remittances from migrant workers amounted to about 4.7 billion US dollars (approximately £3.6 billion) (World Bank 2011). By means of these cumulative amounts of money sent routinely to countries that send migrants, workers help build-up or keep afloat the very economies from which their labour was rendered redundant or dispensable, and from where they were economically and socially "unfixed" (Bale 1999: 14). There, these funds are arguably circulating in other exclusionary and inequitable forms of capital accumulation, but where the migrants would otherwise have enjoyed more social and symbolic regard within the communities they left in search of opportunities elsewhere.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter focused on Mansion, the late 1890s-built three-story residence of a downwardly mobile wealthy Beirut merchant family, which was abandoned and sold to an upwardly mobile businessman then taken over in 2012 by a cultural collective. The collective repaired the house to a modicum - it still appears rather abandoned from outside - and invited artists, architects, activists and researchers to work from the house for a negligible contribution in comparison to market prices. This chapter focused on the structural and social mechanisms that constitute Mansion as a building in a rapidly regenerating neighbourhood, and as a cultural collective that also participates in socio-spatial activism. After a brief history of the house until the present, including my own encounter with it, I presented the legal, economic and social conditions that have rendered Mansion possible as a place and project. I then revealed that Mansion's conditions of possibility are "borrowing" versus debt in a regime where debt through housing loans are a growing investment. I argued that this gift stems from the owners' "benevolent surplus," which is driven in part by his wish to speculate on the land, and in

part by his wish for personal symbolic capital. Like most of the city, ownership reigns supreme here and with Mansion's mandate always extendable temporarily and at the discretion of its owner, the collective is trying to take stock of its efforts at commoning and what it can do to avoid disappearing without a trace should he reclaim the property. Mansioners have therefore invested concerted efforts to conceive of Mansion as more than an ephemeral experience, but one that sticks and is possibly contagious to other sites of cultural production and of affordable urban usage. Beyond these attempts, the analysis of this house collective entailed situating it within the conviction that cities are produced within globalised systems of accumulation and surplus value, what Parr calls "neoliberal planetary urbanization" (2015). It beckons an engagement with the idea of urban commoning, which:

"produces positions of relative autonomy to the heteronomous machinations of capital by creating alternatives to surplus value that directly engage with surplus realised as profit. It also generates a locus of general social value through which other social actors can collaborate in their struggles against the value form of capitalist accumulation. Urban commoning creates situations of radical alterity from within the privatised landscape of neoliberal planetary urbanization..." (Parr 2015: 86).

Nevertheless, like many other sites and informants in my thesis, Mansion's future is uncertain. Mansion's commoning has been done through "cultural production," recycling, creating conditions of affordable workspace, and providing semi-public spaces for work and for cultural initiatives. Like several Lebanese civic groups and arguably most organisations, Mansion runs through the embodiment of power of a single person or entity (Ghassan and to a great extent Sandra), who has legitimacy with the owner as custodian of Mansion and therefore final decision-making powers inside the house. However, Ghassan's mode of operation is spontaneous, haphazard, interspersed, and sometimes deliberately non-interventionist, particularly in his (rarely successful) strategy to attract the initiative and sustainable participation of other Mansioners. His disposition emerges in distinction from the poshness and polish of the city's gentrifying renewal and from the micro-management style of corporate enterprises. Mansion struggles with dispelling the "tragedy of the commons" defined by Hardin as the victory of self-interest over collective interest in the use of a set of communal resources (Hardin cited in Parr 2015: 82). I have tried to show in what way Mansion tries to be such a resource, yet one

which is not owned by its practitioners and dwellers. And while the house remains available as a semi-public space, as a complex site of material and moral experiences and manipulations, the primacy of private ownership imbued in the patriarchal relationship that props it up, casts a long shadow on its potential continuity rendering it as precarious as other informal tenants in the city.

While in the cases in Basta as well as other similar fringe neighbourhoods, owners get rent revenues from informal tenancy, Imad gets no such rent but instead gains symbolic capital from Mansion's presence. In both cases, Mansioners and migrants are convenient temporary occupants, "fodder" for owners' speculation on property that awaits some other form of real estate investment and capital accumulation. However, I have also argued here that Mansioners and migrant workers have very different and unequal access to social, political and economic resources to determine their futures or resist evictions from their place of dwelling, and to secure futures in elsewhere in the city. Unlike Mansioners, migrants' structural invisibility constitutes their fundamental precarity in the face of possible eviction, without giving them any recourse to any symbolic value derived from their labour, which is mostly manual, nor to their subject positions. As a result, these two groups' structural visibilities drastically differ. For its part, Mansion's experimentation with notions and practices of commoning in an urban context where private ownership reigns supreme, has given some of the collective's founding members a public visibility and some traction in society. Thus, one manifestation of the difference with migrants is that while Mansioners' eviction from the house would likely draw significant condemnation in the media and within activist and cultural circles in Beirut, the precarious legal, social and working conditions of migrant workers in Lebanon, would render evictions from or relocations between properties a virtually uncontested occurrence. While this may index the structural invisibility of migrant workers and the shared precarity with Mansioners, as collectivities of people who do not formally own the primary resource of their dwelling space, they share analogous structural precarity in their lack of entitlement to ensure continued access to their spaces of dwelling.

In their desire to perpetuate the experience and perhaps disseminate it beyond its present location, Sandra and Ghassan have also frequently articulated Mansion's mode of existence as unusual or exceptional in their quest to understand their conditions of possibility, and in their hope to dispel precarity and postpone eviction. I have argued in the last section of this chapter that they do this – knowingly or unknowingly – by

banking on the fact that their mode of production, namely cultural production and art, contributes to the owner's social capital, which he desires to complement the surplus financial capital he already has. I show how this echoes patriarchal relations discussed in other chapters, mainly Chapter Two. By drawing a parallel with migrant workers' conditions of dwelling in the city, and contrasting their structural invisibility with the relative visibility and symbolic capital of Mansioners. This section finally shed light on the role that migrants have in processes of capital flows through remittances and how this contribute to broader systems of production and accumulation of value. Mansion's relative symbolic capital and commoning attempts might obfuscate their structural precarity in the face of eviction, giving the impression that their case is exceptional. However, the in-depth exploration of their conditions of possibility and the comparison with one of the most precarious categories of inhabitants of Beirut, reveals Mansion to embody the rules of entitlement to dwelling in the city.

## CONCLUSION

*The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire. The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. (Harvey 2008: 23)*

I began my doctoral research wanting to study decayed houses and residential buildings that were abandoned. I imagined that being abandoned - which I mistook to mean uninhabited - I would track their former residents to get their stories. I wanted to bring them to their former homes for *in situ* interviews and elicitation. But what if they were - and many were - living far away? And what if they would not come - and most said they had no time to? Abandoning the idea for methodological reasons, and reorienting my inquiry to decaying houses that were still inhabited, I became aware of an incidental aspect of my decision. Early on in fieldwork, I realised that uninhabited though they may be, there are no “abandoned” spaces in post-war reconstruction era Beirut. Their sheer potential for urban renewal and its lucrative profit, wrought in ever-scarcer property, attracts the presence of people and their strategies. Indeed, they are heavily surveilled by owners and their hired attendants, squatted by homeless refugees (with owners’ permission of course!), coveted-measured-priced by potential investors, and (less frequently) apprehended by the Culture Ministry for their potential heritage value. These spaces do not recede into an administrative hinterland or an economic and social void that resembles the abandonment one encountered in representations of post-industrial ruins in Detroit (Millington 2013) or Manchester (Edensor 2005). It would suffice for you to try entering such a space in Beirut, to look around briefly and may be take a photograph before someone came out of the green overgrowth to ask with suspicion of your purpose, beckoning you to leave. Far from being left alone and outside human interest, even the most vacant of sites is attended to or imminently intervened upon by some form of commercial enterprise, like a rented storage space or temporary parking lot (Figure 15).

I ended up doing fieldwork on decaying houses and their remaining inhabitants, whose strategies and sensibilities played into the prospects for their own continued dwelling in the city, when faced with the projected renewal of their house. I asked how



these houses got to be so decayed, and how their inhabitants responded to the finitude of their homes given that eviction or gentrification could ensue. In response to these questions, I revealed the conditions that strategically decay old houses in order to perpetuate the profitability of the property market. This is what I have argued to be institutionalised neglect, which refers at once to what humans do (or not) to redress the decay of old houses and what in turn this decay prompts them to do as a means of dwelling in the city. It is in that sense that such houses are “Made to Fall Apart.” Yet I also engaged with the varying dispositions and trajectories of inhabitants and how these inflected the contests and deliberations over property among dwellers with competing interests. Through critical engagement with the conditions that make dwelling possible, I attended to the frustrations of people who do not necessarily master these conditions, while tuning into their aspirations for fit in the city. At every turn, I recognised the aesthetics of dwelling in decay, namely the sense of wellbeing and affective timbres that such dwelling entails when concerns about the termination of dwelling prevail. I revealed that the urban real estate market, which relies on urban renewal for its perpetuations, infuses inter-dweller and inter-familial relations with misanthropic and ambivalent sentiments, heightening the sense of paranoia and insecurity. Such aesthetics of decay characterise how the urban regime insinuates itself into the most intimate scale of urban existence.

In this manner, and drawing on scholarship that establishes the neoliberal and exclusive interest of Beirut’s urban regime, the contribution of this thesis is to substantiate how such a regime operates at the intimate scale of urban life. It is also to suggest that by exploring dwelling in decay, we come closer to understanding the conditions of dwelling in Beirut more generally. Finding out how renewal *does not* come to pass yet, where market and power structures insist that it *does*, pauses the anthropological gaze on the scene of dwellers’ endurance and stay rather than (or just before) their disinvestment and departure from an ageing property. From this interstitial gaze, and through analysis of inter-dweller standoffs and their aspirations for fit or endurance, my thesis showed how the imperative for urban renewal intersects with the terms that legitimise dwelling in the city today. In addition to surplus capital and the added value of symbolic capital, these terms include access to patriarchal kinship relations and good standing within a variant of the global hierarchy of value, which is infused with colonial, classist, racist and sectarian practices and perceptions.

I argued that the sites of this ethnography may not be abandoned, but they are

institutionally neglected, a concept intended to capture the intersection of structural circumstances and residents' strategies that constitute dwelling in decay. On the one hand, institutionalised neglect entails legal, political and economic mechanisms that expedite neoliberal urban renewal while ignoring the urban populations' housing and other social and economic necessities. In this regard, I explored building regulations, rental laws, inheritance laws, heritage policies and the commodification of housing, all of which lie outside the deliberations of interlocutors. On the other hand, I showed how such mechanisms go hand in hand with a slew of dweller strategies, including manipulations, stigmas and schemes, which propagate the effects of institutionalised neglect, while enshrining the ethos of neoliberal renewal at the interpersonal level. This thesis was peopled with owners of decayed property who do dwell precariously in the city, tenants who once afforded renting property but struggle to afford it still, producers of culture and knowledge who have been gifted property and struggle with the fear of losing it. These people channel their efforts and fashion their expectations in line with institutionalised outcomes while poised to make timely decisions for the future, strategise to harness sufficient resources in the present, and ache over the losses of their past.

I have told these intersecting stories through ethnography on inheritance, infrastructure, material decay, nostalgia and cultural production, teasing out people's material, moral and aesthetic concerns. I posited first that the institution of (Islamic) inheritance multiplies the stakes and intentions over decayed property, as do co-inheritors' diverging trajectories. I argued that co-inheritors' fragmented aspirations are routinely flattened with recourse to patriarchal arrangements in the service of urban renewal, accentuating the ambivalence of kinship relations. On old tenant-to-owner relations, I identified complicity between the imperative of renewal and well-established structures of entitlement to dwelling. Under this rubric, I showed how a global hierarchy of value combines with notions of cleaning real estate to privilege private ownership over other forms of land tenure and reiterate colonial, classist, sectarian and ethnic biases (Douglas 1966, Harvey 2008, Herzfeld 2004, Stoler 2008, Nagel 2000). My exploration of maintenance and deliberate debris revealed decay as a rhetoric and practice, at the disposal of landowners who wish to repel unwanted occupants and their social entanglements in old property. Removing it from the analytical grip of nature, I argued that material decay is a strategic instrument for ensuring unobstructed renewal and a defense against gentrification. Nostalgia for old Beirut Houses lost and the bygone lifeworlds that unfolded within them, likewise index the terms of dwelling under the

imperative to renew. In such sentiment, the commodification of housing, for which neoliberal renewal is vital, conceives of comfortable domestic space and the magnanimity associated with it as exclusive to the past and to privileged positions in the present. Given these circumstances, exceptions like Mansion, a case of an attempt at communal reuse rather than the renewal of a decayed house, are very rare in Beirut today. Despite attempts to define itself as challenging neoliberal urban structures, however, I posit that its precarious existence depends on these very structures for its existence and continuity. Exception, it would seem, is enabled only by the benevolent surplus and quest for symbolic capital or power of unconventional patrons. Meanwhile, the members of this initiative struggle from within to consolidate a common ethos of dwelling, which might exemplify institutionalised care in the face of institutionalised neglect.

Though I abandoned the preconception that I could study abandoned houses in Beirut, I brought with me to the field another preconceived notion, which this research only partially explores. Why does heritage consistently weave into urban activists' discourses on the rights to the city? This was not my research question and so I do not pretend to answer it. However, studying the realm of material objects from the past, I was not surprised that the issue of heritage cropped up on numerous occasions. Here are some preliminary insights on the place of heritage in this research. Firstly, the absence of heritage law that encompasses Beirut Houses is one of the circumstances that constitute institutionalised neglect. It is important to mention this even if I have established the ways that preservation flies in the face of equitable access to and has gentrifying effects in this particular context. Meanwhile, attempts (by a reluctant state or a struggling civic society) to associate decayed houses with heritage, is received by landowners' as a blemish on their properties, which lose exchange value under such categorisation. Heritage also figures in the nostalgia for the lost Beirut House, which is thus fixed and glamorised as an emblem of authentic urban belonging and a past magnanimity where downward social mobility has occurred. Most interestingly (to me), however, my ethnography revealed that heritage value can also be instrumentalised as a defence against eviction in the hands of old tenants. Much like owners' deliberate debris, albeit wielded by less securely-positioned dwellers, heritage is occasionally emerges as a weapon in the contest over urban property even if such a strategy is likely to fail without official heritage

protection mechanisms in place.<sup>61</sup> My final preliminary insight is that heritage is secondary to inheritance as a principle of transference of value from the past to the present in Beirut today, even if it is available as a source of prestige. In the absence of the mechanisms to care for dwellers in the present, heritage becomes - at the very least - a righteous admiration for the life and work of the past and homage to the continuity of culture as “codified” by those with symbolic capital (Stewart 1988: 235). Conversely, inheritance and its tendency to disintegrate property beyond recuperation, in order then to contrive its unification under a patriarchal will for renewal, serves better (for the moment) the market’s tempo of real estate subsumption and growth.<sup>62</sup> In this light, we might encompass the seeming contradiction of owners of Beirut Houses who cherish the architecture, craftsmanship and memories of their old homes, while accepting matter-of-fact that all things must come to an end.

Thus, heritage was an elephant in the room of my research, and almost literally so as interlocutors often misrepresented my endeavour by “she’s interested in preserving old houses.” Through fieldwork as well as analysis, I managed to keep that elephant small enough so it could exit by a backdoor of my ethnographic process, leaving me to grapple with the issues that most preoccupied me at that time. But that elephant did not go away. Standing here, myself almost about to exit this process, I find the elephant hanging around the door, waiting perhaps. “What is heritage anyway?” it asks me, and “Whose heritage?” These questions speak to the recurrent articulation of heritage preservation as a viable form of resistance against renegade urban renewal and its exclusive regimes, by members of Beirut’s activist and alternative political groupings. Despite their varied platforms, causes and methods of representing the tension between renewal and urban decayed, these articulations of heritage have something in common: all espouse to one degree or another a restorative nostalgia for the old Beirut House typology, all manifest a reification of such sites as “ruins,” and none have till now been prepared to question the premises upon which these places get valued as such (Boym

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<sup>61</sup> Recall Fatima in Chapter Three who tried to refute an eviction order by flagging up the heritage value of her house.

<sup>62</sup> I say “for the moment” because in the past year or so, Beirut has witnessed more sites where old houses and buildings are renovated instead of demolished and redeveloped. These are usually carried out by big institutions, like banks and universities, for their own use. This phenomenon, which began after my fieldwork, coincided with evidence that the real estate market and building boom are slowing down. Saturated by one activity, the market seeks new avenues for profitability. While requiring further research, I suspect that this new turn in real estate may depend more systematically on the notion of heritage for its packaging and sale.

2001, Gordillo 2014). In other words, the elephants' questions are not answered, even as another quandary arises to befuddle Beirut's advocates of heritage preservation: "Why do most owners of decaying houses not care about heritage?"

To that question I would pose a counter-question, namely: Under what circumstances would dwellers in decay - or in precarious conditions generally - contribute to forms of resistance against and change of the conditions of their own precarity? Is heritage the beacon that would light this way? These concerns constitute an age-old conundrum, which links to the classic structure-agency debate as well. Still worthy of consideration, however, within my thematic and geographic domain such line of questioning has the capacity to interrogate activist expectations of resistance through the category of heritage, even as it unpacks their premises of restorative nostalgia. My fieldwork already revealed that the sites of endurance in Beirut's urban reality do not really constitute sites of "resistance." Rather, I would characterise interlocutors' endurance as suspended in pockets of time, tucked inside the lull of administration, legislation, and the wait/weight of emergent financial possibilities and impossibilities, where daily living is a full-time preoccupation. Even where intentional strategies are deployed, structuring forces enable only temporary outcomes and liminal gains (De Certeau 1984). They do not articulate an opposition to the circumstances that produce their precarity, indeed they sometimes voice support for their ethos (Povinelli 2011). Under the circumstances of institutionalised neglect, with its socio-political forces, and spatial and symbolic orders, to what extent can disenfranchised tenants and small owners whose lives are intertwined with decayed dwelling spaces, draft and live out the urban life of their own choosing? Having addressed the conditions of such dwelling and attempted insights on its link with these broader lines of inquiry, I leave this matter as food for further thought and questions for future fieldwork.



**Figure 15:** Billboard advertising furniture boutique in Qantari: “Life Should Be Furnished with Abandon.”

## APPENDIX 1

## A BRIEF POLITICAL HISTORY OF LEBANON

Lebanon is a small country on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, which measures around 10,000 square kilometres, and has about 4.5 million nationals. Add to this figure some 500,000 Palestinian refugees from 1948, 1967 and 1973, and at least 1.5 million Syrian refugees from the on-going war. Lebanese government institutions are organised around a sectarian and clientelist division of stakes (if not labour) at every echelon of its bureaucracy. An agreement with the French Mandate, known as the National Pact, instated a division in the allocation of the president, prime minister and speaker of parliament to a Maronite Christian, a Sunni Muslim and a Shiite Muslim respectively. A fourth sect, the Druze community, also has significant political weight and often determines in which community's favour the outcome of particular power struggles pendulate. In 1989, an agreement that ended the 15-year Civil War, the National Reconciliation Accord (or Taif Accord) rendered this sectarian division constitutional, reaffirming existing bureaucratic tradition with its distribution of all public positions according to an entrenched quota system for these and to a lesser extent an additional dozen sects. A power contest and a delicate balance between sectarian interests remains deeply constitutive of Lebanon's political and economic dynamics and at the heart of Lebanese nationalist sentiment and economic policy. A *laissez-faire* and outward-facing mercantile economy, which neglects domestic production and thereby also the majority of its labour force has kept the Lebanese state - since its inception - hostage to international and regional agendas and volatile to the collusion of internal wars to theirs (Khater 2000). Today, Lebanon has been without a president since 2014 because the parliament, which has unconstitutionally renewed its own term twice since early 2013 and is also in disagreement over electoral law (among other things), is unable to reach a quorum to make such an elect happen. This seemingly unending deadlock is embedded in a complex and divisive history, a necessarily over-simplified and selective version of which I present here.

As early as pre-WWI times, the Maronite Lebanese community had enjoyed the privileges bestowed upon them by their special ties to France (Khater 2000: 569). These were further institutionalised with the advent of a French Mandate and reaffirmed in the terms of Independence (1943), making them the majority of the political, economic and social elite until the Civil War broke out. Indeed, the Lebanese republic and territory

tailored such a privilege, with the concession of then Sunni counterparts. Yet with the Civil War, powers switched hands as global and regional geopolitical events, agendas and discourses significantly rearranged the trenches of battle and rivalry within this small yet uniquely heterogeneous Middle Eastern country. For instance, the Palestinian Resistance Movement rose in prominence and influence between 1969 and 1982, until the Israeli army expelled them and occupied Beirut for a year, while continuing to occupy Lebanon's vast Southern district until 2000. On the other hand, the Syrian army (and regime) which became involved in the Civil War in 1978, maintained military and political patronage over the country until its withdrawal in 2005. Significant build-up lead to the Civil War; in fact early precedents of eruptions had already occurred in 1860 and 1958, signalling the troubled foundations on which an independent Lebanese nation-state was forged. Some would read the eruption of the Civil War as the eruption of class struggle, while others see the war as essentially a war of religious communal rivalry. Neither would deny its tentacular extensions beyond the Lebanese territory. In all cases, the Civil War ravaged the country and the city, taking the life of around 200,000 people, making another 35,000 go missing, while displacing hundreds of thousands within the country and beyond its borders to the diaspora.

That the Lebanese Civil War has ever ended is amply and evocatively challenged by current events and political analysis. That its protractedness is exceptional or indeed uniquely dystopic to this land also presumes some war-free baseline of normality, which finds little resemblance in the region or indeed beyond. In fact, the outbreak of violence continued to punctuate Lebanese political and daily life well after the Taif Accord and the cease-fire of 1990. As political discord continued, internecine military conflict took a recess between 1992 and 2005. Yet, the south of Lebanon continued to witness Israeli occupation until 2000, and Hizbollah regions experienced devastating Israeli air-raids in 1996 and 2006. Waves of political assassinations took place between 2004 and the present, intensifying in 2005 when Prime Minister Hariri was assassinated, and amounting to 14 political assassinations by 2013.

These recent events in the Lebanese political saga, were highly divisive on the internal political scene, and established new rivalries and allegiances in the so-called post-war era, characterised by constant mutual accusations and sabotage. The pro-Hariri (Sunni and Christian) camp, whose leaders were the primary victims of such assassinations, point the finger their pro-Hizbollah opponents (and their Christian allies), as well as other Syrian-backed factions for orchestrating the assassinations.



Meanwhile, the pro-Syria (and pro-Iran) camp, accuse their opponents of implicitly (or explicitly) backing Israel's attacks through their close coordination with Paris and Washington DC. What started out in the Civil War as a fight between Muslims and Christian (crudely left versus right seen through a Cold War prism, or pro- versus anti-Palestinian understood through the Arab-Israeli conflict), has now transformed into its post- Cold-War variant as a Sunni-Shiite polemic that derives from regional wars, such as the US invasion of Iraq, and the Syrian war that started in 2013. Under Hariri, who championed the post-war reconstruction of Beirut, the country was said to be under Sunni hegemony, with Saudi Arabian backing, as proxy to the United States of course. However, after Hariri's assassination, the strength of Iranian-backed factions, especially Hizbollah and its less world-renowned but more locally conspicuous counterpart, the Amal Movement, arguably represent a new era of Shiite hegemony with continued Iranian tutelage.

Capitalising on the victory of ending Israel's 30-year occupation of the Shiite-majority southern district of Lebanon, and after withstanding 30 days of Israeli shelling in 2006, the Shiite community - which was and felt short-changed in the National Pact - has arguably come to pull its weight in the present socio-politics sphere. Brief skirmishes between Shiite and Sunni militias in Beirut in 2007 confirmed Shiite military superiority without a doubt, and revealed that it was willing to use it internally if it had to. The involvement of Hizbollah in the Syrian war, the occasional retaliatory bomb attacks in the party's sectors of the capital and Lebanon's northern border regions, and a continued political deadlock in Parliament over domestic and extra-domestic affairs are but some recent episodes in Lebanon's civil-war-as-usual saga.



## APPENDIX 2

## LEBANON'S HERITAGE LOBBY, POLICY AND LAWS

The narrative of official and quasi-official attempts to identify Beirut's heritage sites for preservation is long and mostly a story of defeat. Yet at least two attempts have been made in the post-war era to survey and identify potential heritage houses and buildings that fall outside Law 166. These were first instigated by Solidere's appropriation and demolition of numerous salvageable buildings in the city's central district. This stirred controversial debates over the city's (and nation's) ancient and contemporary built heritage. In 1994, activists in coordination with the Association for The Protection of Natural Sites and Old Buildings in Lebanon (APSAD), identified over 1500 post-18<sup>th</sup> century properties with potential heritage value inside municipal Beirut. This effort was still hopeful of salvaging clusters of houses from demolition, as a way of perpetuating the social life of neighbourhoods in the present, and not just safekeeping the material remains of the past.<sup>63</sup> In 1996, a subsequent survey - this time state-appointed by the well-known engineering firm, Khatib & Alami - identified just 500 properties while abandoning the cluster approach or any socio-cultural criteria for preservation. That same year, Beiruti landowners loudly protested and pressured the ruling elite to dismiss the survey and "free" their lands. Today less than 250 of these buildings remain standing, in increasingly decrepit conditions, some at the risk of collapse but with the heritage discourse still embedded in urban politics and activists' attempts to channel these politics in alternative orientations.

Neither heritage survey has translated into law or policy, but remained at the level of recommendation and at the discretion of the Cultural Ministry's non-binding recommendations, real estate interests having trumped and stalled such policy-making. In 2010, after much public outcry, a committee was established at the Ministry of Culture to bar the demolition of potentially valuable buildings from after the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The committee, consisting of the minister, the director general of antiquities and two conservation experts who are tasked with inspecting sites across the entire country and not just Beirut, must approve all demolition orders before they are granted by concerned municipalities. The Draft Law 7424 of 2008, which decreed this mechanism also proposed compensating owners of property with heritage value by

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<sup>63</sup> Interview with Mona Hallak, architect and forerunning urban heritage activist, on October 10, 2013.

allowing them to sell their untapped exploitation rights to builders on other locations in the city, at a set distance from the heritage site. Yet this more consequential part of the law has not been ratified and draft law remains shelved. According to various cultural ministers themselves, the ratification of this proposed law is still highly unlikely.

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