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Mapping Art Worlds in the Industrial Periphery of Beirut The Case of Corniche el-Nahr

Abstract

Since 2005, the areas surrounding Nahr Beirut—the river that cuts through the northeastern border of Lebanon's capital city—became subject to the development of “art worlds” (Becker). Specifically, the neighborhood of Corniche el-Nahr became host to art-related activities in museums, galleries, studios, artist residencies, and interdisciplinary spaces. At the same time, real estate developments began to transform the urban landscapes of the areas surrounding Nahr Beirut, especially in terms of housing and architecture. In this article, I aim to untangle the interconnections between artistic activities and real estate development around Nahr Beirut in the northeastern periphery of Lebanon's capital. First, I examine the underlying conditions that led to the establishment of art institutions in the periphery. Second, by focusing on the rebranding campaign of Corniche el-Nahr, on the construction of mixed-use buildings and on the impact of these projects on local economies, I analyze the way arts worlds are embedded in the material and non-material transformation processes in these peripheral areas. Finally, I study the connections between art worlds and urban transformation, which led art professionals to question their practices within this urban context.

Keywords: Beirut; art worlds; urban transformation; industrial periphery; loft

Introduction

Ever since the partial reconstruction of Beirut in the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), efforts have been carried out to foster “art worlds” in the city (Becker), despite the weak public policies² and the failure to promote artistic production and distribution. Indeed, art worlds in Beirut, and more generally in Lebanon, were able to develop through private and international funding.³

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² On 16 March 2017, former Minister of Culture Ghattas Khoury declared that the budget of the Ministry of Culture was 40 billion Lebanese Pounds (LPB) (1 US dollar = LPB 1507, 5 before the collapse of the Lebanese Lira). One should keep in mind that this refers to the estimated budget of the Ministry of Culture, and not its actual expenditures. Until 2017, the Lebanese government had not voted on an actual general budget since 2005 (Hassani).

³ In Lebanon, government support for culture, and particularly for contemporary creation, is rather limited. Most of the country's art institutions rely on private funding, whether local or international (Brones and Moghadam). From the late 1990s to the 2010s, the opening of several contemporary art galleries, museums, fairs, production and exhibition spaces, and residencies has multiplied, especially in Beirut. These projects mostly benefit from local Lebanese organizations and foundations. (Robert A. Matta Foundation, Association Philippe Jabre, Collection Saradar, the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture – AFAC), regional (Sharjah Art Foundation, A.M. Qattan Foundation), European (Institut Français, Goethe Institute, the British Council, le Fonds pour le théâtre des jeunes arabes, Heinrich Böll Foundation) and American (Ford Foundation, Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts).

These developments have translated into the multiplication of museums, galleries and other art institutions dedicated to the curation and dissemination of art (Brones and Moghadam), most notably in and around Beirut. At the same time, Beirut witnessed post-war urban and real estate developments, especially in the city center. The nexus between the development of art institutions and the urban and real estate growth is not a phenomenon specific to Beirut. Similar connections between these two trends can be observed in other cities such as New York, Berlin, Dubai and Istanbul (Florida; Brones and Moghadam; Zukin). Moreover, the relations between art and space have recently sparked a significant interest among scholars, who focus their work on museums (Fagnoni and Gravari-Barbas), on the transformation of brownfield sites, previously used for industrial purposes, into art spaces (Grésillon), on art galleries (Boichot), on arts districts (Liefoghe), and on cultural policies (Djament-Tran and San Marco). Examining art in its spatial dimensions is not only fruitful for geographers studying art but it is also a useful tool for urban geographers who wish to decipher "the grammars of a city" (Guinard).⁴ In this study, art will be understood in its spatiality and as a dynamic process (Grésillon, *Berlin*). It will be considered as being embedded in its context and understood as an element of social systems (Grésillon, *Berlin* 46).⁵ Moreover, my research relies on Howard Becker's "art worlds" concept. Its collective dimension is highly valuable to capture the networks behind artistic production in Lebanon. "Art worlds" gather all activities essential to the process of production of what is perceived as "art." The coordination between individuals is what makes art possible. The creative process is not considered as the result of an isolated operation, but rather as a collective activity that is part of wide networks of cooperation (Becker and Pessin), which defines the terms of the art production. I will look at artistic activities as situated within common conventions and practices (Becker 34). The concept of "art worlds" is useful to uncover the underlying dynamics that shape art spaces and art-related activities in peripheral areas of Beirut.

Prior to 1975, Beirut's art institutions (museums, galleries, studios, artist residencies, and interdisciplinary spaces) were concentrated in more central neighborhoods such as Hamra and Ashrafieh. In the 1990s, the Beirut Central District, controlled by Solidere (Société libanaise pour le Développement et la Reconstruction),⁶ became the site for a significant number of art institutions, mainly galleries. In the past decades, art institutions became less centralized within these areas and began to spread out in other neighborhoods around the city (fig. 1 and 2). For instance, Corniche el-Nahr, among other neighborhoods on both banks of the Nahr Beirut ("Beirut River" in Arabic), was home to art institutions since 2005, witnessing the opening of the Sfeir Semler gallery as well as Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury's offices in Qarantina/Medawar.

⁴ French urban geographer Marcel Roncayolo defines the "grammars of a city" as the successive social reinterpretations of urban spaces.

⁵ The geographical analysis of art allows researchers to reduce the polysemy of culture and as such, facilitates the analysis of art and its spatial materialization. Thus, focusing on art and its spatiality allows the identification of a clear geographical object, unlike the notions of representations, identity, myths, that are usually components of culture (Grésillon, *Berlin*).

⁶ Since the end of the Civil War (1975-1990), the former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri carried out the reconstruction of Beirut through his company Solidere and the indebtedness of the state to the Lebanese banks.

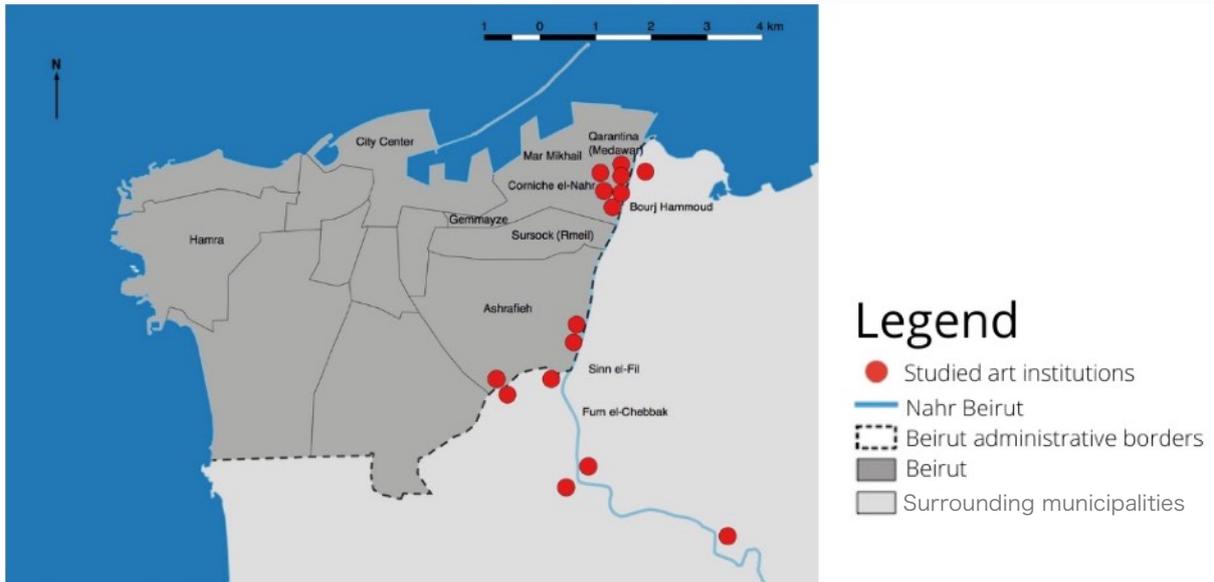


Figure 1: *Art institutions concentrating along Nahr Beirut.* Image courtesy of the author, base map designed by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

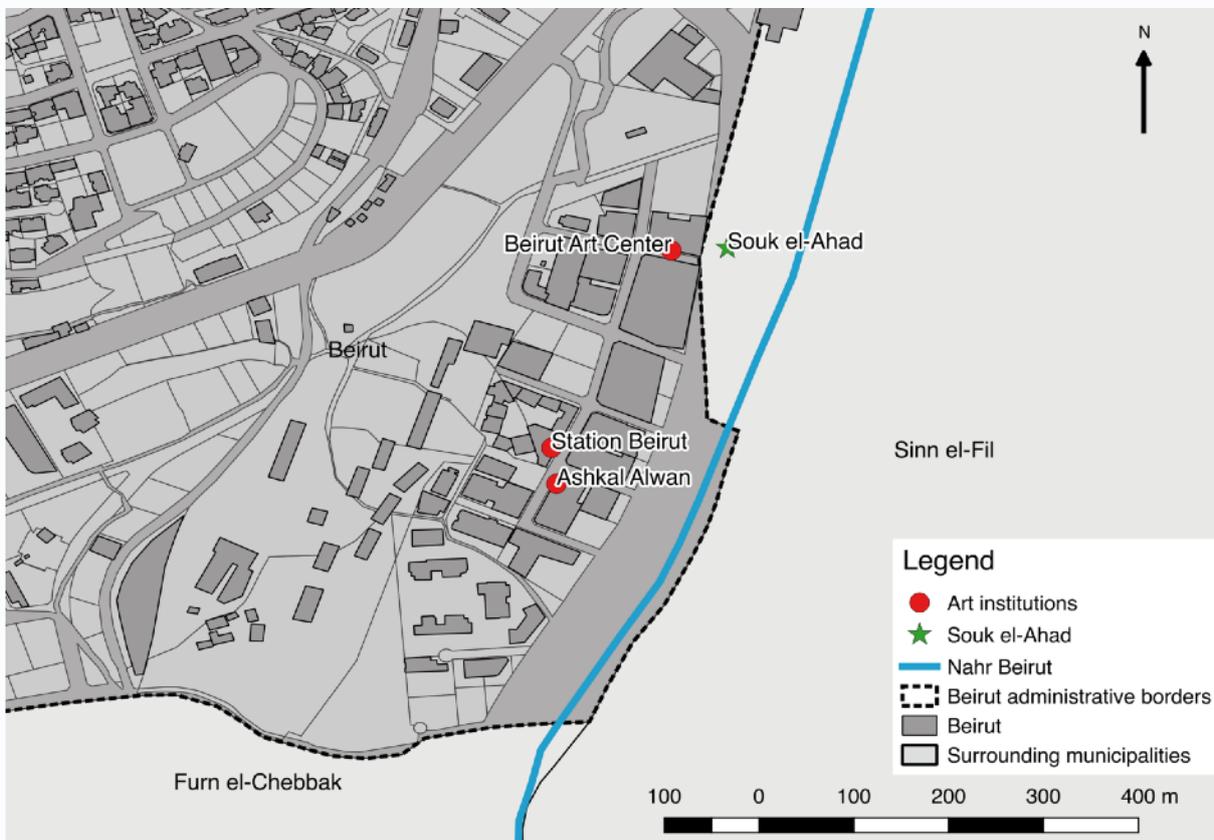


Figure 2: *Focus on Corniche el-Nahr.* Image courtesy of the author, base map designed by the Beirut Urban Lab (AUB) and the Lebanon's CNRS.

The aim of this article is to untangle the interconnection between the intensification of real estate projects and the expansion of art institutions in northeastern peripheral areas of Beirut, by delving into the recent development of an art centrality in the periphery.⁷ My understanding of the term periphery, here, refers to *both* a social and a geographical margin. Corniche el-Nahr is located on the eastern bank of Nahr Beirut, on the edge of the city. The neighborhood has been socially marginalized for decades and has only started to be a point of interest among property promoters and developers in the past decade. I will focus on networks of art exhibition and distribution, rather than those of creation and production in Corniche el-Nahr and along Nahr Beirut. I argue that the development of art worlds in Corniche el-Nahr led to the creation of a positive image of the neighborhood. The arrival of professionals who work in art institutions in this area attracted real estate actors who exploited this new image as a means to develop expensive and high-end housing projects. Art professionals who settle in abandoned industrial areas often involuntarily generate the transformation of these areas' real estate, economy and demography (*Vivant Qu'est-ce que la ville créative ?*). In Beirut's case, this claim is partially true and will be nuanced in this article.

Most of the data used for this article was collected during a fieldwork carried out in line with my master's thesis in January and March 2020 (Moujaes). This fieldwork took place during particularly unsettled times, following the massive demonstrations in October 2019⁸ and preceding the Covid-19 sanitary crisis. During my research in Beirut, I conducted 22 semi-structured interviews in Lebanese Arabic, English, and French; a majority of which were subsequently recorded, transcribed, and translated into French. Additionally, I carried out daily observations of the built environment in and around the Nahr Beirut: warehouses, factories, old and new residential buildings, construction hoardings, local shops, and businesses. These observations were made predominantly in and around the neighborhoods of Corniche el-Nahr, Qarantina, Gemmayze, Mar Mikhail, Bourj Hammoud, and Furn el-Chebbak. I primarily interviewed artists, art administrators and curators, coming from art worlds in Beirut, within an age range of 22 to 57. I also sought advice from academics such as Mona Harb, professor of Urban Studies and Politics at the American University of Beirut (AUB) and co-founder and research lead of the Beirut Urban Lab. Moreover, I interviewed, on a smaller scale, real estate actors, such as promoters and developers who contributed to real estate projects in Corniche el-Nahr. In general, I was able to get in touch with them quite easily, via email or WhatsApp, since a majority came from the same background as mine—lived in the capital or upscale suburban areas, attended foreign private schools, obtained higher education degrees and worked in Lebanon but mostly in European, North American or Gulf countries. Initially, I would send emails based on the targeted person or institution's professional contact information, which could be accessed publicly. Otherwise, I would ask among my personal network for someone's e-mail or telephone number. Furthermore, due to the ongoing economic and financial crisis in Lebanon and the devaluation of the Lebanese currency, all amounts (revenues and prices) mentioned in this article are outdated.

⁷ In the past decades, art spaces were implemented, and art activities were deployed in other areas in the periphery of Beirut, such as Dahiye ("suburb" in Arabic), a marginalized area in the southern periphery of Beirut. For instance, Umam Documentation and Research — Umam D&R, an organization specialized in handling war archives in Lebanon, as well as Hangar, its artistic venue for exhibitions and films, were established by Lokman Slim (assassinated on 4 Feb. 2021) and Monika Borgmann in 2004 and 2005 respectively, in Hareit Hrek. Moreover, murals and graffiti were designed on the façades of buildings in Ouzai, another neighborhood in Dahiye, as part of the Ouzville project in 2015. Although these projects in Hareit Hrek and Ouzai translate differently in urban spaces in Dahiye and deserve further attention, they will not be discussed in this article.

⁸ At the end of 2019, a wave of fires had just devastated several regions in Lebanon and the country was sinking into an economic and financial crisis. Hundreds of demonstrators began to protest against an increase in taxes, heavily affecting the working and middle classes. At the time, Lebanon was on the verge of bankruptcy before defaulting in March 2020. On 17 Oct. 2019, demonstrations occurred and would continue to do so in the following months across Lebanon such as Beirut, Nabatieh (South Lebanon) as well as Tripoli (North Lebanon).

This research stems from one main question: how can the analysis of a new artistic centrality, along Nahr Beirut, and especially in Corniche el-Nahr, be useful to grasp the interconnection between real estate development and the location of the art worlds in peripheral urban spaces? In order to answer this question, I briefly introduce the history of the Nahr Beirut and its surrounding environments, before delving into the development and history of art institutions in the area. Then, I turn my focus to the real estate development in Corniche el-Nahr. I identify the degree to which the implementation of art institutions in a specific urban area contributes to the dynamics of real estate project development, as well as the impact of the latter on the artistic and economic activity in the area. Finally, I address the questions that art professionals raise regarding their activity in the area, at times of mass social mobilization in Lebanon.

A Brief History of Nahr Beirut

Industrial activity in the area, as well as warehouse construction and maritime shipping services multiplied in the 19th century on the coast near Beirut's port. It heralded the beginning of modern industrial activity (Gates) in Beirut and in the vicinity of the river. At that time, Qarantina (in Medawar) became the first industrial park in the area. In the 1920s, Beirut experienced rapid urbanization, affecting both banks of Nahr Beirut. This area's urban development can be traced back to the various migration flows⁹ to the city and the growth of industrial infrastructures around the river's axis, especially on the riverbank and the Mediterranean seafront.¹⁰ Following Lebanon's independence from French colonial rule in 1943, the industrial activity began to spread from Qarantina to other areas further south, enhancing the formation of an "industrial corridor" along the river (Frem; Riachi). Moreover, the automobile boom in the 1960s led to the settlement of automobile companies such as Peugeot and Fiat in southern Qarantina and Corniche el-Nahr, and Chevrolet in Furn el-Chebbak further south. Even today, long after the closing of the Fiat headquarters, Beirutis commonly refer to the area as the "Fiat area." The expansion of industrial activity in Qarantina, Corniche el-Nahr and other neighboring areas in Mkalles and Sinn el-Fil is responsible for chemical waste discharged from factories into the river, contributing to the high contamination of its waters. This led to the construction of a negative image of the area surrounding the river, which Beirutis perceive as soiled and polluted. Besides its industrial character, the eastern periphery of the city has always been a working-class "reservoir" (Frem), particularly in Furn el-Chebbak and Bourj Hammoud. Progressively, land and real estate expansion in this area began to take over the few vacant lots that remained (Ruppert). Moreover, the agricultural area around the river, initially dedicated to growing fruits, vegetables, cereals and olives, between Sinn el-Fil and Jisr el-Bacha (Frem), has also been given over to land and property development since 2008. Today, although part of Corniche el-Nahr is located within Beirut's administrative borders, it is understood as a social and geographical margin and as such can be considered peripheral.

⁹ For instance, Qarantina hosted Armenian refugees starting from 1915. In 1933, the Armenian population in the neighborhood was relocated to the neighborhoods of Karm el-Zeitoun and Bourj Hammoud (Davie), on both banks of the river. Since 1948, the vicinities of the river were home to multi-ethnic working-class populations, such as Palestinians with a Sunni majority, but also Lebanese Shiites, Iraqi Arabs and Kurds. Inhabitants were also middle-class Maronites (Frem). During the war, the area fell under the Christian militias' control, homogenizing the population coming mainly from Christian social groups. On 18 Jan. 1976, Phalangists carried out a massacre of Palestinians and Lebanese Muslims, which took place in Qarantina. Since the 2000s, a Shia population returned in the eastern periphery, especially in Bourj Hammoud, cohabiting with other communities, such as Egyptians, Sri Lankans, Ethiopians, Armenians and Lebanese.

¹⁰ Rapid urbanization around Nahr Beirut and the use of riverbed for informal housing began to highly affect the quality of its water (Frem), since organic waste and sewage contaminated the water and seeped into the water table. Moreover, immediate encroachment on the river domain resulted in frequent floods since most of the informal housings were settled in the flood zone of the river. As early as 1942, floods caused severe damages. In 1956, along with the delimitation of Beirut's administrative boundaries, the Ministry of Planning issued a decree to canalize the Beirut River (Davie). In 1968, the river was channeled from the seashore to Sinn el-Fil, the river from urbanized areas in and around the city. In 1998, another part between Sinn el-Fil and Jisr el-Bacha was ultimately channeled (Frem).

The Reuse of Former Industrial Sites in Corniche el-Nahr: a Centrifugal Process

Among the approximately twenty spaces implemented along the Nahr Beirut in the last twenty years, that I identified during my fieldwork, I chose to focus on three which are located in Corniche el-Nahr: Station Beirut, Ashkal Alwan: the Lebanese Association for the Plastic Arts, and Beirut Art Center (located right across from Souk el-Ahad).¹¹ Station Beirut is a hybrid cultural space established in 2012 that is dedicated to performance and visual arts. It is based on four main pillars: visual culture, performing arts, community projects and space privatization. Its program, which was experimental when the space was first founded, has since stabilized around these pillars, hosting a wide array of activities such as film screenings, exhibitions, concerts, conferences, talks, master classes, dance workshops, local markets, etc. Ashkal Alwan was founded in 1993 and was initially dedicated to setting up a series of cultural and artistic projects aimed at bolstering public art by occupying public spaces in several parts of the city. In 2006, Lebanese curator Christine Tohmé founded HomeWorks, a bi—or triennial discursive platform of conferences, panels, and performances, which took place over a period of ten days in Beirut. In 2010, Ashkal Alwan inaugurated its space in Corniche el-Nahr (fig. 3) with the aim of hosting the "Home Workspace Program," a 10-month arts study program that enrolls 10-15 fellows per year "who develop their formal, technical and theoretical skills in a critical setting, and provides enrolled fellows with feedback and resources to facilitate and support their art practice."¹² This program is conceived as the physical extension of HomeWorks otherwise ephemeral works and events.

Beirut Art Center is a non-profit association, space and platform dedicated to experimental art, founded in 2009 by Lamia Joreige and Sandra Dagher. Beirut Art Center as a concept was conceived in 2004, when Sandra Dagher directed Espace SD, an art space located within the Gemmayze sector on Charles Helou Avenue, which was active from 1998 to 2007. Beirut Art Center currently has an exhibition space, an auditorium, a bookshop, and a café. It was first implemented in Corniche el-Nahr in 2009 and was relocated in 2020 to a space within walking distance of the original. There are several motivations behind the implementation of art professionals and their professional activities in the northeastern periphery of Beirut, of which many are pragmatic in nature. The most obvious of these motivations are economic, as art professionals began to show interest in the industrial spaces found in Beirut's periphery as early as 2009.

¹¹ Souk el-Ahad means "Sunday market" in Arabic.

¹² For further information, see: www.ashkalalwan.org. Accessed 1 Aug. 2022.



Figure 3: Ashkal Alwan: internal view. Image courtesy of the author, photographed by the author.

As of 2005,¹³ art worlds began to expand outside Beirut's borders as a result of the congestion of central areas of the city. There are many contributing factors to the movement of art professionals (and other middle and low-income communities) to this area: the growing saturation of the construction activity since the 1990s, the rise of real estate prices and the limited access to affordable rent, among others. Since art professionals sought available, affordable and large spaces in the periphery of Beirut, they settled in former industrial premises to pursue their artistic endeavors in vacant and inexpensive spaces. This seemed to be the answer to the high prices of rent in more centralized parts of the city. They mostly settled in Corniche el-Nahr and other peripheral neighborhoods located in the river's axis such as Qarantina, Bourj Hammoud and Furn el-Chebbak. Beirut Art Center co-founder and artist Lamia Joreige¹⁴ reveals in an interview the motivations for the implementation of the art space in Corniche el-Nahr back in 2009:

When [the Beirut Art Center] moved in, most of these factories had not been working for twenty years, there were still one or two that were functioning and most of them were in decay because of the war. It was really an area considered as the suburbs of the city. And we were interested in developing the Beirut Art Center there, because we were looking for a site that was spacious and not expensive. Of course, everyone told us that it would have been a better idea to be located in the center. But at the time, the Downtown area¹⁵—even today—cost a fortune, even Hamra, Ashrafieh, all the areas of Beirut were expensive. You had to go either outside Beirut or to an area that was not yet developed. (Joreige)

Furthermore, art professionals saw in these neighborhoods a symbolic opposition to the concentration of artistic activity, which historically took place in central neighborhoods of the city, such as Sursok¹⁶ in Rmeil and to a lesser extent, Hamra.¹⁷ During a discussion, Joreige expressed her opposition to the Solidere enterprise of post-war reconstruction of "Downtown Beirut:" "Symbolically, Downtown—the 'new Downtown'—had been formed with Solidere, in a way that one could be politically against. So we'd been looking for a space in neighborhoods like Mar Mikhail, or Qarantina, in places that were always so slightly off [alternative]." (Nayla. N). I subsequently met with Nayla N., the manager of an art space in the same neighborhood¹⁸. When I asked her about what it meant to be located in the art center in Corniche el-Nahr, she emphasized the need to "decentralize" art worlds from the city: "I think there is almost a rebellion against being in the Downtown area, being in the city. If we were to open the art center in Downtown, or even in Hamra to some extent, or if we had been in Ashrafieh, we would have a very different mission. . . and a very

¹³ The opening of the Sfeir-Semler Gallery, one of Beirut's main art galleries, dates back to 2005. It is located in Qarantina, in the northern periphery of the city. The first art space to open in Corniche el-Nahr was the Beirut Art Center in 2009.

¹⁴ Born in 1972, Lamia Joreige is a Lebanese visual artist and filmmaker. Her work addresses issues of history and narrative through archival and fictional elements, as well as the relationship between individual stories and collective memory. Recently, through her project *Under-Writing Beirut*, which is divided into two chapters: one titled *Nahr* (the River), which refers to the Beirut river, (2013-2016) and the other titled *Ouzai*, an informal neighborhood in Dahiye, on the southern outskirts of Beirut (2017-2018), she explores the dynamics of transformation and conflict that determine these spaces located on the outskirts of Beirut. Joreige gathers drawings and films that stem from her reflections around the Beirut river. *The River* (2013) is a four-minute film that tackles the idea of Nahr Beirut, which is today dried up and inaccessible, as a suspended space. *After the River* (2016) is a twenty-minute film that unfolds on three screens. Joreige uses this triptych performance to interview two individuals from two different professions, located "at both ends of the social hierarchy." On one hand, a nonagenarian businessman and one of the first industrial owners of Corniche el-Nahr, talks about the development of this neighborhood. On the other hand, a Syrian employee of the Beirut Art Center since 2010, who used to live inside the building, could witness how the area operated at night. According to her, these testimonies are a non-linear means of expression around the area.

¹⁵ The Downtown area is also known as the center of Beirut.

¹⁶ Sursok in Rmeil is where the historic Sursok Museum is located since its opening in 1961 with the Salon d'Automne.

¹⁷ Hamra was home to a number of cinemas and theatres.

¹⁸ She wished to remain anonymous.

different audience" (Nayla N.). According to other art professionals such as Edwin Nasr, art worlds in Corniche el-Nahr have developed in former industrial sites along Nahr Beirut both for economic reasons and in direct opposition to art worlds embedded in more central areas of Beirut.¹⁹ Additionally, other interviewees such as Lamia Joreige and Nayla N. expressed that the implementation of their professional activity in peripheral areas represented a political stance against central areas of Beirut in addition to the economic benefits of such moves away from the city center. As such, one cannot exclude the possibility of a spillover effect. "Pioneers" who first began carrying out their artistic practices in the periphery may have encouraged other art professionals to do the same. This process, whether generated by a pragmatic purpose, a political drive or thought as part of a general trend, cannot be dissociated from urban transformation within peripheral areas such as Corniche el-Nahr. This interconnection will be explored in the following sections.

The Rise of the Real Estate Market in Corniche el-Nahr: A Process Embedded in the Lebanese Urban Context

In this analysis of the relationship between real estate dynamics and the implementation of art institutions in the neighborhood, I draw on Bruno Marot's concept of "pegged urbanization." Marot demonstrates the interconnection between urban production in and around Beirut and the expansion of financialized dynamics that shape capitalism in Lebanon. Pegged urbanization designates the processes through which the real estate market is a pillar of urban expansion and is determined by public policies, specifically through the Banque du Liban (Central Bank of Lebanon). The concept of pegged urbanization is key to understanding the way art worlds unfold in an urban, political, and economic framework which favors the financialization of housing issues and in turn neglects socially-oriented issues such as infrastructure development. The lack of urban planning and the "finance-property interplay" (Marot, *Developing Post-War Beirut*), which are central to Lebanese local capitalism, explain the growing interest of real estate actors in certain peripheral neighborhoods. Indeed, since 2008, a new form of urbanization has been taking place in areas along the Nahr Beirut, which have been previously oriented towards industrial activity. A substantial number of residential projects have sprung up in this peripheral area, mostly concentrated in brownfield and vacant lands (Marot, *Developing Post-War Beirut*). Large real estate development sites in Corniche el-Nahr are due to much more reasonably priced lots and spaces than those found in central areas of Beirut.²⁰ While it is true that the Lebanese state does not *directly* intervene in urban matters, it is more involved than it may seem (Marot, "The Financialization of Property"). Rather than implementing coherent urban policy, the Lebanese state facilitates urban transformation through tax breaks or the liberalization of rental contracts, especially since the 1990s (El-Achkar; Krijnen and Fawaz; Krijnen and De Beukelaer). Public authorities deliberately chose to delegate some of their prerogatives to the private sphere, including the construction and planning of housing. Indeed, urban production is "directly enacted by property developers." However, through the Banque du Liban, the Lebanese state's contribution, albeit indirect, to the realization of real estate projects in Corniche el-Nahr, indicates a level of involvement, which seems to contradict the general assumption of the state's non-interference. The presence of high-rise condominiums, the increase of land and real estate prices, and the growth of mortgage-based ownership altogether characterize Beirut's urban developments (Marot *Developing Post-War Beirut*). These developments are pursued in line with financial interests that fall within globalized circuits of capital flows. This means that "the logics of market take precedence over sectors of life" (Krijnen, *Creative Economy* 9), which are supposed to be

¹⁹ Born in 1994, Edwin Nasr is a law graduate and the assistant to the Director Christine Tohmé at Ashkal Alwan. He is also an independent writer and researcher based in Beirut.

²⁰ For instance, Ras Beirut and Ashrafieh, are now saturated due to an older concentration of real estate investment.

managed through “political” or “social” processes (Harvey). However, one should keep in mind that urban developments have been slowing down, if not been halted, due to the ongoing economic and financial crisis.

That being said, real estate activity, on the one hand, stems from the urban and financial contexts that are favorable to constructions in Corniche el-Nahr, which has many undeveloped land reserves. On the other hand, although urban expansion in Corniche el-Nahr is anchored in how urbanization usually occurs in Beirut and more generally in Lebanon, it is perceived as rather exceptional by real estate actors in Corniche el-Nahr. For instance, real estate developer and former director of a company specialized in creating and designing lofts in Lebanon, Azmi A. stated that “in 2004, when [he] started to become a real estate developer on land that nobody wanted, people thought [he] was insane.” By initiating one of the first real estate projects in Corniche el-Nahr, his desire was to shift away from the “Lebanese mentality, individualism, greed, selfishness,” by “imagining something new” and “living different.” Since “he was never raised by the [traditional] system” (Azmi A.), he thought that he could successfully implement such projects. Indeed, Azmi A. takes pride in his ability to invest in previously undesired areas, to attract people beyond the usual boundaries of the city, and to depart from “traditional” urban development in Beirut (Brones and Moghadam).

Moreover, real estate developments are not unrelated to the emergence of artistic activities in Corniche el-Nahr. For instance, artistic-industrial architectures such as loft aesthetics have emerged as a component in new high-end buildings and have come to define the recent urban landscape of the neighborhood. Real estate developers Azmi A. and Georgette B., real estate promoter Philippe C., and architect Khaled K., did mention the emergence of this new architectural style in relation to art activities in former factories and warehouses in the area. In many cities, where industrial landscape is transformed into *loftscape*, a term coined by Sharon Zukin, the loft appears as a central element of post-industrial urban aesthetics (Vivant, *Qu'est-ce que la ville créative ?*).²¹ This type of accommodation symbolizes “the proximity with the artistic worlds” and is associated to “artistic references” such as “functional reuse and minimalism,” as well as “objective residential convenience” such as “design flexibility” and large space (Vivant, *Qu'est-ce que la ville créative ?* 34). This demonstrates how art spaces and activities can be used as a valuable asset for real estate projects. More generally, art has become a “prerequisite to create attractive and competitive cities” and thus, it is being considered as an urban norm among urban planners (Guinard and Margier 19). In this respect, art can serve as a powerful means to promote a positive image of cities, and to enhance both their visibility and their symbolic capital (Harvey). In other words, art is exploited as a marketing tool in order to improve Corniche el-Nahr’s attractiveness (Vivant, “La classe créative existe-t-elle ?”, *Qu'est-ce que la ville créative ?*) and to valorize an area located within the social margins of Beirut that were, for a long time, negatively perceived due to its industrial activities. In light of the emerging art scene in Corniche el-Nahr, real estate actors claim to contribute to the “creation of a new urban identity” (Brones and Moghadam 17) in this long-depreciated part of Beirut. The development of real estate and the implementation of art institutions in the neighborhoods are thus intertwined.

However, land and real estate projects in Corniche el-Nahr did not follow the opening of the Beirut Art Center in 2009. In fact, they occurred at the same time. Major investments were injected in the property sectors in the aftermath of the 2007-2008 financial crisis. Nevertheless, the development of art worlds around Nahr Beirut and especially in Corniche el-Nahr cannot be dissociated from the industrial and artistic aesthetics that inspired real estate projects. Among these projects, Artist Loft (Plot # 4371), a curved glass shaped building (fig. 4) located right behind a storage warehouse (*dépôt pour l'entreposage*), designed by Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury, Factory Loft, Warehouse Lofts and UPARK 128g (Har Properties), are the most notable.

²¹ They all wished to remain anonymous.



Figure 4: PLOT #4371. Image courtesy of the author, photographed by the author.

For instance, “with its distinctive red brick and metal beam exterior”²² the UPARK 1289 project takes “inspiration from the loft style architecture of New York.”²³ Furthermore, Plot #4378, a project that was later abandoned, is described as “the third development of its kind in the area”. The project aims at providing non-typical working/living lofts for the emerging creative scene in Beirut, and is strategically located at the proximity of the Beirut river (Corniche el Nahr), NBT railway station at the vicinity of the Damascus highway, the National Museum district and the intersection of the major east/west and north/south road networks of the city. The site consists of a 1675-square-meter lot in a developing industrial district. The area is undergoing major transformation and urban renewal, consequently attracting alternative programs and activities. The Beirut Art Center on the adjacent plot is one of these new developments.²⁴

In summary, while it is clear that the major real estate projects in the area stem directly from the architectural aesthetics of New York’s Soho district, it does not entirely explain why real estate was initiated in the area. The development of art worlds in Corniche el-Nahr can explain aesthetic choices in the architecture of many buildings as a marketing strategy enacted by property promoters and developers. Although art worlds are used as a means to legitimate, in a subtle manner, real estate projects in the area, the intensification of real estate activity in the area is, in itself, the outcome of the structural urban context in Beirut.

The Consequences of Filling the “Rent Gap” in Corniche el-Nahr

I have argued that real estate developments heavily rely on industrial loft aesthetics. However, they paradoxically threaten the artistic activity in various ways. For instance, Nabil Canaan, director and co-founder of Station Beirut, was invited between 2014 and 2016 to attend several meetings with owners, real estate developers and promoters.²⁵ Because the Canaan family owned the building, he was at first included in the discussions regarding the launch of a major rebranding campaign of the area. This campaign aimed to rebrand Corniche el-Nahr as “Soho Beirut,” through the appropriation of aesthetic elements reminiscent of industrial lofts in New York. The “Soho Beirut” campaign, as its name suggests, drew inspiration from the gentrified Soho neighborhood in New York and explicitly emanated from the recent opening of art centers in Corniche el-Nahr (Brones and Moghadam 113-138). The symbolic value stemming from artists and art professionals in the neighborhood has been and continues to be exploited, as part of a wide campaign aimed to reinvent the identity of an area that was once marginalized. During a conversation with Canaan, he explained the reasons why he walked away from this project after 2016:

I didn’t participate [in the campaign], because they came with ideas that are not in line with our spirit, our approach, with the cooperation we build with the neighbors. They were saying, “okay our neighborhood is this many square feet, the Canaan family you have X percent of that land and that translates into X percent of dollars.” So they wanted money to start investing. . . . And the truth is, I asked them for money as sponsors. At first, I was saying “guys, by making things happen here, we will bring people in,” but this was something they didn’t understand. On the contrary, they said “You think that we are going to fund your business?” (Canaan)

²² For further information on UPARK 1289, see: http://harproperties.com/sites/default/files/projects/u_park_brochure_o.pdf. Accessed 1 Aug. 2022.

²³ For further information on the UPARK 1289 project, see: <http://har-properties.com/upark-1289>. Accessed 1 Aug. 2022.

²⁴ For further information on the PLOT #4378 project, see: <https://www.bernardkhoury.com/project.php?id=257>. Accessed 1 Aug. 2022.

²⁵ Lebanese-Swiss filmmaker Nabil Canaan is the director and co-founder of Station Beirut since 2013. He is also a cultural producer and a curator.

This echoes with the rent gap concept which is the difference between the current amount of rent for a piece of land and the potential amount of rent created by a potential use of land (Smith and Williams). However, mainstream assumptions concerning urban transformation commonly link this process to the spontaneous nature of supply and demand as the sole cause of urban change. In fact, architect Khaled K. claimed that:

Public authorities never intervene, there is no real estate strategy, no nothing. It is the law of supply and demand that decides and real estate promoters only consider their side of the equation [the supply]. Everything is so badly managed, sometimes based on our instincts and sometimes with the help of market studies. (Khaled K.)

In light of what I have previously shown using Marot's concept of pegged urbanization, this understanding does not account for the way public authorities, land and real estate stakeholders, banks and other financial have interests in the urban planning and thus closely collaborate with urban processes. Actually, supply is created—and improved—in order to anticipate some potential demand. Canaan then explained that following these disagreements, real estate developers and promoters often called the police for disturbance at night while he was organizing concerts on Station Beirut's rooftop:

Because before [the property developers] arrived, we had a rooftop with lots of activities upstairs, we organized concerts, parties, barbecues, street fairs, urban markets, which brought thousands of attendees. These events were accessible for all, while contemporary art attracts approximately 300-500 people maximum. But since 2017, as soon as we started to make a bit of noise on the roof, they would call the cops. So now, we don't organize big concerts anymore. They killed us [our activity], actually. (Canaan)

As one can see in the photo below (fig. 5), the rooftop opens on to the UPARK 1289 building. This shows that real estate interests can threaten the art spaces they were feeding off in the first place. Similar to the Soho Beirut rebranding campaign, property developers can also cause environmental changes. Architect and geographer Hala Younes touches upon the way these property developers are capable of carrying out a major project named, for instance, "mimosa," in an area with and varied biodiversity, only to eventually destroy those mimosas (Younes). Real estate investment in Corniche el-Nahr has not only an impact on artistic activity but is also targeting other local economic activities. For example, let us examine the case of Souk el-Ahad, located in Corniche el-Nahr, which was open, before the Covid-19 crisis, on Saturdays and Sundays. Souk el-Ahad is a popular market that has existed in Corniche el-Nahr since 1995, where marginalized groups, such as Syrians and Palestinians, purchase and sell clothes, accessories, antiques, home supplies and food. It is commonly recognized as an *urban marginality* (Mermier), due to its supposed "illegal" and "foreign" character (Krijnen and Pelgrim 1). It also has a history of being perceived as an urban space for conflict between Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian communities (Mermier). Debates regarding the possible relocation of Souk el-Ahad from Corniche el-Nahr to the port of Beirut intensified during the last years, while the area was witnessing urban transformation.²⁶ These discussions ended around 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic began and the large explosion occurred on 4 August 2020 in this area. In 2019, lawmakers and officials called for the relocation of the market from Corniche el-Nahr to the port (OLJ). They claimed it would reduce traffic in the area and was deemed to be "more appropriate" as stated by Mount Lebanon Governor Mohammed Mekkawi.²⁷

²⁶ Debates around the relocation of this market to the Port area peaked before the *thawra* (17 October Revolution) and the covid-19 crisis. In the aftermath of the blast of 4 Aug. 2020, Souk el-Ahad will not be relocated to this area. In fact, Souk el-Ahad closed down on 25 Apr. 2021, following a decision issued by the Ministry of Interior.

²⁷ For further information: <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Lawmakers%2C+officials+call+for+relocation+of+Souk+al-Ahad-a0590529449>. Accessed 1 Aug. 2022.



Figure 5 : UPARK 128g; external view from Station Beirut's rooftop. Image courtesy of the author, Photographed by the author.

The establishment's general director, Ziad Shayya said that the monthly rent for a spot in the port would be LPB 20,000 per square meter and that applicants would have to be Lebanese citizens. These disputes reinforce the perception of the neighborhood as both "poor" and "foreign" as well as the stigmatization of its local economy.²⁸ Public authorities, especially the municipality of Sinn el-Fil, have repeatedly expressed their desire to relocate the market to the Beirut port in order to make the neighborhood more bearable.²⁹ Debates regarding the forced relocation of Souk el-Ahad (Hour) could then be associated to the significant real estate development in Corniche el-Nahr. Indeed, there are "significant private interests at stake in the conflict, including a possible interest in the land because of nearby real estate developments, which have led to skyrocketing prices of land." While this factor is not confirmed, it "is expected given the many connections between real estate developers and politicians." (Krijnen, "The Contestations"). These socio-demographic and economic changes at the neighborhood level are akin to "gentrification" (Glass), a series of processes that combine changes at the social, physical, and economic levels.

The Crossover Between Art Worlds and Urban Transformation

Most art professionals I interviewed at the beginning of 2020 were questioning their professional practices in relation to socio-economic structures in Lebanon. These interviews were conducted amidst a context of mass demonstrations across the country when the public debate focused on issues such as social inequalities. Whenever topics such as urban development and housing came up in our conversations, many art professionals pointed out a wide array of structural problems, as well as the necessity to rethink art worlds in Lebanon.³⁰ For instance, graphic designer Karim W. emphasized the exclusive functioning of the Lebanese art worlds.³¹ He stressed on how the field of graphic design in Lebanon works as a monopoly of restricted circle of individuals:

The graphic design department in AUB opened in 1997 and anyone who was a student there at that time knows everyone.³² These people, they own literally every art studio, pop up stores, cafés, bars. . . They all lived through the war and saw the country go through changes against their will. They all come from the same generation, they all know each other, work together in graphic design. Although I worked with these people and I love them, you realize that they have become a clique and started to gentrify their own spaces. (Karim W.)

On the other hand, Edwin Nasr from Ashkal Alwan perceived his experience as an art professional slightly differently, providing a discourse that further nuances the exclusiveness that exist the Lebanese art worlds. According to him, an artist has a very low income and therefore, we should not "posit him as someone who has capital just because he knows Gilles Deleuze. It doesn't mean anything, it's not a currency that takes you very far [in Lebanon]." (Nasr)

As for Lamia Joreige, she acknowledged the fact that art professionals are an integral part of these economical and social structures. She explained how professionals have a hand in their perpetuation, despite being critical of them in Lebanon. According to her, one can be critical towards the economies of art. However, it can be very challenging, in "the absence of the state or cultural policies," to carry out artistic activities without benefiting from "private money, sponsor money, falling back on auctions, dinners, end-of-year galas." However, this discussion regarding the role of art is not specific to Beirut, nor to Lebanon, but is inherent to the different networks of artwork circulation and

²⁸ USD 13.25 before the economic and financial crisis.

²⁹ The municipality of Sinn el-Fil directly borders Corniche el-Nahr.

³⁰ One should keep in mind that these interrogations did not abruptly occur in 2019, but peaked during this period. Many art professionals in fact took part in protests in 2015 and have been reflecting on these issues for the past years.

³¹ He is born in 1997 and wished to remain anonymous.

³² The American University of Beirut, one of Lebanon's most prestigious institutions for higher education.

embedded in globalized art markets. She draws a parallel with the role of art professionals in economies of art and their role in urban transformation: “Just like you’re against gentrification, but you’re participating in it: by doing what you did, you end up five years later with towers [she laughs bitterly] with the [square] meter at 4000 dollars in a place that is completely off-center.” (Joreige).

By making marginalized urban areas attractive, these art professionals trigger an economic and land transformation that they do not control and of which they ironically become a casualty (Grésillon, “La reconversion”). Indeed, art professionals become “instruments for the production of [Beirut]’s image” (Vivant, *Qu’est-ce que la ville créative ?* 84). The area benefits today from a more attractive identity and image because artistic activity aids in the facilitation and creation of “land value and wealth that generate spillover effects” (Grésillon, *Berlin* 32), consequently enhancing the value of the area. The intertwining of art and capital develops into an “artistic mode of production” (Zukin, 176-190), leading to capital injection into these formerly disqualified sites. In addition, Karim reflects on the transformation of the neighborhoods by revealing his deep attachment to the Grande Brasserie du Levant in Mar Mikhail. Originally the oldest brewery in the Middle East, the existing building opened its doors in the 1931 to produce the local beer brand Laziza, stopping production in 1995 and officially closing in 2003, before its demolition in April 2017 (Enders), which made way to the construction of a building designed by Bernard Khoury. Khoury designed Artist Loft (Plot #4371) in Corniche el-Nahr, a building that bears the same name as the brewery.³³ Karim, a collector of old beer bottles and caps for years, explains how the debate around the demolition of a place that was dear to him was a crucial moment in his intellectual path. It made him highly aware of the gentrification process of Mar Mikhail and the surrounding neighborhoods that he strongly criticizes. The Grande Brasserie du Levant incident in Mar Mikhail is intimately associated with the spirit of Khoury’s projects in Corniche el-Nahr. Mar Mikhail, where the property developers have significantly pursued the “rent gap” actors, cannot be studied as an isolated case, since Corniche el-Nahr is situated in the extension of this area. Urban transformation in Corniche el-Nahr is therefore in line with urban transformation in Mar Mikhail.³⁴ Since 2009, Mar Mikhail in the east of Beirut has been transformed by both the establishment of art and design galleries and by the “spillover basin for nightlife” from the neighboring Gemmayzeh area further west (Krijnen, *Creative Economy* 7). When mentioning Bernard Khoury’s work, one should bear in mind that in the decade following the end of the Lebanese Civil War, he was paradoxically known for leading architectural endeavors that highlighted the “historicity of places and sites on which he intervenes” (Brones 148). His most famous projects are the nightclub BO18 (1998) located in Qarantina and the restaurant Centrale (2001), in a 1920s house in Saifi. He conceived BO18 as a “place of nocturnal survival” and imagined Centrale, as an “act of resistance against the sterilization process” in the city center (Khoury). These projects were envisioned in opposition to the reconstruction process of the center of Beirut, which he believed would bring about an “imported modernity” from abroad and a “neo-orientalist” image to the city (Berthelon). However, since the 2000s, Khoury has been mainly carrying out residential projects. According to him:

Working with developers can also mean the realization of political acts. Probably much more than the easy recuperation of stories regarding my early projects [such as BO18 and Centrale]. Today, when I build apartments with its pontoon-like circuits that run along the facades, it is a way to parachute the inhabitants into the city. Reconnecting with the neighborhood in this way (Plot #183) creates another urban fabric, but also another social fabric. . .³⁵ (Khoury)

³³ For further information on the demolition of the Brasserie du Levant, see: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/battle-over-beirut-landmark-demolition-raises-bigger-questions-about-city-%20s-fate-1.661884>. Accessed 1 Aug. 2022.

³⁴ Mar Mikhail is a neighborhood near Corniche el-Nahr, located further west.

³⁵ For further information, see: https://www.liberation.fr/culture/2016/01/07/l-architecte-bernard-khoury-redresse-son-liban_1419215/. Accessed 1 Aug. 2022.

This statement allows us to understand how Bernard Khoury—among many others—deliberately provokes material and symbolic change on an urbanistic, sociodemographic and economic level, especially in Mar Mikhail, which has undergone gentrification around 2009. He responded to widespread opposition, by stating that it became “very obvious that Beirut was never going to be rebuilt [by the state] because the institutions were not there” (Khoury). The Grande Brasserie du Levant illustrates the way, within this urban and political context, property developers enact urban transformation (Krijnen, *Creative Economy*). In fact, this transformation occurs under the auspices of the Lebanese state and is facilitated in Lebanon, through tax exemptions and the liberalization of rental contracts in the early 1990s and in 2014.

Conclusion

Since the 1980s, in European or Northern American cities, there has been a growing interest in art among policy makers, particularly in terms of urban policies in a context of post-industrial transition (Vivant, *Qu'est-ce que la ville créative ?*). Indeed, urban policies in European or North American cities developed in accordance with real estate interests, using art as a mode of urban production. In Lebanon, and more specifically in Beirut, the role of public authorities is different. Lebanon is a country where public authorities lack interest in contemporary art. If Corniche el-Nahr has witnessed real estate development, it is due to the urban and financial framework that is conducive to real estate development and takes place without proper urban planning. Nevertheless, the real estate development strategies in this neighborhood have relied on artistic activities unfolding in the neighborhood since 2009, especially through the construction of lofts in a neighborhood that has been renamed Soho Beirut.

This real estate activity threatens current local activities in Corniche el-Nahr, as it encourages discourses that, for instance, delegitimize Souk el-Ahad. Moreover, two visions that antagonize central and peripheral areas in the city arise. On the one hand, art professionals justify their decision to depart from central areas of Beirut and to implement their activities in the periphery with their up-front opposition to the center of the city, which Solidere has monopolized over since the 1990s. They also look for affordable and vacant spaces beyond the traditional borders of Beirut, as a result of urban production in the city. On the other hand, real estate promoters aim to break with the tradition of urbanism in Beirut, despite the real estate actors in Corniche el-Nahr who pursue financial interests in the area. Both these visions, which have a centrifugal dimension and stem from urban experiences in Beirut, allow us to grasp the specificities of Corniche el Nahr.

Nonetheless, these observations and analyses heavily require additional consideration and reevaluation in light of the ongoing deterioration of the political, economic and health situation in Lebanon. The Beirut blasts on 4 August 2020, as well as the economic and financial crisis, have exacerbated these difficulties, significantly constraining artistic activities. It would be interesting to conduct further research to assess these actors' role and contribution to the reshaping of the socio-cultural fabric in the recovery and post-crisis period. One could do so by examining the links between art and urban change as a result of brutal urban processes, such as the explosion, or of the redefinition of socio-economic structures as a result of the ongoing crisis.

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Biography

Born and raised in Beirut, **Sasha Moujaes** moved to France and completed the Middle-Eastern and Mediterranean program at the Paris Institute of Political Studies (Sciences Po). She then joined a dual research program at the same institution and at the National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations (INALCO). She specialized in comparative politics and Arab studies, focusing on the crossover between art and urban issues. After acquiring professional experience in several cultural institutions, she now works in the film and media industry.

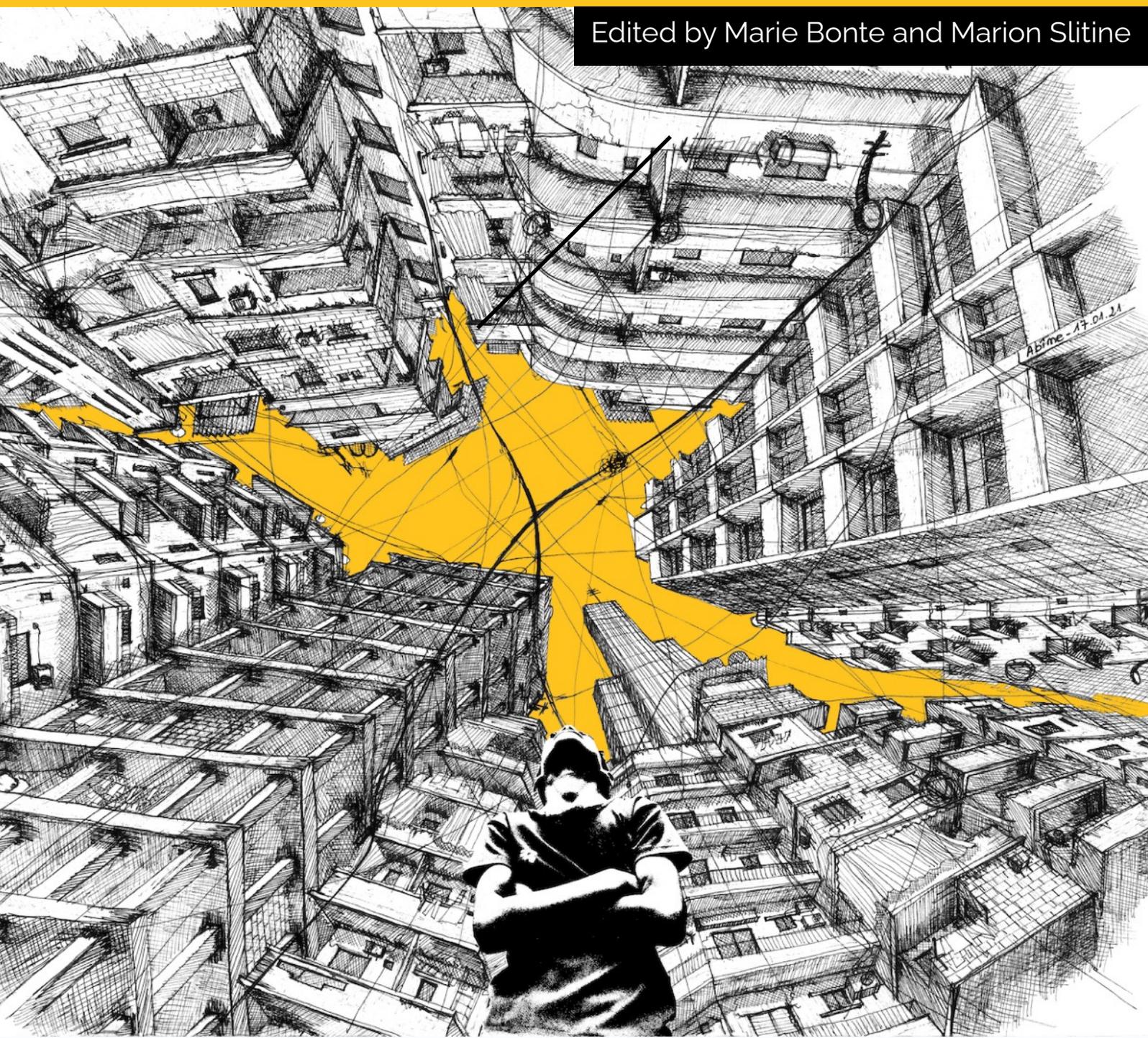
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4

Ce que l'art fait à la ville en Afrique du Nord et au Moyen-Orient

Pratiques artistiques, expressions du politique et transformations de l'espace public

Edited by Marie Bonte and Marion Slitine



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