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KEYWORDS

crisis; Greater Beirut; marginal; residential street; social practices

ABSTRACT

Streets are enduring public spaces, which epitomise a city's culture and identity. While lively streets are often located in central urban areas, the street's vibrant quality could fade away in marginalised residential neighbourhoods. Moreover, crises could impact economic activities and the everyday lives of residents. The concept of liveability serves to study streets in a relational perspective, by analysing the relation among their morphology, functions and diverse social activities. This paper aims to investigate residential streets in marginal neighbourhoods, and their role in providing public spaces that are conducive to social practices, especially in crisis situations, taking the case of Lebanon. The research builds on urban design literature, site visits, observations and informal interviews with residents, to map the street interface and corresponding activities. The study area was selected in a neighbourhood to the north of the capital city Beirut, in the administrative area of Sarba, which is characterised by population of mixed backgrounds, and accessibility through the highway to other cities. Our research findings suggest that there is a relation between the street interface that extends from the ground floor up to the residential building roof, and the opportunity for staging social activities beyond this interface, blurring boundaries between public and private. Further studies in other streets are required to validate the applied methodology.

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Re-reading, Revaluing Residential Streets: Exploring Neighbourhoods in Beirut's Suburbs

INTRODUCTION

Public spaces could reflect resilience in crises by supporting everyday life. The COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns revealed how some residential streets compensated for limited social interaction through reconnections across balconies, rooftops or the reorganisation of the street itself. However, residential streets with car-dominant mobility, under-supplied infrastructure and deteriorated environments, face further challenges. In the case of Greater Beirut, Lebanon, the compounded crises and the absence of residential neighbourhood planning have adversely affected street liveability and consequently social interaction. Liveability is defined by the spatio-temporal relation between the street itself, and its interface – defined by adjacent lots and buildings, objects and greenery. In this research we ask: what is the impact of informal interventions on street liveability along vehicular residential streets with mixed ground-floor uses in the Greater Beirut area? Next, we explore street liveability, interface and activities, especially in crisis

situations, where we focus on the context of Beirut. We then present the methodology for analysing the residential street liveability, our findings, then the conclusion.

REVISITING THE LIVEABILITY OF RESIDENTIAL STREET

We start by defining weak planning, which is characterised by crisis situations, where the state's power to plan is often limited to meeting basic needs, as opposed to stability, when authorities assume their role to strategically plan and provide residents' everyday needs.¹ When strategies are absent, needs are met by new actors who resort to tactics, which could have a narrower scope, shorter term and more limited impact. These tactics vary according to contextual specificities. One case is that of marginalised residential neighbourhoods, characterised by a vulnerable population living in environmentally poor conditions, with little investment, limited access to amenities and contested

public spaces, leading to low neighbourhood vitality.² In this context, residents' tactics of blurring public-private boundaries to enable diverse street activities and meet collective needs could impact street liveability.

The discussion on liveable streets is not a recent one.³ Within urban design, streets as public spaces enable encounter and the tolerance of differences, which shape urban life.⁴ Donald Appleyard⁵ characterised the liveable street as one catering for differences. Yet, liveability is not deeply investigated in contexts of weak planning and marginal neighbourhoods. A relational perspective enables a dynamic exploration of streets, based on what they offer to people spatio-temporally, what interactions they facilitate among people and objects, and also how people reconfigure streets.⁶ Diversity in contexts of weak planning could be contested due to some users' dominance over the street and the proliferation of private over public activities. In his guidelines, Appleyard referred to the adverse role of traffic on walkability and the environment, the importance of street furniture and sidewalks, street maintenance and safety, but also spaces between buildings to support social activities, and a sense of place. We unpack these guidelines to focus on liveability within marginal neighbourhoods and examine the contestation of pedestrians by cars, limited management of the public domain, street configuration and interface, and the activities enabled by the intersection of the public and private domains.

Street configuration and management

Liveability is specifically studied within residential collector streets characterised by medium-high vehicular traffic, with mixed ground floor uses.⁷ They often connect the neighbourhood to a primary commercial street, or even a highway.⁸ Traffic flow – related to the street cross-section, provision of sidewalks, cycling lanes, traffic direction, signage – affects both environmental and social aspects. Under weak planning and absent urban design, sidewalks with crowded utilities, scarce greenery, lighting, drainage and street furniture, adversely affect walkability. Issues of safety and health arise, stemming from car speeding or parking on sidewalks, noise and air pollution, resulting in "ecologically unsustainable, antisocial, unhealthy, and aesthetically dull" streets.⁹ This could be mitigated through street design and management.¹⁰ Alternatively, tactics by residents along the street interface could compensate for this state. For example, cafés and shops could extend onto sidewalks.¹¹

Street interface

The street interface reflects contextual practices, focusing directly on the inhabitants' activities over time, as affected by the combination of the street, sidewalks, setbacks, the building interior and exterior.¹² In fact, Nolli's plan of Rome¹³ represented these collective spaces that extend street activities to indoor spaces, setbacks, and vacant lots, blurring the boundary between public and private.¹⁴ The role of such spaces for residents' wellbeing has been emphasised in the literature.¹⁵ While on the street level,

the ground floor comes in direct contact with pedestrians, the upper floors could also impact what happens on the street through the presence of windows or balconies that facilitate visual or even verbal interaction. Understanding the street interface requires analysing both, lot boundaries and building envelope with its characteristics both horizontally and vertically, the different degrees of interaction, accessibility or ability to enter a space, and permeability – defined by the building setback, frontage, openings, and whether there are any interstitial spaces at setbacks lending themselves to social activities.¹⁶ Under weak planning, buildings not abiding by regulations affect the street interface, and consequently interactions along the street.

Street activities

Diverse street activities and users reflect the extent of the street's liveability. Carmona et al. indicate how based on space management, ownership, control, and location, urban spaces display an array of public to private qualities, conducive to different activities.¹⁷ Examples include transportation hubs, waterfronts or third places. Gehl also related public space activities to design and management, and classified them as necessary, optional or social.¹⁸ Necessary activities include shopping, or walking to a destination, even if the streets were not designed for pedestrians. Optional activities include those that individuals decide to perform in public, for example sitting outside, and are related to the space's conditions. Social activities occur when diverse people interact spontaneously in spaces encouraging a variety of activities. This could include: walk, sit, play, congregate, have a chat, or be in contact with nature. So long they remain publicly accessible, social activities are not limited to outdoor public spaces, but could equally occur on balconies, private open spaces, workplaces or shops. In the case of weak planning, activities are mostly limited to the necessary, depriving residents from practising the optional and social ones within their neighbourhoods.

RESIDENTIAL STREETS IN GREATER BEIRUT

Lebanon is an automobile-dependent country with about 80% of trips done by car, and 20% by shared transport.¹⁹ The capital Beirut has developed into the metropolitan area of Greater Beirut. It comprises suburbs and nearby urban areas within several municipalities and is characterised by residential neighbourhoods with mainly commercial activities and services. In addition, urban sprawl has converted highways into commercial strips, while collector residential streets struggle with vehicular dominance. With a free-market economy, Lebanon's urban planning system prioritised vehicular movement to facilitate the private sector's trade, while less attention was given to liveable public spaces and streets, thus affecting walkability.²⁰ This is also evident in the housing sector, which is mainly developed by real estate companies, which maximise exploitation in the absence of residential neighbourhood design guidelines. The result is unaffordable housing within



- i.Study Area 1 - St. John Street
- ii.Study Area 2 - Al Khandaq Street
- iii.Lebanese Army Cazern in Sarba

Greater Beirut with limited regulation of the construction quality or street integration.²¹

The protracted civil war from 1975 to 1989 resulted in a state of weak planning, local authority's limited role with implications on the built environment, and abrupt demographic changes including several population displacements, and the densification of settlements in Greater Beirut since the mid-1980s. Consequently, higher residential buildings emerged side-by-side in areas next to lower ones, with staggered building frontages and poor street alignment, while interfacing with streets designed for low-rise buildings. This densification strained available infrastructure, shrunk public spaces, and limited car parking spaces, which resulted in on-street or on-sidewalk parking, air and noise pollution. Residential mid-rise buildings generally compensate for open space scarcity through the provision of balconies, which are very often enclosed to enlarge the living space, and block pollution.

METHODOLOGY

Based on the reviewed literature and to analyse street liveability, we conducted five site visits on weekends and six on weekdays during March and April 2022, during which we observed and mapped street configuration and management, and the street interface. To understand street activities, particularly any changes during the economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, we conducted informal interviews with shopkeepers and randomly selected residents along each of the two streets. **Fig. 1** summarises the analysed dimensions, with corresponding criteria and methods.

Case study selection

Located about 15 kilometres north of Beirut, the study area is in two municipalities Sarba, and Zouk Mikael, which are in proximity to the Sarba military cazern. In terms of urban planning regulations, in both municipalities the floor-to-area ratio is 50%, total built-up area is 2.00 and 1.65 in Sarba and Zouk Mikael respectively, and setbacks are 3 meters from the sides and 3-4 meters from the back of a lot in Zouk and Sarba respectively. **Fig. 2** This attracted soldiers serving in the cazern, to relocate with their families along the collector residential streets in the area. Two residential collector streets, indirectly linked to the highway, were chosen in each of the municipalities. With its strategic location, St. John Street (alias Moscow) in Sarba was attractive not only to displaced Lebanese due to internal migration, but also migrant workers of different nationalities, mainly Ethiopian, and Syrian refugees. Its buildings vary from one-storey to eight storeys. Al-Khandaq Street in Zouk Mikael is populated by Lebanese residents, and some Syrian workers with their families residing in makeshift accommodation annexed to shops or within vacant buildings. Its buildings range from two to eight storeys.

Findings

In analysing the two streets, we follow the criteria outlined in **Fig. 1** to identify aspects of the street configuration,

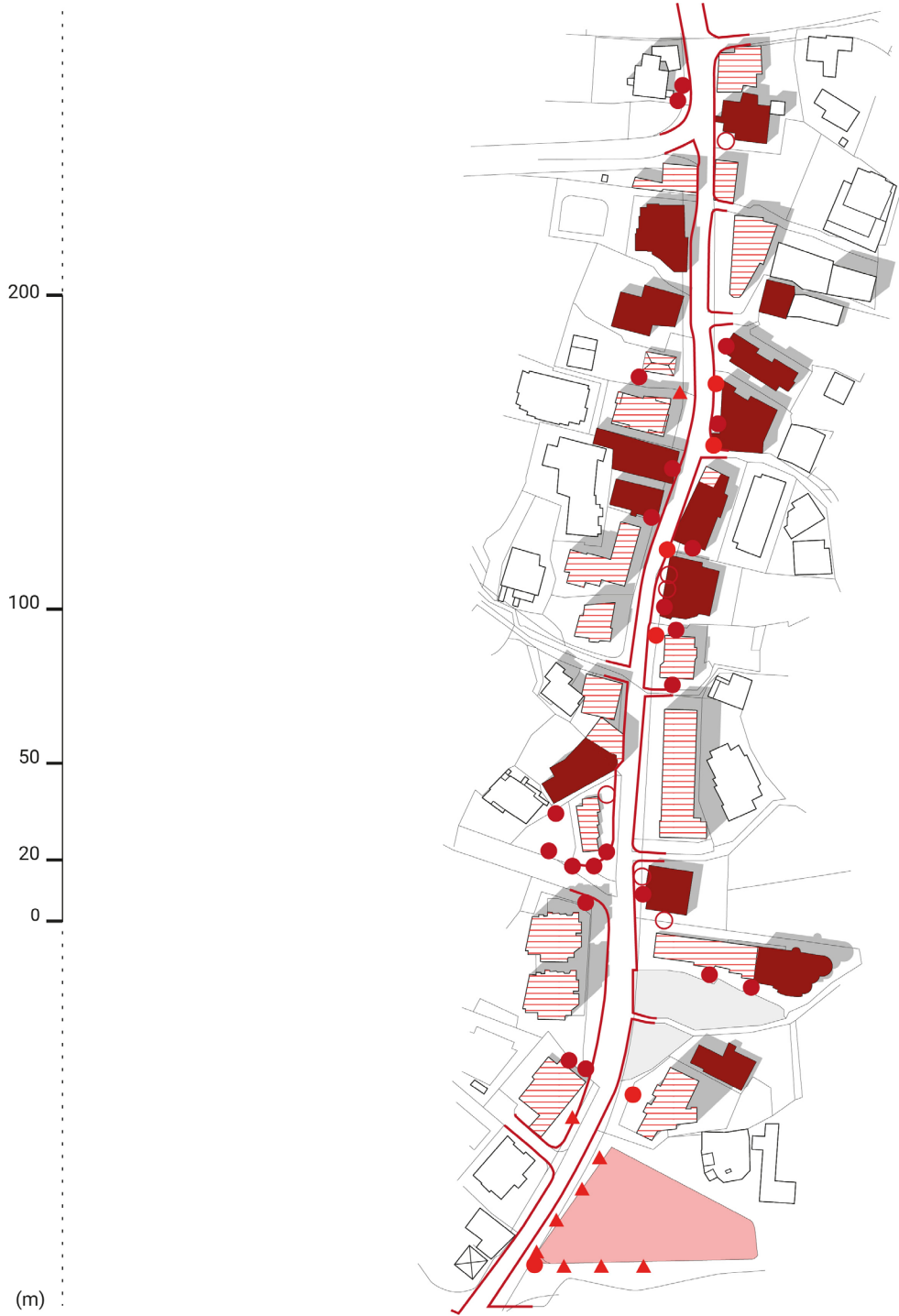
interface and practised activities.

We explain the emergence of spatial tactics in the context of weak planning later in the discussion.

St. John Street

Starting with street configuration, St. John Street has a width ranging between 4.8 and 9.5 metres, with a mild slope of 4.8% **Fig. 3**. It has one-directional vehicular traffic, with frequent intersections, no traffic lights, signage or provision of bicycle lanes. The sidewalks are disrupted by the infringement of cars parking, or the infringement of private activities. Residents, especially those living on the ground floor, indicated their discomfort from cars' noise and air pollution. The street has few streetlights, no urban furniture, two old trees adjacent to streetlights where sometimes residents gather, and few others in the vicinity of the municipal mini-football ground. There are electric wires stretching along utility poles, and one exposed medium-voltage transformer jeopardising pedestrians' safety. At the street level, there are commercial and service activities such as notary, public and local authority offices, grocery, mini-market, pastry shops, snacks, clothes and accessories, beauty parlour, electronics, pharmacies, studios, photocopy centres, taxi service, and one furniture carpentry. The St. John sportsground was initially intended for the residents' children and youth. However, the municipality could not afford its maintenance, and started charging fees, which residents could not afford, leading to the facility's closure. Within this setting, we observed social activities specifically around ground floor balconies, trees and some shops.

Horizontally, the street interface has a width ranging 6.5-18 metres, a variation resulting from sidewalks, infringement on setbacks, and ununiform building alignment. One vacant lot is used as parking by the locals, in addition to cars transgressing sidewalks. Permanent and temporary structures encroach upon street setbacks, with some ground floor shops expanding onto the street, or even balconies appropriating part of the sidewalk for private uses, delineated by plants or objects. In some cases, ground floor balconies merge with the horizontal street interface. Most building entrances are on the street. Vertically, balconies provide street covers. Balconies are either enclosed, extending the interior, or open and serving as spaces for socialising with an externalisation of activities onto the street. This interface has defined social activities at interventions related to balconies and setbacks, defining semi-public spaces. This public-private domain blurring of the interface serves for some public activities as evident from the fieldwork. In the absence of playgrounds, side setbacks are transformed into play areas. Some parts include plants in pots or in ground floor flower beds, enhancing the environment. **Fig. 4** Also, setbacks and open-air staircases and landings were being used for gatherings by some of the street residents, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. **Fig. 5** The grocery shop serves as a gathering place mainly for residents but also visitors to the area, while the steps and balcony edges along the street serve as a semi-public meeting point. **Fig. 6**



- | Street Configurations | Street Interface |
|--|--|
| Residential on GF | 1 to 2 Floors |
| Commercial on GF | 3 to 5 Floors |
| Parking on GF | 6 to 9 Floors |
| Vacant Plot | Building entrance |
| Vegetation on private properties | Pedestrian Sidewalk |
| Existing old trees | Enclosed Balconies on Building Frontage |
| Trees Planted by Local Authority | Site Photo |
| Garbage Bins | |
| Lighting Pole | |



- | Street Configurations | Street Interface |
|--|--|
| Residential on GF | 1 to 2 Floors |
| Commercial on GF | 3 to 5 Floors |
| Sports Activities | 6 to 10 Floors |
| Vacant Plot | Building Entrance |
| Vegetation on Private Properties | Pedestrian Sidewalk |
| Existing Old Trees | Enclosed Balconies on Building Frontage |
| Trees Planted by Local Authority | |
| Garbage Bins | |
| Lighting Pole | |



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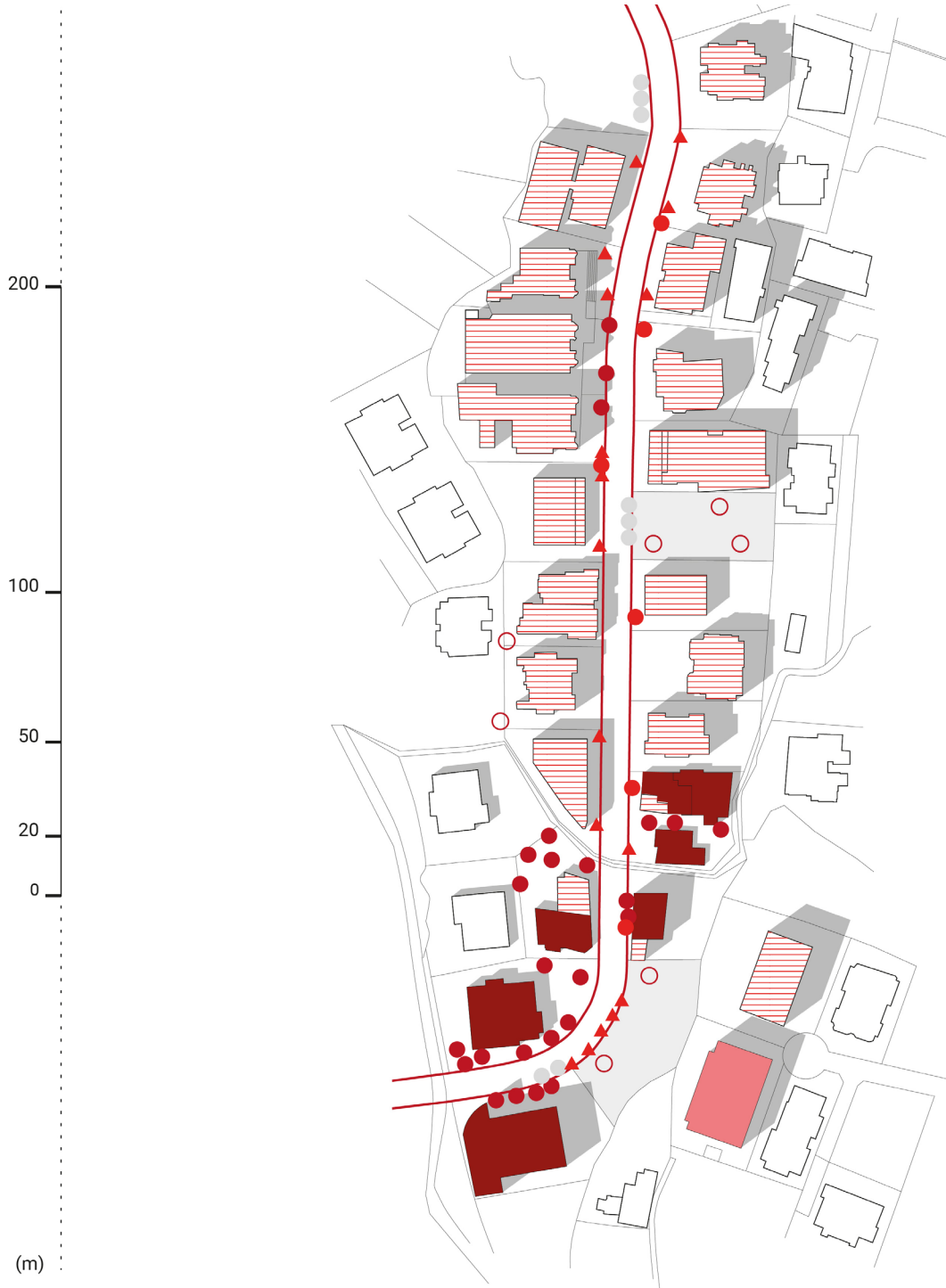
Al Khandaq Street

Regarding its configuration, Al Khandaq Street has a width ranging between 8 and 10 metres, with a slope of 5.1%. **Fig. 7** Traffic is two directional, with limited street intersections, no traffic lights, cycling lanes and only scarce signage. Its sidewalks are disrupted by parking spaces in setbacks serving commercial shops. Al-Khandaq has few streetlights, no urban furniture, except for garbage containers placed in front of two vacant lots. Few trees are planted by the municipality, yet residents felt that the priority of using a municipal budget should go to the provision of playgrounds, greenspaces and proper infrastructure. Electric wires stretch across utility poles along the street. At the street level, building uses include diverse commerce and services: grocery, mini-markets, pastry shops, snacks, clothes and accessories, electronics, beauty parlour, pharmacies, studios, photocopy centres, and light car-repair. Within this setting, we observed social activities specifically around shops.

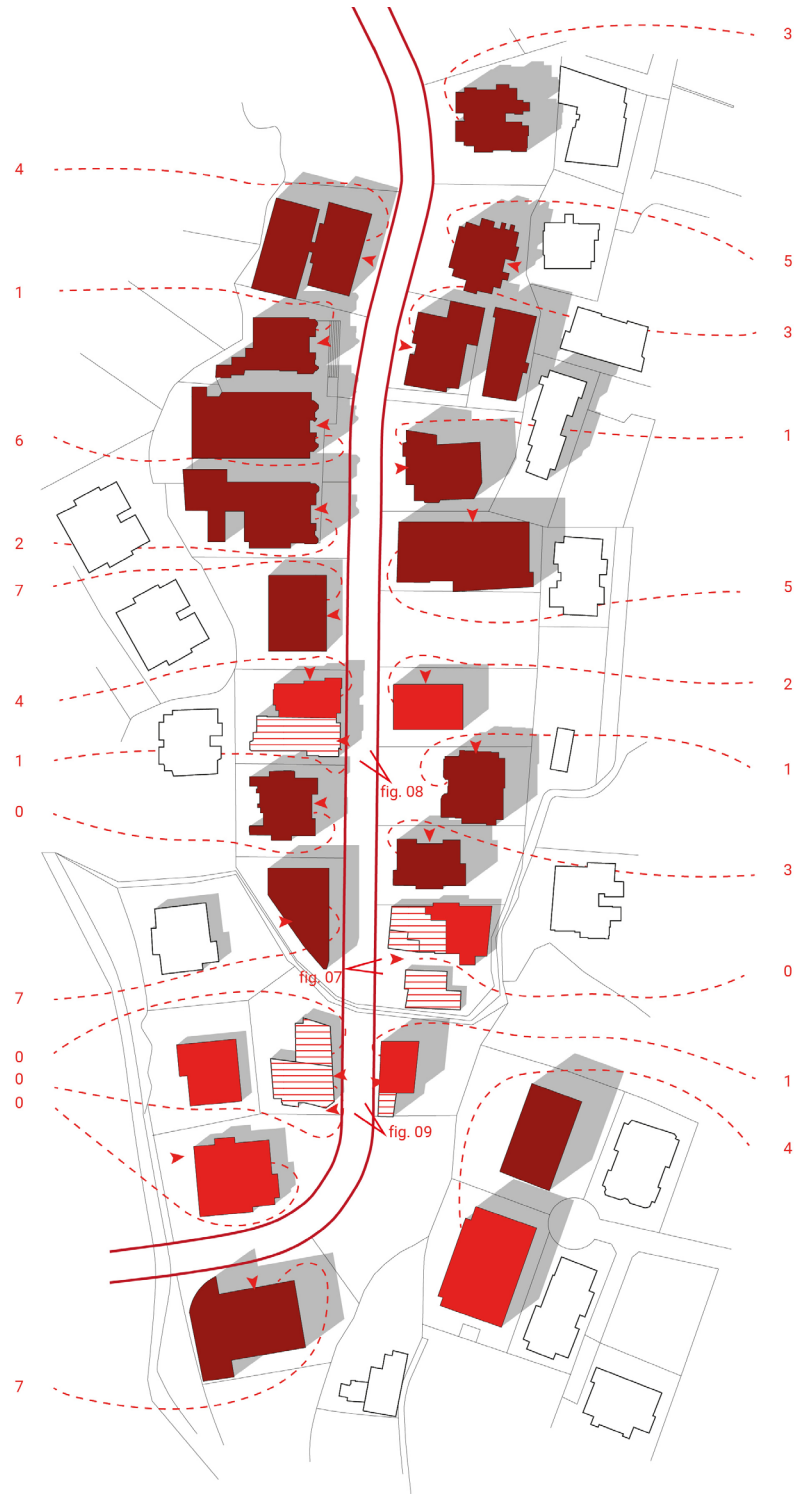
Horizontally, the street interface has a width ranging 11.5 and 38 metres. Similar to St. John's, it comprises one-sided sidewalk, setbacks, infringements, and ununiform building alignment. Having only one side with a sidewalk, means

more space for on-street parking. Street setbacks serve as parking spaces for shop customers, and after-hours for residents. Other parking spaces are available in vacant lots, ground floors with columns (pilotis) or basements for buildings constructed after the 1990's. There is generally poor integration between the street level and that of shops. This not only obstructs accessibility but also disrupts the continuity of adjacent uses along the street. In other cases, ground floor steps merge with the horizontal interface forming occasional seating areas in front of shops used by xxx. The majority of building entrances are along the street. Vertically, covers are provided by balconies. This interface has defined social activities/ interventions in setbacks or leftover spaces, defining semi-public areas.

Similar to St. John's, the public-private domain blurring serves for some activities. On ground floor level balconies and setbacks, there are some plants in pots or flowerbeds. **Fig. 8** The horizontal interface is used for seating and gathering, especially adjacent to shops. **Fig. 9** Some ground floor balconies extend forming patios for social activities mainly among residents. **Fig. 10** Also, one open staircase was converted to a semi-public meeting place during the COVID-19 pandemic.



- | Street Configurations | Street Interface |
|--|--|
| Residential on GF | 1 to 2 Floors |
| Commercial on GF | 3 to 5 Floors |
| Parking on GF | 6 to 9 Floors |
| Vacant Plot | Building entrance |
| Vegetation on private properties | Pedestrian Sidewalk |
| Existing old trees | Enclosed Balconies on Building Frontage |
| Trees Planted by Local Authority | Site Photo |
| Garbage Bins | |
| Lighting Pole | |



- | Street Configurations | Street Interface |
|---|---|
| Residential on GF | 1 to 2 Floors |
| Commercial on GF | 3 to 5 Floors |
| Sports Activities | 6 to 10 Floors |
| Vacant Plot | ▶ Building Entrance |
| Vegetation on Private Properties | Pedestrian Sidewalk |
| Existing Old Trees | Enclosed Balconies on Building Frontage |
| Trees Planted by Local Authority | |
| Garbage Bins | |
| Lighting Pole | |



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DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We revert to our question: what is the impact of informal interventions on street liveability along vehicular residential streets with mixed ground-floor uses in the Greater Beirut area? Within both municipalities, the state of weak planning manifested through car-dominance – even vacant lots are used for car parking rather than street activities – meagre provision of walkable environments, limited street maintenance and lax control of building regulations. This resulted in poor integration of buildings with the street level in some cases, and in other infringements on the public domain. The absence of strategic plans has enabled market forces, as well as residents yet without any coordination, to model their streets, and impact their liveability. The approaches were rather ad hoc and piecemeal, relating to basic interventions affecting walkability, permeability, greenery enhancing the environment and contributing to place identity, the provision of leisure and service spaces. These interventions affected street configuration, interface and activities.

There are similarities and differences between the two streets' configurations and interfaces affecting liveability: blurred boundaries between ground floor public and private properties often result in gathering spaces; makeshift seating along the street; makeshift play areas. Along Al-

Khandaq, about 40% of the shops rented by outsiders recently closed, limiting interaction with passers-by. The neglect of landscaping along the two streets has been partially compensated by residents' tactics. While some ground level balconies transformed to patios, open upper-level ones especially on first floors, serve as eyes-on-the-streets in both streets. This controls who participates in optional or social activities at street level at locations capable of accommodating them. Also, there seems to be some porosity between in-and-out, public-and-private – such as building entrances – and merging of interstitial spaces with the streets, all serving optional and social activities mainly for the residents.

Regarding activities, in St. John, a sense of place is established through the given street name among locals, the religious shrine, the eyes-on-the-street phenomenon, and the grocer's shop, who is the street's gatekeeper, knowledgeable about residents' activities, preferences and concerns. In Al-Khandaq, it is rather the planted trees, and given name, which provide the street's sense of place. The extent of horizontal interfaces used for optional and social activities along St. John Street is higher than that along Al-Khandaq, with its poor drainage, building integration, the presence of gates and fences, and minimalist design of stairs to access ground floors. The lack of green and



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gathering spaces is evident and was continuously raised by the locals. Both aspects result from weak planning. This paper presented a framework for studying medium-high traffic residential collector streets in terms of their liveability, by examining street configuration and interface, and the level of activities, within a context of weak planning. Two streets were analysed within Greater Beirut. The analysis indicated that the state of weak planning has led to tactics by the locals that enable street activities beyond the necessary. These interventions reflect constraints and opportunities to meet collective needs and reveal the network of actors involved in determining street liveability. Moreover, the two cases indicate the impact of blurring public-private boundaries on creating opportunities to serve optional activities. With only two case studies, the findings are indicative, informing about the specificities of these streets, yet with the potential of testing this framework in other contexts. Also, the informal interviews are not representative of all residents and their changing needs. These limitations could be addressed by conducting further interviews with households, the municipality, shopkeepers, and further observations over a continuous period and along several streets in Beirut's suburbs.

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Map of Al-Khandaq Street (Graphic re-edition by Beatriz Freitas Gordinho, based on material provided by the authors, 2023).

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Setback with plants (author's photograph, 2022).

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Seating area on the ground floor (author's photograph, 2022).

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Ground floor balconies and extensions (author's photograph, 2022).



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Rileggere e rivalutare le strade residenziali: esplorare i quartieri della periferia di Beirut

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PAROLE CHIAVE

crisi; Grande Beirut; marginale; strada residenziale; pratiche sociali

ABSTRACT

Le strade sono spazi pubblici duraturi, che incarnano la cultura e l'identità di una città. Mentre le strade più vive sono spesso situate nelle aree urbane centrali, questa loro vivace qualità potrebbe svanire nei quartieri residenziali emarginati. Inoltre, le crisi possono avere un impatto sulle attività economiche e sulla vita quotidiana dei residenti. Il concetto di vivibilità serve a studiare le strade in una prospettiva relazionale, analizzando il rapporto tra loro morfologia, funzioni e diverse attività sociali. Il presente saggio si propone di indagare le strade residenziali dei quartieri marginali e il loro ruolo nel fornire spazi pubblici favorevoli alle pratiche sociali, soprattutto in situazioni di crisi, prendendo il caso del Libano. La ricerca si basa su letteratura urbanistica, visite sul posto, osservazioni e interviste informali con i residenti, per mappare l'interfaccia stradale e le corrispondenti attività. L'area di studio è stata selezionata in un quartiere a nord della capitale Beirut, nell'area amministrativa di Sarba, caratterizzata da una popolazione di origine mista e dall'accessibilità ad altre città attraverso l'autostrada. I risultati di questa ricerca suggeriscono che esiste una relazione tra l'interfaccia stradale che si estende dal piano terra fino al tetto dell'edificio residenziale e l'opportunità di mettere in scena attività sociali al di là di questa interfaccia, confondendo i confini tra pubblico e privato. Sono necessari ulteriori studi su altre strade per convalidare la metodologia applicata.

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Christine Mady è professore associato presso l'Università Aalto. In precedenza, è stata professore associato presso la Notre Dame University-Louaize. La ricerca di Christine esamina diverse nozioni di spazio pubblico in contesti di instabilità, il loro ruolo nella vita quotidiana e il loro potenziale di integrazione sociale.

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