Concept Paper

An Inquiry into Current Urban Change Processes in Ras Beirut: Is This Gentrification?

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INTRODUCTION

I was entrusted by the AUB Neighborhood Initiative with the task of producing this concept paper on the urban phenomenon of gentrification; to serve as a framework in guiding future research on Ras Beirut – the neighborhood (actually a large city district composed of different adjacent neighborhoods) in which AUB is located.

Rather than uncritically accepting that gentrification is threatening Ras Beirut social diversity and mixed used character, or that it is the dominant process of urban change currently taking place in Ras Beirut, I opted to frame the inquiry into the topic in the form of a question: Is this gentrification? The motive behind this question is twofold: First, to initiate a discussion around the concept of gentrification, its meaning, connotations, and contemporary usage and interpretations beyond the conventional Anglo-American-centered definition of the term; and second, to draw attention to the presence of other parallel processes of urban change, not necessarily identified with gentrification, in the area.

Indeed, while no one can doubt that Ras Beirut, like some other peri-central districts in Beirut, is currently undergoing a rapid and conspicuous process of urban change, conceptualizing the nature of this change might not necessarily pass as an uncontested matter. Urban change is a continuous process. Cities and their built fabric, economic base, topographical features and landscape elements change with time; so do their people and people’s lifestyles. New neighborhoods and centers of activities emerge, others fade away, and some others re-emerge after long periods of decline and neglect.

The reinvestment of capital in declining urban areas and abandoned, or semi-abandoned, buildings is not always radical or socially dramatic. Urban transformations and physical improvements can take place incrementally without significantly disrupting the social composition and land use mix of upgraded areas. Gentrification, as often presented in contemporary academic discourses, happens when physical upgrading results in a rather en masse displacement of longtime residents and businesses – mainly due to rapidly skyrocketing land and rental prices – and their replacement with higher-income and more privileged groups and trendier businesses and activities that cater for the demands and needs of the newcomers.

The above understanding of gentrification is not intended as a confining definition. Gentrification is a politically loaded term whose meaning and definition have long been debated. It is however generally agreed today that gentrification is a multi-faceted phenomenon that takes different shapes in different temporal and geographic settings. Contemporary scholarship links it to four interrelated processes: 1) reinvestment of capital, 2) social upgrading of locale by high-income groups, 3) landscape change, and 4) direct or indirect displacement of low-income and less well-off residents and businesses from physically upgraded neighborhoods (Lees, Slater and Wyly 2010, xv).

How can we explain Ras Beirut’s current physical, social, economic transformations?
Can we look at emerging spatial, socio-economic and demographic changes primarily through a gentrification lens? Is gentrification the most pervasive process of urban change? Are on-going urban transformations socially homogenizing? Is the area losing its spatial, social and economic diversity?

Ras Beirut’s recent urban changes definitely deserve attention. A gentrification perspective might not be enough to account for the area’s diverse processes of urban change, which range from physical upgrading, land use change, adaptive re-use, renovation, displacement, demolishing, rebuilding, and densification. Therefore, it is crucial to have conceptual clarity before embarking on a research project on the gentrification of the area and before formulating conclusions.

The paper is structured into two parts. The first part responds to some basic questions related to the phenomenon of gentrification: How did it originate? What does it mean? Is it a good or a bad process? What are its causes and effects? Can it be controlled? This overview should not however be read as a comprehensive literature review on the topic. Further research is needed to clarify, verify and develop it.

The second part reflects on current processes of urban change taking place in Ras Beirut and presents a research framework aimed at: 1) guiding the work of AUB Neighborhood Initiative on the topic, and 2) stimulating the interest of concerned AUB faculty and students in an interdisciplinary analysis and scholarly debates on processes of neighborhood change in Beirut in general and Ras Beirut in particular.

**GENTRIFICATION**

**Origin, Meaning and Phenomenal Variations**

The term “gentrification”, part of English lexicon since the 1980s, is a coined word combining the noun “gentry” (the state of being a gentleman) and the suffix “-ification” (the making or production of). Despite an earlier appearance of the word, the commonplace conceptual meaning of “gentrification” emerged in British urban sociological studies in 1964 after sociologist Ruth Glass deliberately used it to describe what she viewed to be a new and distinct process of urban and social change taking place in many neighborhoods of inner London.

Based on Glass’ account, gentrification is a rapid process that involves the invasion of working-class quarters by lower and upper middle classes who take over the quarters’ dilapidated mews and cottages from their original occupiers, following the expiration of their leases, and turn them into nice and expensive residences; causing by this the displacement of the working-class and the change of the overall social character of the area (Glass 1964). As Glass further observed, gentrification in central London was instigated by the de-nationalization of development rights, liberating real estate speculation and relaxing rent control; which, combined, led to the inflation of property prices even in what used to be the most “dingy or unfashionable” city districts. The result, she feared, is that “London may soon be a city which illustrates
the principle of the survival of [...] the financially fittest” and a city “faced with an embarrass de richesse in her central area” (Glass 1964, quoted in Slater 2009, 4).

While Glass has been broadly credited for the coinage of the term, the novelty of the processes that she associated with it has been disputed. Some scholars argue that gentrification was taking place long before Glass described it – for example Eric Clark (2005) presents the Haussmannization of Central Paris as a form of gentrification. Others scholars believe that early examples are merely historical precursors of gentrification but “gentrification proper can be traced to the postwar cities of advanced capitalist world” (Smith 1996), noting that its “systematic occurrences were in the 1950s in large metropolitan cities like Boston; Washington, D.C.; London; and New York City” (Lees, Slater and Wyly 2008, 5).

Scholarship on gentrification has evolved significantly since Glass conceptualized the term. Many scholars agree today that early interpretations and definitions derived from Glass’s description are those of “classical gentrification”, and represent only one of gentrification many facets. Rose (1984) and Beauregard (1986) were the first scholars to emphasize “the diversity of gentrification” and reject its “chaotic” confining interpretations. Following from their work, many scholars agree today that generalized interpretations that associate gentrification with disinvested industrial zones and working-class historic neighborhoods taken over by the sweat equity and the private capital of pioneer gentrifiers, mostly yuppies, are inaccurate and chaotic. More specifically, as Clark clarifies, what is chaotic about gentrification is its conceptualization into narrow focused categories that associate it to inner cities, residential areas and rehabilitation of existing buildings, when it is a diverse process, neither specific to inner cities nor to residential areas (Clark 2005, 26).

As literature on the topic shows, the conception of gentrification evolved over time from a neighborhood process linked to the inner residential quarters of Anglo-American cities to a much broader and “highly dynamic process... not amenable to overly restrictive definitions” (Smith 1986, 3). In “advanced capitalist societies”, Smith and Williams argue, residential gentrification “is only one facet (if a highly publicized and highly visible one) of a more profound economic, social, and spatial restructuring” that involves major urban landscape changes. This is manifested in “the redevelopment of urban waterfronts for recreational and other functions, the decline of remaining inner-city manufacturing facilities, the rise of hotel and convention complexes and central-city office developments, as well as the emergence of modern “trendy” retail and restaurant districts” (Smith and Williams 1986, 10).

Lees, Slater and Wyly underscore, that the phenomenon, now global, involves multiple processes that materialize and interlink in different ways in different geographic settings and places. Consequently, they present a set of terms that different researchers introduced to describe emerging urban phenomena associated with gentrification (Lees, Slater and Wyly 2008, 129-131):

1) “Rural gentrification” and “greentrification”, which refer to the “socioeconomic and cultural transformations of the rural landscape, and the subsequent displacement and marginalization of low-income groups”.

2) “New-build gentrification”, which refers to newly constructed building forms rather than the rehabilitated ‘old’ building identified with classical gentrification.

3) “Super-gentrification” or “financification”, which refers to a new layer of gentrification “superimposed on an already gentrified neighborhood, one that involves a higher financial or economic investment in the neighborhood than previous waves of gentrification and requires a qualitatively different level of economic resource”.

4) “Studentification”, which, according to Darren Smith (2002; 2004) who was the first to name it, “refers to the process of social, environmental, and economic change effected by large numbers of students invading particular areas of the cities and towns in which popular universities are located”.

5) “Commercial gentrification”, “boutiqueification”, “retail gentrification”, or “shopsteading’ (as opposed to “homesteading”), which “refers to the gentrification of commercial premises or commercial streets or areas”.

6) “Tourism gentrification”, which refers to “the transformation of a neighborhood into a relatively affluent and exclusive enclave in which corporate entertainment and tourism venues have proliferated”; encouraging by this by this the gentrification of area residents.

7) “Coastal gentrification”, which is a form of tourism gentrification particularly associated with “culturally distinct sections of coastal cities” threatened by the growth of tourism activities.

Connotations, Justifications and Repercussions

Not all scholars however agree that the above-mentioned processes are forms of gentrification, being clearly at odds with the classic explanations that link the concept to an existing housing stock rather than to new buildings and tourism and other activities. Discontent with such broad deviations, some scholars argue that alternate words, not gentrification and its derivatives, should be used to describe these emerging phenomena.

In contrast, there are researchers who insist on the label “gentrification” since losing the term would also mean losing its “politics and political purchase” (Lees, Slater and Wyly 2008, xxi). As Tom Slater explains, “the principles of social justice animated Glass’ concerns about gentrification”. If anything, her concept of gentrification was a political cry against class-based displacement, the commodification of housing, and turning city-centers into exclusives zones for the rich (Slater 2009). Hence, by insisting on using the label “gentrification”, scholars such as Slater, among others, are actually holding onto the political and class dimensions of the term.
The negative class connotations of the term “gentrification” have certainly amplified the debate over its political appropriateness. Initially, both in the US and the UK, the state refused to use it (Lees, Slater and Wyly 2008) and many US scholars preferred to use more positive labels to explain the urban and demographic changes taking place in American cities e.g. “back to the city movement”, “neighborhood revitalization” and “brownstoning” (Williams 1986, referred to in Lees, Slater and Wyly 2008, 6). While each of these terms has its own particular history, their usage to refer to the process of gentrification was not politically neutral.

Today as well, several positivist terms – such as urban “revitalization”, “renewal”, and “redevelopment” – are often used in reference to the process of gentrification. Again, these are not politically neutral terms. Those who use them as alternate terms are clearly taking a particular position regarding gentrification (Smith 1982, referred to in Lees, Slater and Wyly 2008, xxi).

Even the very term “gentrification”, has been manipulated by gentrification advocates and turned into a positive process. For example, public policy in the USA has explicitly applauded gentrification as a positive phenomenon that has positive consequences for declining neighborhoods abandoned by their original users (Marcuse 1985). Prominent architects and urbanists such as Richard Florida and Andres Duany have also discussed gentrification as a good process.

For instance, in his article “Three cheers for gentrification” Andres Duany (2001) argues that the gentrification of poor decayed neighborhoods usually benefits existing owners who rarely complain about the process knowing that there is much for them to win. “They receive better prices for their homes if they sell. If they remain, there is a general improvement in the quality of life as a result of improved consumer services, higher tax bases, and the beneficial effects of middle-class vigilance over municipal services.” As he further adds, it is only “local community leaders and poverty advocates” who condemn the gentrification process, as they “fear their constituency is being diluted”.

While arguments such as the above may be true, they are, according to gentrification opponents, also deceiving and manipulative. As Beauregard (1986) notes, positivist descriptions of the gentrifiers and the positive changes they bring about in the built environment “fail to explain the dynamics that bring about these changes” and “erroneously presents gentrification as beneficial for the city as a whole”(Beauregard 1986, 12). Gentrification “boosters”, he contends, including “redevelopment bodies, local newspapers, ‘city’ magazines, mayors’ offices, real estate organizations, financial institutions, historic preservationists and neighborhood organizations comprised of middle-class home owners” have their own agendas and self-motivated interests. “Their [simplified, ahistorical and aspatial] descriptions, analyses and advertising both present and misrepresent the phenomenon as it exists, and convey an ideology meant to foster continued gentrification” (Beauregard 1986, 11).

Indeed, there is no doubt that gentrification results in physical upgrading of the built environment, improved building maintenance, better security, and probably a more...
diverse mix of activities. The physical changes associated with gentrification are, however, “not the essence of the process”. Gentrification hinges on more profound “economic, social, and population changes that cause the physical change” (Marcuse 1985, 199).

Although very difficult to measure and quantify, the issue of displacement is central to gentrification research. Following George and Eunice Grier (1978), Marcuse defines displacement as the involuntary or forced relocation of households from their place of residence due to external factors occurring outside the household. He however supplements this understanding of displacement by introducing the concept of “exclusionary displacement” which he differentiates from processes of “direct displacement” implicit to the Griers' definition.

As he further explains, direct displacement can either be physical, such as when the landlord cuts off heat to force the occupants to move out; or economic when, for example, “the landlord raises the rent beyond the occupants' ability to pay, and forces them to move” (Marcuse 1985, 205). Indirect displacement, on the other hand, happens “[w]hen one household vacates a housing unit voluntarily and that unit is then gentrified or abandoned so that another similar household is prevented from moving in, the number of units available to the second household in that housing market is reduced. The second household, therefore, is excluded from living where it would otherwise have lived” (Marcuse 1985, 206).

The difference in socio-economic status between the old and new population and the identity of excluded groups, their (re) settlement choices, and mobility options emerge here as key questions. This links to arguments that view gentrification as part of a wider process of urban restructuring (Smith 1982, 1986, 1987, 1996). Theoretical arguments on the geography of gentrification and the social stratification of space also emerge here. Bruegmann (2006, quoted in Lees, Slater and Wyly 2010, xvii), for instance, argues that “[g]entrification at the center and sprawl at the edge have been flip sides of the same coin” while Sharon Zukin proposes that “gentrification may be described as a process of social differentiation" (Zukin 1987, 221).

Brain Berry’s (1985) argument on the theme of “Islands of renewal in seas of decay” is also pertinent here, so is Wendell Berry’s discussion on the fragmentation and destruction of traditional communities as a result of the arrival of new comers (Berry W. 1977, referred to by Clark 2005). Equally relevant is Clark’s question: “why does gentrification lead to violent conflict in some places and not in others?” (Clark 2005). Clearly, there are no single answers as the repercussions of gentrification are certainly context-specific and need to be explored in relation to the particular locale we wish to study.

Causes

Different scholars have advanced different theoretical explanations of the causes and root causes of gentrification. Their explanations are often presented under two broad
categories: (1) production-side arguments, mostly Marxist and left-Weberian readings that view gentrification as an economic process, and (2) consumption-side arguments, mostly humanist and postmodernist readings that view gentrification as a socio-cultural process. Increasingly however scholars (e.g. Rose 1984; Beauregard 1986; Clark 2005; Lees, Slater and Wyly 2008) argue that these two approaches have been polarized against one another, while in reality they are complementary and cannot be seen without each other.

Consumption side explanations were dominant until the late 1970s-early 1980s when production side arguments started to emerge as parallel explanations. According to the former perspective, the gentrification process is driven by social and cultural factors pertaining to an emerging new middle class. Hence, much of the early sociological research on gentrification focused on empirical questions pertaining to this gentrifying middle class and the neighborhoods where gentrification is taking place, e.g: Who are the gentrifiers? What is their occupation? Where did they come from? Where is gentrification happening? The gentrified working-class has yet been largely missing from early scholarship on the topic, something that received a lot of criticism (Smith and Williams 1986; Zukin 1987). David Ley is considered to be one of most influential scholars who discussed gentrification from a consumption side perspective.

On the contrary, production side explanations are concerned with the gentrified working class and in understanding gentrification in relation “to the broader spheres of housing and urban land market” (Smith and Williams 1986, 9-10). Neil Smith’s rent gap theory is the most influential production-side explanation of the process. The basic theme of Smith’s thesis centers on the uneven development of regional and metropolitan land markets in advanced capitalist societies. Driven by capitalists’ interests, Smith argues, investment in the built environment in certain city areas is paralleled by disinvestment in other areas. This uneven process of development brings the capitalized ground rent (actual land value) in disinvested areas significantly below their potential ground rent (potential market value). It is the “gap” between the potential and actual land value that makes certain areas and land uses profitable for capital accumulation. This “gap’ drives the gentrification process, which “operates primarily to counteract the falling rate of profit” (Smith 1982, 151).

More specifically, Smith presents gentrification as “only a small part of a restructuring of urban space which is, in turn, part of the wider economic restructuring necessitated by the economic crisis” (Smith 1982, 139). As he maintains, the “valorization and devalorization” cycle in land markets is related to the “broader rhythm and periodicity of the national and international economy” (Smith 1982, 149). From this conceptual perspective, he questions the role of the state and neo liberal economic policies in instigating gentrification. Smith with Williams highlights the “shifts in state intervention and political ideology aimed at the privatization of consumption and service provision” (Smith and Williams 1986, 10). If the gentrifiers and their practices were missing from Smith’s rent gap thesis, something he was high criticized of (e.g. Ley 1987), it is because he intentionally decided to focus on wider political economy issues (Lees, Slater and Wyly 2010, 129).
In the 1980s-1990s many sociologist and postmodernist scholars started to move out of the production versus consumption dichotomy. They argued that changes in the industrial and occupational structure, consequently, in the consumption patterns of advanced capitalist societies, have led to the birth of a gentrifying “new middle class”. The tremendous growth of scholarship examining the characteristics of this new middle class was primarily intended to correct neoclassical explanations that assumed, following the theories of Chicago School of Sociology (Lees, Slater and Wyly 2008, 45), that “gentrification is a natural outcome of shifts in the trade-offs between accessibility and space that make central city locations more attractive for wealthier households” (Slater 2011, 576). At the same time, the growing volume of research on the gentrifying middle class challenged “Marxist political-economic explanations that were seen to focus narrowly on cycles of investment and fluctuations of urban land rent, to the neglect of human agency” (Slater 2011, 576).

According to Slater, “the underlying research question of all those analysts who are uneasy with both neoclassical and Marxist explanations of gentrification: why do gentrifiers seek to locate in areas that have been subjected to disinvestment and are affected by territorial stigmatization?” Or, in other words, “why gentrifiers invest their cultural, social, and economic capital in areas considered to be “risky” by investors and real-estate agents?” (Slater 2011, 576).

Specifically, the issue of “class” emerged as a main point of disagreement between gentrification scholars. A number of scholars challenged reductionist views that see the gentrifiers as “yuppies”, and underlined the diversity of the middle class and the different reasons that attract them to disinvested urban districts. For instance, Damaris Rose argued that “gentrifiers” are not the mere bearers of a process determined independently of them. Their constitution, as certain types of workers and as people, is as crucial an element in the production of gentrification as is the production of the dwellings they occupy” (Rose 1984, quoted by Slater 2011, 576).

Tim Butler and Garry Robson, on the other hand, emphasized the “divisions within the middle class” and argued that “different middle-class groups would be attracted to different areas and this would be determined by a range of [cultural and ‘lifestyle’] factors in addition to what they might be able to afford in particular housing market”. Their choices “have a clear spatial manifestation” (Butler and Robson 2001, 399).

Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu’s renowned book Distinction (1984), issues related to the practices and taste of the middle class also emerged as key research topics. Increasingly, issues of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, and not only class, are also being recognized and emphasized by gentrification researchers (Lees, Slater and Wyly 2010, xix).

On another level, the recognition that gentrification is now driven by global elites and international capital flows has introduced a new dimension to the notion of class in gentrification research. Scholars (e.g. Smith 2002; Atkinson and Bridge 2005; Butler and Lees 2006) have underlined the link between gentrification and globalization while discussing issues of “neo-liberal urban policy regimes, the hyper-mobility of
global capital and workers, the expansion and increased wealth of the cosmopolitan class”, among other issues (Butler and Lees 2006, after Smith 2002). Hence, gentrification literature is increasingly drawing on, and challenging, globalization literature in explaining the emergence of new social classes such as “super-gentrifiers” (Butler and Lees 2006) and the “vagrant sovereign” (Clark 2005).

Combating Strategies

Many scholars (e.g. Clark; Atkinson; Marcuse) believe that while it is not possible to eradicate gentrification in capitalist societies, it is possible to curtail it and defy its negative aspects. Issues such as minimizing displacement, enhancing city connectivity, and reducing disparities between different urban areas in terms of access to services and job opportunities are key to the discussion. The challenges and possible policy directions are numerous. These involve various levels of decision-making power (national, regional, city, neighborhood) and different courses of actions including legal action, urban planning regulatory action, political action, and community action.

Surely, there are good examples from around the world to learn from. This is however a broad research topic that falls outside the scope of this concept paper. Case studies that focus on socially motivated policy directions, how these were implemented in their particular contexts, and how adaptable they are to the specific context we wish to study need to be identified by way of informing future policy-oriented research.

A RESEARCH FRAMEWORK FOR RAS BEIRUT

Conceptualizing Gentrification and Urban Change in Ras Beirut

A primarily focus on the gentrification of Ras Beirut and the threat to its social diversity and mixed used character can be misleading. While much of the current processes of urban change taking place in the area can certainly be associated with contemporary conceptions of gentrification, these processes are not homogenous. Ras Beirut urban changes are complex, multi-layered and non-uniform. Arguably, gentrification’s derivative phenomena of studentification, new-build gentrification, super-gentrification, commercial gentrification and tourism gentrification coexist in the area. The plurality and diversity of these processes need to be recognized and explored.

Indeed, the so much feared homogenization of the area is taking place simultaneously with its heterogenization. As mentioned in the introductory section of this paper, Ras Beirut is not a single neighborhood. It is a large geographical zone identified, at the biggest scale, with the headland of Beirut, which includes the two

city districts of Ras Beirut and Ain el-Mreisseh. Again, these are large city districts made up of differentiated sub-districts or sectors (e.g. Hamra, Verdun, Raoché, etc.) with each sub-district comprising several adjacent neighborhoods, or spatial constructs, referred to by locals as our hay (singular) or ahyaa (plural). Whereas the boundaries of each district and sub-district (or sector) are administratively defined, the physical and legal boundaries of the different neighborhoods (ahyaa) are elastic and undefined.

Despite apparent similarities, Ras Beirut’s different areas and neighborhoods are transforming in different ways. Urban change is also sporadic. It is very slow in some locations and intense and rapid in other locations. For example, Hamra district, Beirut’s modern commercial hub prior to the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), is increasingly reinstating itself as a vibrant commercial and leisure center that caters for the needs of a diverse range of social, ethnic and income groups; in addition to being a “university town” of some sort where many students, professors, professionals and workers live and many others commute on a daily basis. Verdun district is turning into a high-end shopping mall destination while waterfront locations are experiencing a proliferation of luxurious residential buildings and entertainment and tourist attractions.

The geographies of uneven development, so obvious at city and national scales, can actually be discerned in Ras Beirut. While the whole area is deemed attractive for capital reinvestment, some sites and locales are clearly more valued than others. Obviously, real estate developers consider sites with sea and/or open views, including those overlooking AUB campus, appropriate for deluxe residential towers with fenced gardens and exclusive amenities primarily targeting Lebanon’s powerful elites, members of the Lebanese diaspora and foreign nationals. This however does not preclude the fact that many other sites, with less prominent views, are also being redeveloped as either “deluxe” or commercial quality residential towers, or, depending on their location, as new hotels, furnished apartments, office buildings and shopping malls.

At the same time, some existing buildings, mainly those close to AUB and the Lebanese American University (LAU) are being refurbished and turned into furnished apartments chiefly targeting Ras Beirut’s transient student population and young professionals. Other existing buildings are being refurbished by their own residents for their own use. The ground floor commercial spaces of many buildings, and their interiors and merchandise, are also being gradually upgraded to cater for a wide variety of income and social groups.

For example, the ground floor of many buildings in Hamra, given its proximity to the major educational institutions of the area, is being converted into trendy pubs and cafés, again largely targeting students and young professionals. The privileged highly educated youth are however not the only target group of Hamra’s commercial enterprises. The clientele of large shopping centers like Akil Bros, Eldorado, and

1 Ras Beirut is also the name of a sub-sector (also called Jal el Bahr) that falls within the district of Ain Mreisseh. The boundaries of Ras Beirut District and Ras Beirut Sector do not overlap.

Maxx, all of which opened in Hamra Street in recent years (in abandoned movie theatres converted into commercial space in the case of Eldorado and Maxx), are mostly low and middle-low income groups.

In contrast with this construction and physical upgrading boom many streets and buildings show signs of abandonment and neglect. By and large, the older building stock, constructed pre the 1990s, including buildings of 8 floors and more, stands in poor physical condition and suffers from poor amenities, including lack of parking space. Still standing low-rise historic buildings, on the other hand, have been mostly abandoned by their users expect for their commercial ground floors.

Such diverse and contradictory spatial transformations raise several pertinent questions related to broader processes of urban, social and economic restructuring acting on the city, and the legal and regulatory framework guiding, facilitating and/or preventing physical redevelopment: How can we interpret Ras Beirut’s urban transformations in light of emerging political, economic and social circumstances? How can we understand the area’s current urban redevelopment dynamics vis-à-vis larger, both local and global, processes of urban and economic restructuring? How do Ras Beirut urban changes relate to urban transformations taking place in the rest of the city and to the regional dynamics of housing and urban land markets? What regulatory processes are instigating the urban change process?

Likewise, Ras Beirut’s current urban changes raise many questions related to the specific urban changes taking place in Ras Beirut and its different neighborhoods: Where is change happening? To what extent AUB, and other educational institutions, are acting as catalysts for urban change? To what extent students’ and other users’ preferences, lifestyles and communication patterns are instigating change, specifically in the kind of retail and services provided in the area? What are the economic, demographic and spatial impacts of current and anticipated urban development processes? What is the extent of displacement? Who is being displaced, or gentrified, from the area? Who are the residents of Ras Beirut’s emerging new luxury towers? How do they relate to their surrounding city context?

In recognition that vulnerable groups will be prone to be either directly or indirectly displaced from Ras Beirut, and other central areas, due to skyrocketing property values and rental prices, questions related to gentrification combating strategies also emerge: How can the negative impacts of gentrification be curtailed or minimized? What economic and planning policy directions need to be put in place to ensure that Ras Beirut, and other peri-central areas vulnerable to gentrification, continue to be affordable and habitable by different income groups?

**Proposed Research Framework**

*Theme 1: The logic of property investing*

Much has been written in local magazines and newspapers about Lebanon’s real estate market relation to both regional and national political and economic

circumstances and the role of Arab investors and wealthy Lebanese expatriates in stimulating the construction activity, escalating property prices and encouraging speculative investment. Also much has been written about the incentives that render Lebanon a favorable location for capital investment, including the country’s strategic geopolitical position, attractive geography, liberal economic system, relative freedoms compared to other Arab countries, highly skilled labor force, secure and secretive banking sector, and legal framework and taxation.

These realities deserve some attention. Real estate investments and markets have a geographic logic. Not all locations are equally attractive to developers and investors, and not all locations are equally desirable or affordable by end-users. How can we explain the logic of property investing? Where is physical upgrading taking place in Beirut in general and Ras Beirut in particular? Which locations are targeted, or more likely to be more targeted, by developers? What spatial, social, financial and economic considerations govern their investment decisions?

In addition to reviewing existing studies and analyses on market trends in Beirut, the inquiry into this thematic area needs to engage in empirical fieldwork pertinent to the specific context of Ras Beirut. Using relevant visual material (photos, maps, and aerial views), the research needs to investigate and illustrate the types of new urban developments taking place in the area (including their land uses and amenities) and their location in the urban fabric (e.g. around AUB, waterfront, etc.).

In parallel, this thematic area needs to look at major and visible interventions in existing buildings, noting their locations, physical adaptations (e.g. building remodeling, façade maintenance, floor additions, land use transformations, ground character change), architectural merit, and clienteles. In addition, this mapping exercise needs to identify sites and locations amenable to change while looking at variables such as abandonment and decay, ripple effect of new development, geographic location, and underutilized sites.

Through focused interviews, this theme also needs to address questions related to agents of change, their interests, motives, and their different perceptions of the benefits and risks of emerging urban change and development patterns.

- Building developers: Who are the developers of Ras Beirut new buildings? What guides their investment decisions and choices? What are their criteria of selection? What partnerships or agreements have they formed to implement project (e.g. partnership between developer and original landowners)? For constructed buildings: What were the impediments facing the process (including time delays due to issues with existing site occupants)? What costs were incurred to solve problems?

- Target groups of Ras Beirut’s new buildings: Who is the clientele of Ras Beirut’s new buildings? Where did they come from? Why different people decided to live/buy in these new buildings? What guided their locational choice? How did they finance their investment?

- Investors in existing buildings: Who is investing in existing building renovation? Why investing in these particular buildings and locations?
- Public authorities: How does urban change in Ras Beirut relate to the Lebanese Government’s overall development vision for Beirut? How are public administrations facilitating the urban development process?

**Theme 2: The “rent gap” as a key driver of the built environment change**

There are two rent laws in Lebanon: an old law applicable on rental agreements signed before 23 July 1992, and a new law applicable on rental agreements signed after 23 July 1992. Neither of these laws is however adequate. Both have contributed to dramatic distortions in rental housing markets. With the intention of protecting tenants’ interests, properties leased out under the old law are guarded by a strict rent control that has neither accounted for the progressive devaluation of the Lebanese currency in the 1980s-1990s period nor prices inflation. As a result, rent-controlled property is today way below market rates. On the contrary, the rents of property leased out under the new law are always on the rise given that their owners can command market rates and increase their rents every 3 years. For instance, a new 2-bed apartment in Ras Beirut can command USD 1,800 per month while an older apartment in the same neighborhood leased out before 23 July 1992 can yield its owner only USD 10/month.

Unsurprisingly, the old rent law has led to a major disinvestment in the older building stock, and the eventual collapse of some buildings. It is not only that landlords feel cheated out of the real value of their property but also legally burdened with the responsibility of building maintenance and paying a fair compensation (which could be in the range of 25%-50% of property value – percentages to be verified) to the tenant in case they wish to terminate the lease agreement.² The problem is further exacerbated by the ability of leaseholders and owners alike to transmit their property rights to family members and legal heirs, which in many cases has led to the entanglement of property rights between multiple owners and tenants, including children and grandchildren.

Aware of the huge gap between the actual and potential value of their property, and discouraged by their inability to redeem their rented out property without incurring great costs, some landlords put their property for sale. By law, existing tenants are eligible to buy their units at reduced rates (usually 30%-40% less than market rates). Alternatively, the property can be sold at market rates to a third party who assumes the responsibility of buying existing tenants out (depending on negotiating abilities around 30%-40% of the unit sales price can go to the tenant and the rest to the owner).

On another level, the Lebanese building code, combined with a lack of effective

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² This usually happens by a court decision when the landlord demands the rented premise for his own son who needs to show that he is not an owner of a similar premise in the same juridical area, e.g. Beirut (to be verified).

protection to the existing building fabric, has enticed some building owners (mainly of low-rise buildings) to opt for selling their property to an interested developer. Motivated by the huge gap between the actual and potential land value, developers are more often than not interested in demolition the existing building and investing in a new tall and profitable development instead. The Lebanese construction code renders such transformations possible since it does not restrict building height but makes it a factor of the site’s surface coverage, allowable floor to area ratio (FAR), and required setbacks from adjacent buildings and streets. Usually the bigger the site and/or the more open space it has or overlooks, the higher the building constructed on it can go. Recent amendments to the building code, enacted in 2004, have permitted even more increases to allowable densities for high-rise buildings exceeding 50m, something that explains developers’ tendency towards the agglomeration of adjacent small sites and going higher and higher up in their buildings.

In looking at this thematic area, existing and on-going studies on the broader regulatory frames governing land development and property rental markets in Lebanon would provide a valuable source of information. Literature review of existing material needs however to be complemented by illustrative examples and analytical work pertaining to selected new developments in Ras Beirut. The analysis would mainly address how selected new developments were made possible by the exiting regulatory frame. This would entail looking at their overall design features and characteristics (e.g. their plot area, building footprint, height, built-up density, open-space ratio, unit size, etc.) and where possible comparing them -- using aerial views and photos -- with the characteristics of the former buildings that existed previously on selected newly re-built sites. Alternatively, still standing existing buildings in the vicinity of the selected newly built sites could be analyzed and compared with new development in terms of general physical characteristics.

**Theme 3: The impacts of current and potential urban development processes**

The reinvestment of capital in Ras Beirut is clearly resulting in dramatic changes to the built environment, manifested in the physical appearance of contemporary architectural styles and building types, landscape changes, and the emergence of new commercial venues and attractions. Public interventions in infrastructure upgrading (e.g. road maintenance and sidewalks improvement along some main streets) and private sector initiative, largely triggered by the locational attractions and the presence of AUB and LAU in Ras Beirut, have significantly contributed to the economic regeneration of the area, particularly its Hamra district.

The social and demographic impacts of urban renewal and economic redevelopment are less visible. Academic discussions -- mainly those instigated by the AUB Neighborhood Initiative -- on the gentrification of the area, the displacement of vulnerable and less well-off residents and businesses, and ensuing threat to social and economic diversity, are worthy of theoretically informed empirical research that engages in field investigations and in-depth interviews with existing and former
residential and commercial populations. Specifically, this thematic area needs to address the following concerns:

- The impact of new developments and attractions on the economy and the physical environment of Ras Beirut: Are Ras Beirut new developments and attractions devaloring existing ones? How are new residential towers impacting their surrounding urban context? How is the studentification/commercialization of the area affecting its residential character and traditional small businesses? What is the pace of change?

- Social and demographic change: Is Ras Beirut’s demography changing? What is the socio-economic status of the outgoing population? What is the socio-economic status of the incoming population? How do they interact with and relate to their surrounding city context? Who are the groups most vulnerable to forced displacement? How does displacement, whether direct or exclusionary, relate to the wider context of land and housing development and markets in Lebanon, as opposed to the specific development patterns taking place in Ras Beirut? Are Beirut’s suburban sprawl and its peri-central areas gentrification connected?

- People’s options and choices: How do the relocational choices of people and shutting down of some businesses relate to people’s changing lifestyles, expectations and preferences, as opposed to current urban development processes taking place in Ras Beirut? What are the benefits and costs of moving, whether voluntary or involuntary to the city’s peripheral suburbs?

**Theme 4: Intervention Strategies**

Striking urban inequalities and contradictions exist between and within Beirut’s different geographic locales and neighborhoods. Ras Beirut is no different. The area’s visible manifestations of change, power and wealth stand in stark contrast with an overall neglected urban context characterized by a decaying old building stock, pollution, traffic congestion, poor sidewalks, and inadequate public amenities.

Like other peri-central areas in Beirut, Ras Beirut is becoming increasingly unaffordable. Escalating real estate prices are certainly pushing first time homebuyers and middle and lower income tenants, whose interests are not protected by rent controls, to look for residential space outside the area. While the en mass displacement of longtime residents and businesses is unlikely to happen, the current process of urban change will presumably continue to be spread unevenly across space and to amplify existing spatial and social contradictions.

What interventions are needed to prevent turning the city into a patchwork of affluence and decay? Can urban upgrading happen without gentrification? What legal measures, financial instruments, urban planning policies and regulations, and urban design strategies can be developed to promote affordability and diversity in Ras

Beirut and other neighborhoods vulnerable to gentrification?

Clearly nothing can happen without political will and legal and regulatory frames that ensure that the interests of lower and middle-income groups are protected against more powerful interests. It is also clear that many of the required interventions to promote positive change and affordable and diverse living and work environments cannot be tackled at the local scale alone, but need to be addressed at the broader city and national levels e.g. issues of rent control, access to affordable credit for housing, housing subsidies, tax reductions, urban planning and zoning regulations, etc.

This thematic area needs to look at the broader legal, regulatory and financial instruments necessary for the promotion of affordable and diverse built environment. More specifically, however, it needs to look at what is possible and doable at the local level. In thinking of local scale interventions, key questions to be considered include: What can be done to counter the forced displacement of small businesses and middle-income groups? Can architecture and urban design work contribute to a better living and work environment for all (e.g. by careful re-consideration of building typologies, communal spaces, construction material)? What role can local institutions, organizations and current existing residents and businesses play in enhancing and protecting their neighborhoods? What role can the American University of Beirut play? How can local action be organized?

In engaging with the above set of questions, this thematic area needs to focus on the identification of existing positive efforts in built environment upgrading and affordable housing, particularly ones initiated and implemented and the level of local communities and organizations, and how these can be multiplied and broadened. International experiences and experiences from elsewhere in Beirut or Lebanon need to be assessed vis-à-vis their adaptability to Ras Beirut context.
REFERENCES


Quotations in text are from an on-line pre-print (accessed Jan 6, 2014):
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