Is it possible for the Municipality of Beirut to intervene in a residential neighborhood where elderly, low-income residents are being displaced and architectural heritage destroyed in order to protect the social and architectural diversity of the city? Do existing planning regulatory and operational tools empower the municipality to do so? How does the legal framework of property management and housing exchange affect these processes of change? Can local partners – NGOs, neighborhood commissions, social activists and/or public representatives - activate particular legal/institutional frameworks that empower them to resist rapid urban transformations?

On July 20, 2016, the Social Justice and the City program at AUB’s Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs held a workshop to explore answers to these questions through the case study of the neighborhood of Mar Mikhael (Beirut) where property exchanges and building activities usher a rapid transformation of the social and spatial quality of the neighborhood in the coming years. The workshop brought together a group of researchers, planners and policy-makers over the subject of rapid urban transformation and the absence of affordable housing in Beirut. It was organized as a follow up to the workshop Creative Economy, Social Justice and Urban Strategies: The Case of Mar Mikhael organized in March 2015 organized by the institute’s Social Justice and the City project in partnership with Gaia Heritage, the Sciences Po Urban School, and the MUPP/MUD programs at AUB. In accordance with the aims of the Issam Fares Institute’s Social Justice and the City program, the workshop aimed to establish partnerships between scholars, policy-makers and activists working towards more inclusive cities. It falls under the “right to housing”, one of two research tracks currently adopted by the Social Justice and the City project.

This workshop aimed to build on past research on Mar Mikhael by formulating concrete alternatives to the rapid gentrification displacing its inhabitants, through prioritizing the importance of this neighborhood’s social and economic diversity. The discussion was lively, and led to a variety of proposed solutions that ranged from new regulations to protest. At
the building scale, modifications of building regulations were proposed, such as lowering coefficient of exploitation, changing the building footprint and forbidding joining of land, with the aim of discouraging demolition through reducing profit. More concretely, the idea of transferring the coefficient of exploitation from one zone in the city to the other was lively debated. At the level of the neighborhood, preserving the stairs was stated as paramount to preserve the urban and social fabric, as well as engaging the dwellers in this workshop’s process and working with them to define the issues at stake. Dwellers of Mar Mikhael are engaged in issues of housing, and this can be built on for protest or policy advocacy.

More generally, the subject of housing, and the right to the city were tackled. In our current regulatory and governance framework, how can we envision a stock of affordable housing, especially rental? In that regard, several solutions were mentioned, such as building on the current importance of philanthropy and “corporate social responsibility” in Beirut in order to build private non-profit housing. The idea of a system of compensation of owners for the presence of old renters was also discussed, either through a system of “density bonuses” or through another source of income for the municipality.

The workshop reinforced the importance of exploring potential urban interventions that can reverse the ongoing gentrification of the city by setting in place an alternative trend, one where the value of land as shelter and the collective significance of heritage and neighborhood life can be introduced to balance development pressures. The next step in this process is a series of workshops involving the participation of stakeholders such as local dwellers and old shopkeepers in Mar Mikhael to help translate the workshop recommendations into actual claims that can be made before the municipality and other public agencies.

**Workshop Participants**

Afif Chamseddine, Judge and independent legal expert in property law  
Georges Zouain, GAIA - Heritage  
Habib Debs, URBI  
Hiba Bou Akar, Columbia University, Professor in Urban Studies  
Marc Gearsa, Independent developer  
Marlene Nasr, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies  
Maysa Sabah, Affordable Housing Institute  
Nadine Bekdache, Public Works  
Zeina Abla, Independent consultant in social and economic development

From the *Social Justice and the City* project  
Mona Fawaz, AUB, Professor in urban studies and planning  
Daria El Samad, AUB, graduate student, MUPP-MUD Program  
Dounia Salamé, AUB, researcher and assistant in the organization of the workshop