

Property developer outmanoeuvres residents

On property no. 641 in Mar Mkhayel Street stood the homes of an elderly woman called Georgette, Umm Michel and her wheelchair-bound husband, Madame Hayat, Mr. Nassif and his family, the Abou Wahids, and George. The property consists of three small buildings which once housed the six families: four apartments tenanted under the old rent, and two historically owned, in addition to Garo's, a shop facing onto Mar Mkhayel main street. The original owner built the front-facing part of the property in the 1930s, then added the two rear sections in the 1950s. Following his death, the property was inherited by his heirs, eleven individuals in total. Only two live on the property, in the front building.

In 2011, an investor, the Michelange Company, acquired the shares of the non-resident owners, outmanoeuvring the remaining two investors and forcing them to sell.

The investor gradually cleared the other tenants from the building in preparation for a major development project. Following Georgette's death, the new owner sealed her apartment with red wax before her children could enter the house and recover her possessions. The remaining residents—Umm Michel and her husband, Madame Hayat, Mr. Nassif and his family, the Abou Wahids, and George—were unable to remain in the neighbourhood due to the high rents, and moved out of Beirut.



Housing Monitor

beirutevictions.org / housingmonitor.org

The Housing Monitor seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of housing in the country, recognising that housing is more than just shelter, and encompasses social networks and access to other resources available in the local environment. In response to studies of residential patterns and changes in land ownership, in particular the alarming number of evictions and vacant units and buildings in Beirut's residential neighbourhoods, not to mention the difficulty residents have in getting access to affordable and appropriate accommodation, the Housing Monitor was launched with the purpose of advancing a reading of these phenomena as symptoms of wider systemic processes at work in the city, and to transform individual initiatives to fight for housing rights into an issue of public interest.

This series of pamphlets is associated with the Housing Monitor, an online platform which collates research, lays the groundwork for advocacy, and proposes alternative strategies with the objective of promoting the right to housing in Lebanon.

Published by Public Works (2019)
Based on the research project
«Mapping Beirut Through its Tenants' Stories» 2015–2019

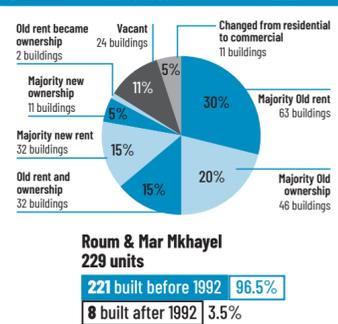
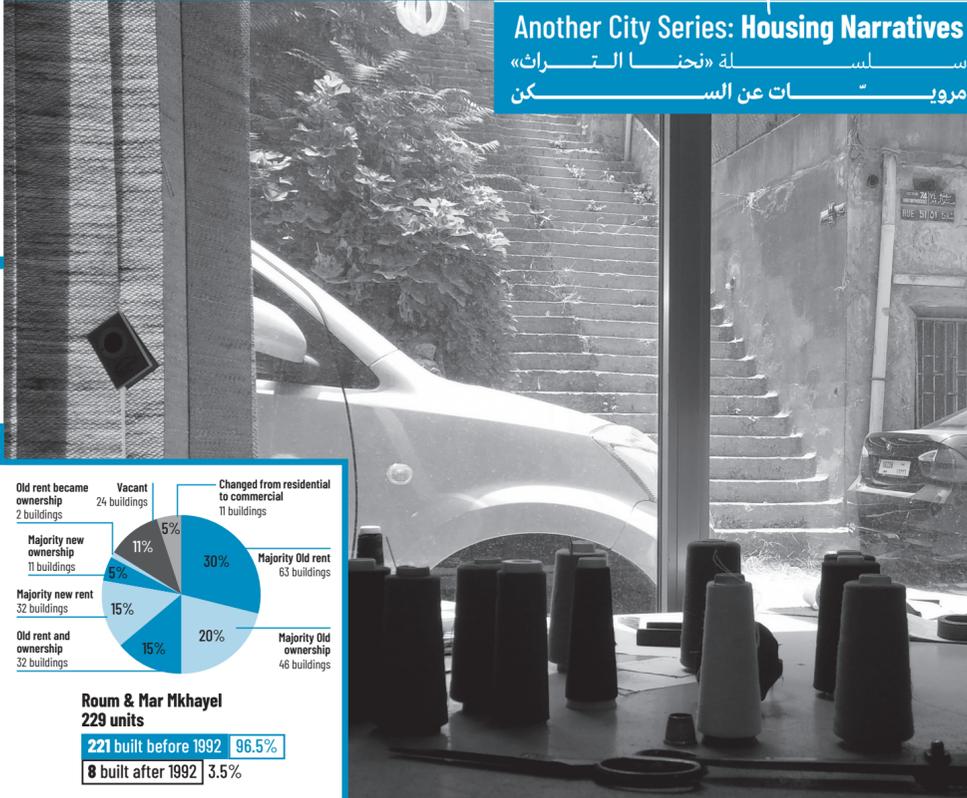
HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
BEIRUT
Made East

ROOM & MAR MKHAYEL

الروم مار مخايل

Another City Series: Housing Narratives

سلسلة «نحن التوارث»
مرويات عن السكن



As we get to know the streets and alleys whose residents have witnessed significant changes in the architectural and social environment, we pose questions about heritage and the housing policies which have led to the displacement of communities.

The Another City Series sees local history through the lens of its community's stories, an approach which gives us space to reconsider both dominant models of urban development and the policies which shape the housing market.

The historical architectural fabric of Room is relatively intact and there are few construction sites active in the area. Due to the absence of public spaces in the neighborhood historically, its urban fabric is characterised by an abundance of shared spaces between buildings, with public space redefined as the alleyways, lanes, and public staircases where residents meet and talk.

Immigrants from neighbouring regions (such as Armenians, displaced communities from the mountains, and refugees from other countries) brought new skills and crafts to Room, but over time these professions depreciated and Mar Mkhayel Street was converted into a district for nightclubs, restaurants, and galleries. This transformation has a profound effect on the residents of the street, the hill and the inner neighborhoods.

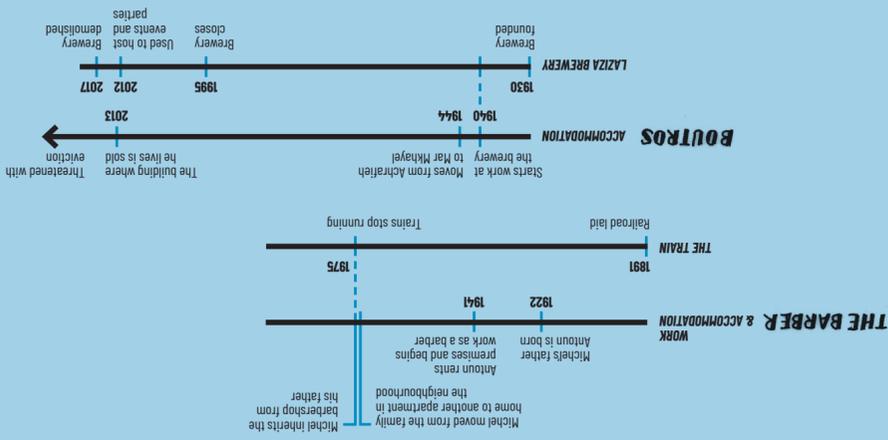
Alongside this economic transformation, which saw property prices rise along Mar Mkhayel Street and the surrounding area, there was an influx of residents from

Rmeil
1926



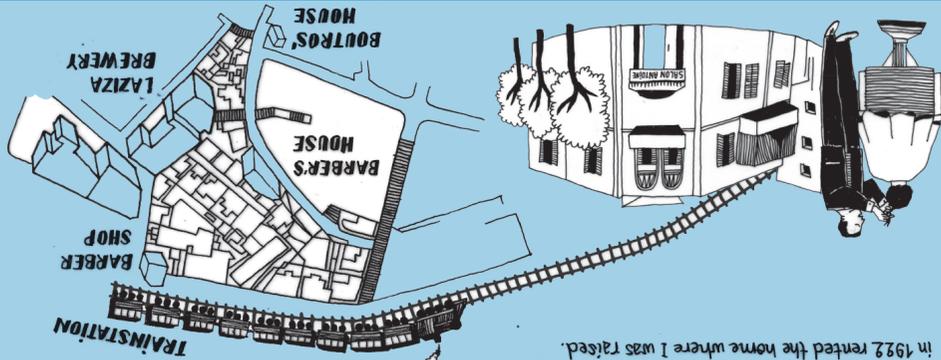
the Northern Beirut suburbs and the Northern Matn district, drawn by the neighbourhood's proximity to the city centre and its still relatively low prices.

Three years ago, El Khazenein Street in Room underwent radical but undetectable changes: with the exception of the large construction site alongside the Massaad Stairs there were no demolitions of residential blocks and houses, and no construction cranes towering into the sky. However, the demolition work which has crept up to the fringes of Room in recent years is now set to penetrate to its heart: El Khazenein Street itself, the oldest street in the neighbourhood. Many properties in Room are attracting interest from buyers, placing old residents, especially those who rent, in a position of vulnerability and fear of eviction.



But in the 1930s, the Room hill, once a summer destination for the wealthy, also began to take in residents from outside the city. It became the neighbourhood of choice for workers in the railways and the port, or employees of the Lebanese Electricity Company and the Laziza Brewery, a process that continued through the 1950s and into the 1960s. Landowners in the Room Hospital neighbourhood explain that they first bought land there in order to build homes close to their places of work. **In the 1950s and 1960s**, however, they began to add stores to these buildings in order to rent them out to the new arrivals, turning Room into a primarily residential neighbourhood with a majority of rent-paying residents. Like all the central Beirut neighbourhoods, the **civil war** saw a mass exodus of its population, though residents soon returned following the cessation of violence. **From 2009 onwards**, economic and commercial changes in Mar Mkhayel Street picked up pace, attracting large numbers of local visitors and tourists.

In the post-independence 1940s, with Mar Mkhayel's conversion into a hub for commerce and trades, and with the resulting influx of low-income workers and families from neighbouring districts, including Armenian refugees from the Karantina Camp. The installation of the tram stop at the beginning of Mar Mkhayel Street kickstarted a wave of development and expansion which lasted from 1923 to 1929. I think of myself as the mayor of this neighbourhood. Not officially, of course. I have a lot of memories here, like the train which used to run past the shop when I was a boy of twelve. My grandfather, George Asaad Tabet, was the first train driver, or chauffeur train as we called it. I had unforgettable adventures here with my friends, like our expeditions to the Cinema Vendôme, or taking short cuts through the neighbourhood by climbing walls and slipping from alley to alley till we reached the main road. I inherited the profession of barber from my father, who was born in the neighbourhood and in 1922 rented the home where I was raised. The first fell for this apartment was because it was close to the brewery, and now we live here sixty years I feel that we're inseparable. I always thought of me. It hurts me that the man who bought the building doesn't want to discuss terms and has gone straight to the courts. One day I was walking through a neighbourhood nearby, and I saw a man painting a road, I asked him for a cutting and he gave me one, already planted in a little flowerpot. I took it home and replanted it on my balcony. I have watered it and tended it and it for ten years it grew and flourished. When my wife passed away, the rose withered and died.



1860 and 1881 were set off by the construction of major landmarks between the sea view and fresh air. In a very short time the population of Rmeil had multiplied by a factor of ten. I was seventeen when my family moved from our village to come and live in Beirut: to a single-room apartment in Achrafieh. I got a job at the Laziza brewery, working in this apartment in Mar Mkhayel and came to live here. Back then, the rent was 500 Lebanese pounds when I first came, but by 1992 it had climbed to 5,000 pounds. In 2013 the building where I live was bought by a new owner. I called the new landlord and asked him how he would like me to pay the rent, but he informed me that he wanted the apartment itself, not the rent money. He refused to negotiate with me, preferring to take the matter to court. I worried what would happen to me. Today, I'm living alone in the building, which is divided into four apartments. Two of them were occupied by friends of the owner, and the third by a tenant paying old rent, but they have all passed away and nobody's left but me.

Alongside this economic transformation, which saw property prices rise along Mar Mkhayel Street and the surrounding area, there was an influx of residents from

— Mona Fawaz, *Harleke Krjnen, Baria el Samad, A property framework for understanding gentrification: Ownership patterns and the transformations of Mar Mkhayel*, City Journal, 2019
— Interviews with residents by participants in the Mapping Traq El Jiddah Through its Tenants' Narratives workshop

— Dictionnaire Group, *Topography of Descent: City Walk Performance from Sursok Museum to Karantina, 2015*
— Layla Salehameh Kamel, *Un quartier de Beyrouth: Saint Nicolas, Bar al-Mashreq, 1998*
— Linking Economic Change With Social Justice in Mar Mkhayel, Research report published by Galla Heritage, Sciences Po, and the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, 2016

— Hedd Salameh El Jouneir, *Summary of Studio work*, Faculty of Fine Arts and Architecture at the Lebanese University, Urbanism Department
— *Mezons traditionnelles de Beyrouth: typologie, culture domestique, valeur patrimoniale*, Volume 1. Le secteur de Rmeil-Redwan, Association pour la Protection et la Sauvegarde des Anciennes demeures (APSAJ), 2004

ROUM & MAR MKHAYEL

الروم مار مخايل

We emigrated to the city in search of education. My father rented us a place in Roum next to the school, but he didn't want to leave his village and stop working the land. We grew up here, between the train and the tram, and I can still remember how me and my friends used to dodge paying the five-piaster fare. We'd slip onto the train through the back door so the conductor wouldn't spot us. I also remember the old customs of Gemmayzeh Street: the deceased being laid on a cart pulled by a pair of horses and all the shop owners shutting their doors until the cortege had passed, out of respect for the dead. Death today has lost its gravity: wakes and weddings are held in the same building at the same time.

I apprenticed as a tailor at a shop in the city centre and got a lot of experience, then I rented a shop of my own in the Bourj El Ghazal, close by Bourj Square, which is known today as Martyrs' Square. I spent 29 years working in that shop before Solidere evicted me in exchange for a pittance. My shop was in the Khayyat Building, and the owner did everything he could to stop the bulldozers knocking it down. He even chained himself to the building, but the security guards cut the chains and humiliated him in front of the cameras and the local media. Then they went ahead with the demolition as though nothing had happened.



As for me, I returned to Roum, where I opened a new shop that I run to this day.



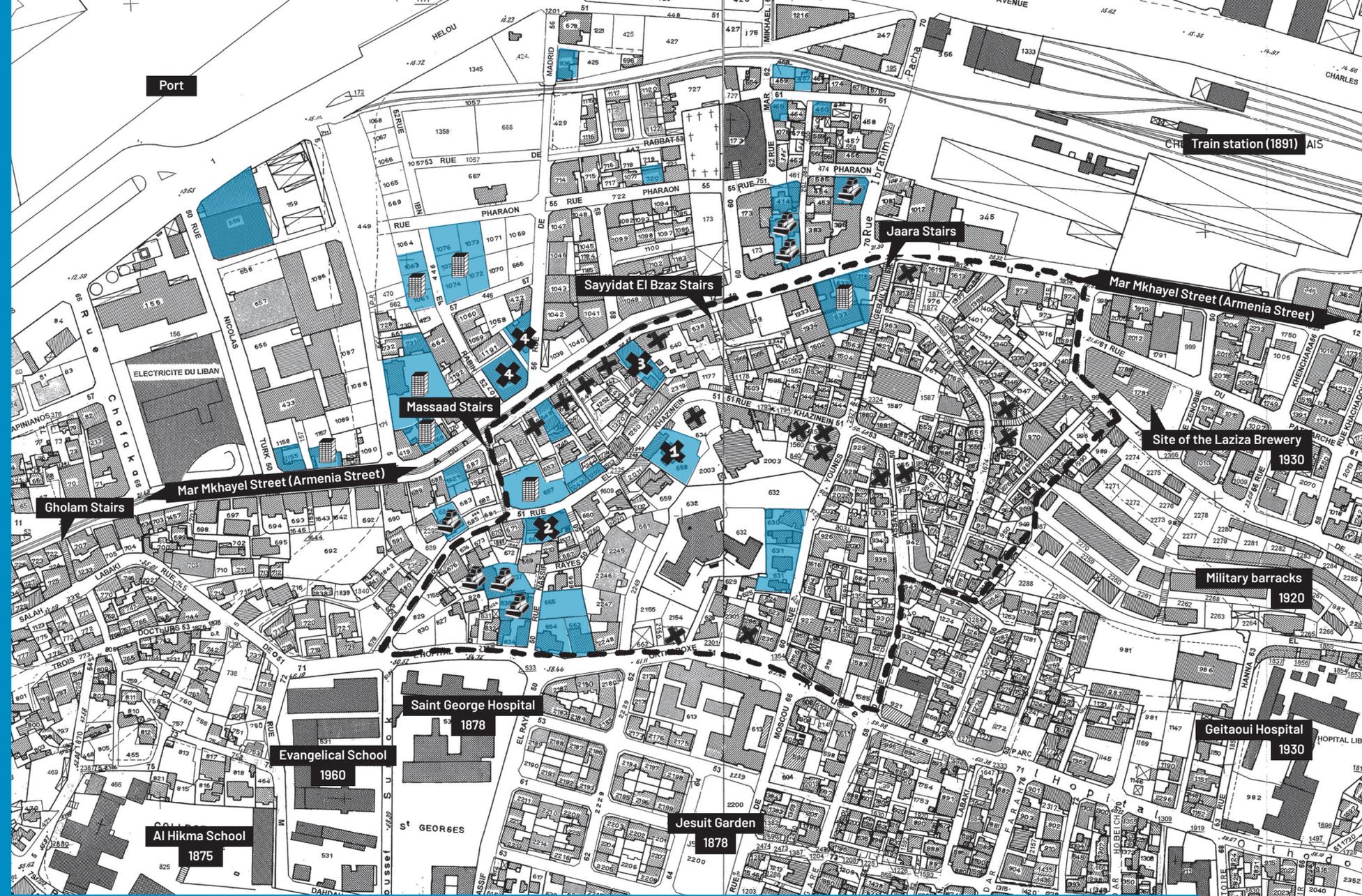
Between 2001 and 2007

the average price of apartments in Mar Mkhayel increased 150%, from \$1,200 per square metre to \$3,000.

In 2014

approximately 50 new shops were opened by designers and artists in the neighbourhood, in addition to 70 art galleries, bars, and restaurants.

Property no. 658
This property consists of two unoccupied buildings. Old tenants were evicted from the building at the front of the property. An Armenian family, long-standing residents of the neighbourhood, and Dr. Abou Samra, who had a clinic on the property, were among the old owners of the property. The Armenian family was evicted on the grounds that they had been absent from their residence for ten years during the civil war. The rear building is occupied by heirs of Dr. Abou Samra. A property developer (one of the heirs) made an offer to the remaining owners to join him in demolishing the two buildings and jointly owning a new building on the site. Given the large number of heirs and the lack of available accommodation for all members of the extended family, the offer made sense. The heirs living in the rear property left Beirut while the new 12-storey tower is being constructed. Each of the six heirs will receive an apartment each, while the developer will own six apartments.



Map showing the transfer of property ownership in Roum and Mar Mkhayel



Khazenine street



The Massaad Stairs and Property no. 657
In May 2013, the municipality of Beirut granted a license to Ghassan Rizq, an investor and the owner of this property, to build Rizk Tower, a vast edifice which would be the first tower block in the neighbourhood and would alter the course of its urbanization. Ironically, according to municipal order 157 from 2006, the property was scheduled to be turned into a public garden, but then in 2008—coinciding with the sale of the property—a second municipal order was issued (no. 101) overriding the earlier decision. The story did not end here. The construction site was licensed to demolish the Massaad Stairs in order to give trucks access to the site and connect the residential tower with Mar Mkhayel Street. Efforts by local residents and activist groups brought the issue of the Massaad Stairs to public attention, and they were able to halt the demolition of this century-old historic landmark. The greater part of the stairs were saved from destruction, and the site was entered on the list of protected buildings. However, construction is ongoing at the site, causing suffering and inconvenience to the residents of this narrow street.

The Massaad Stairs are named after Massaad Bou Chebl who came to the neighbourhood from Bikfaya in the 1930s to work in transport at the Port of Beirut. He later founded the Trucks Management Authority and was head of the truck drivers' union in Lebanon for 43 years. He put up the first buildings in the Upper Neighbourhood, where he lived before adding more storeys and renting them out.

Mar Mkhayel street

I own a super market in Mar Mkhayel Street, which is the last of its kind in the neighbourhood. The original owner lived in the property. Two years ago, after the owner died, an investor bought the property from his heir, who lives in the United States. The new owner evicted the tenant paying old rent and he has now approached the courts to evict me, the Saliba Supermarket. I heard he bought the property for two million dollars and that he's going to convert it into a luxury hotel. A small-time local investor convinced him that this would be better than demolishing it, and would guarantee him a profit. The shop next door to mine is a Land Rover mechanics. They're being threatened with eviction as well, on the pretext that the building will be demolished.

Two properties completely evicted by the Carnaby company
The company purchased the properties from members of the Azarian family in 2012. Property no. 3911 consists of two storeys, with 12 residential apartments and seven shops. All tenants were evicted with the exception of the Armenian Club dispensary. Four of the shops have been evicted and converted into restaurants, and the remaining three are threatened with eviction. Property no. 421 is a five-storey building containing 15 apartments. Tenants in 12 of these apartments have been evicted in addition to the four shops on the ground floor.

Site of the former Olympia Cinema
The Olympia Cinema was built on the property in 1952, with residents stating that it was built by a Muslim. It was a place where locals would spend their evenings. When it became Cinéma Vendôme, the nearby steps were renamed the Vendôme Stairs, though residents continue to refer to them by their original name, the Jaara Stairs, after the original owner of one of the abutting properties. After HAR Properties purchased the property in 2009 the cinema was demolished, and in 2011 the company obtained permission to demolish the three historically-listed buildings on property no. 633. The Save Beirut Heritage organisation called for a demonstration to protest the demolition, but were unable to prevent it going ahead. A 19-storey tower block is currently being constructed on the site.