



# ROUM & MAR MKHAYEL

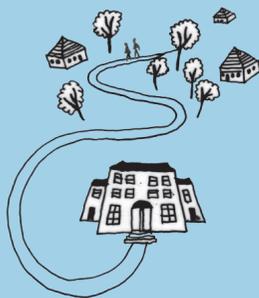
الروم مار مخايل

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.



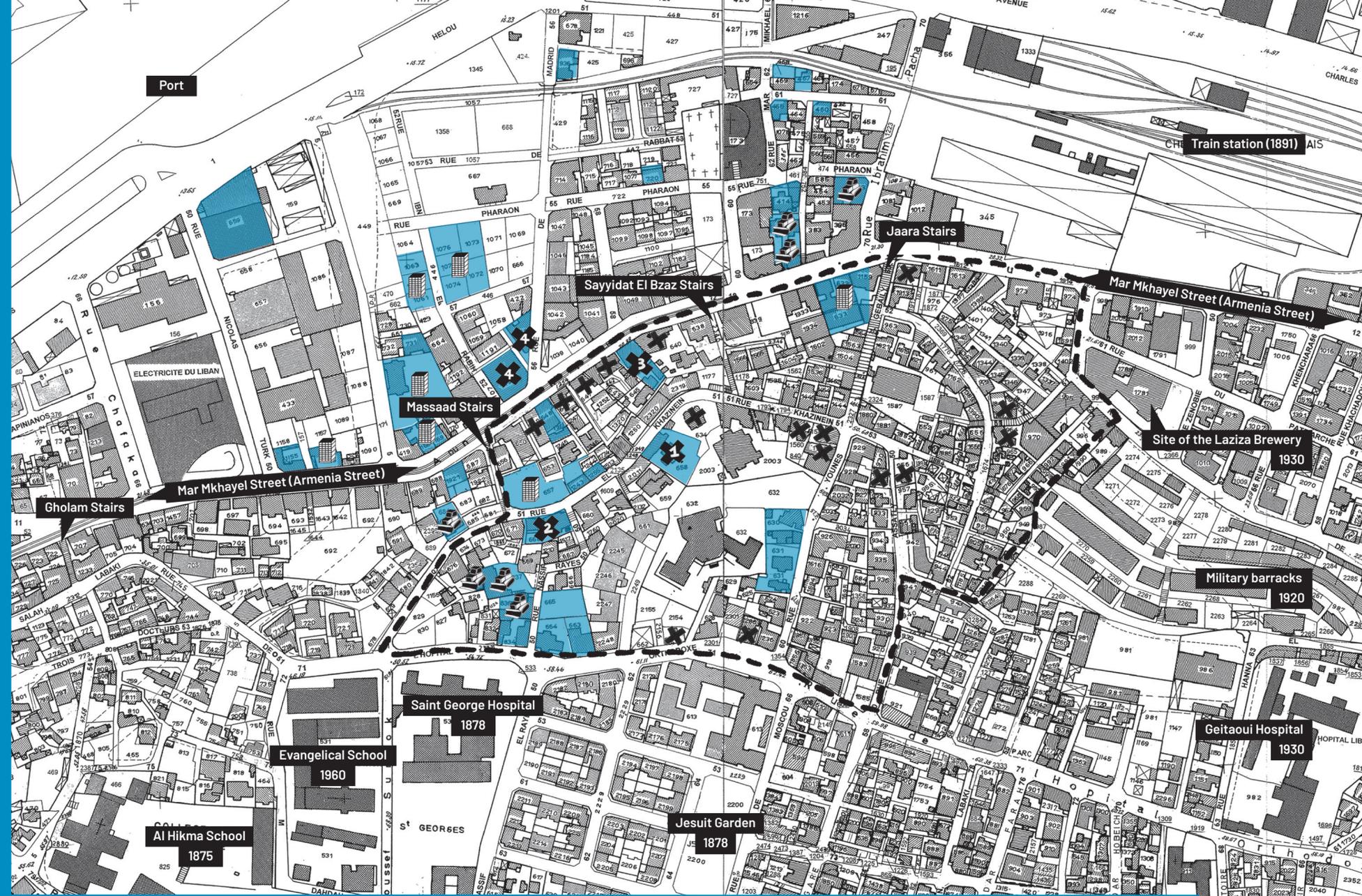
## Between 2001 and 2007

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.