

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.

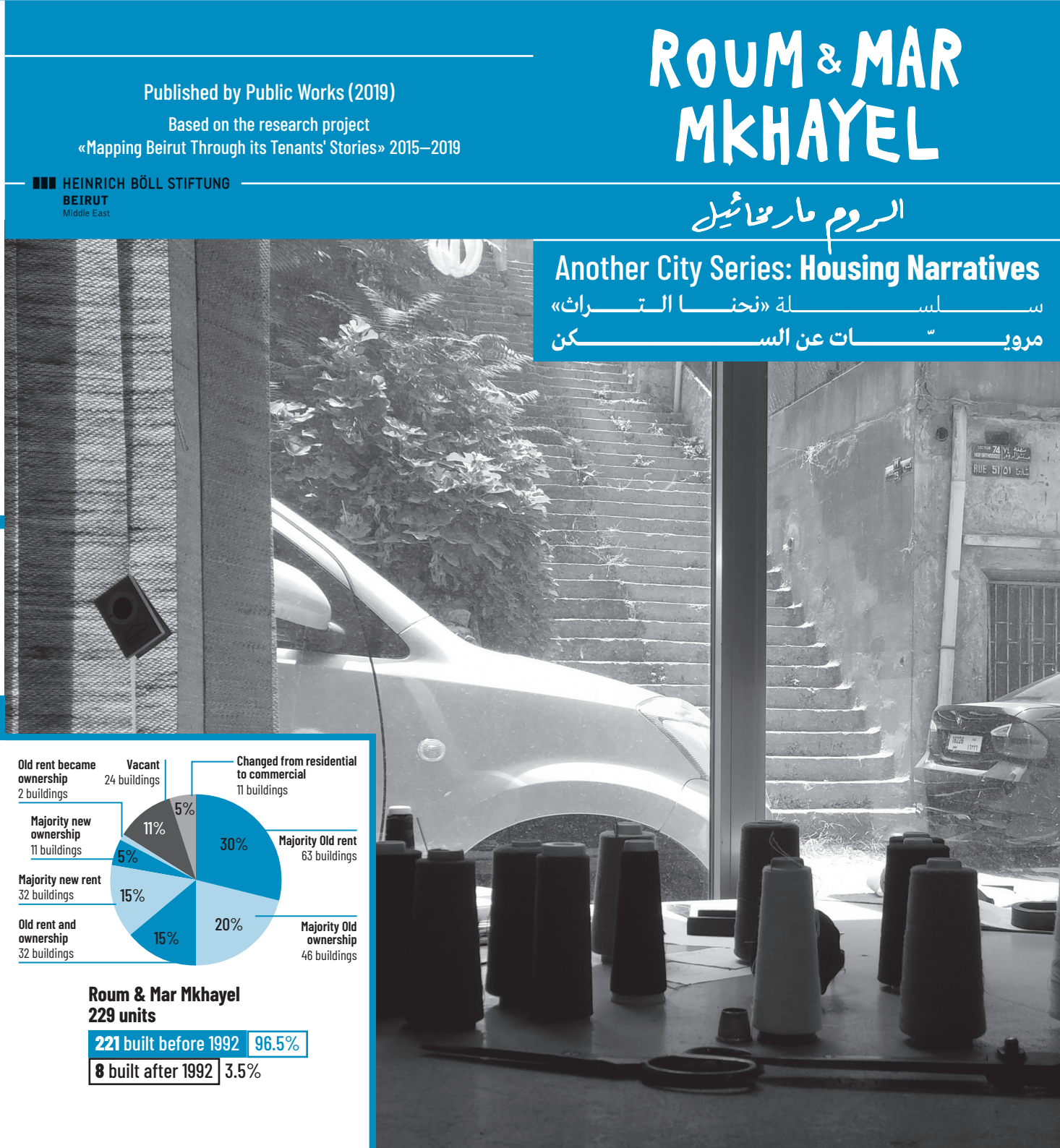


Housing Monitor

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.



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

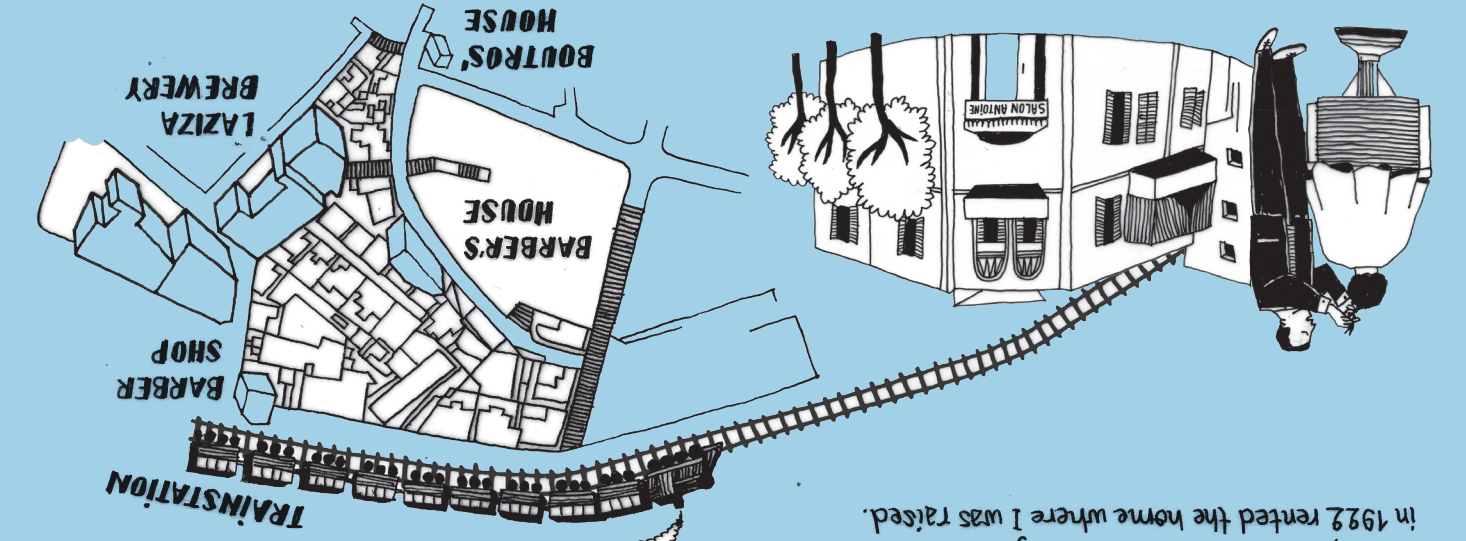
the Northern Beirut suburbs and the Northern Matn district, drawn by the neighbourhood's proximity to the city centre and its still relatively low prices.

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.

The Rmeil neighbourhood grew up between Achrafieh hill and Mar Mkhayel Street, though relatively late compared to the other residential neighbourhoods in and around Beirut's historical city centre. Indeed, the district remained largely agricultural until the onset of the French Mandate, with the exception of the area around the Saint George Hospital and Lower Rmeil, where a train line was laid and the Mar Mkhayel station built in 1891.

As Beirut's population grew **during the late nineteenth century**, the city's footprint began to spread past its ancient walls towards the neighbouring areas of Zuqag Al Blat, Bachoura, and Msaybe. However, although Rmeil was regarded as a major transit point between Beirut and Tripoli (Mar Mkhayel Street was also referred to as Tripoli Street), it remained nearly unoccupied and agricultural in nature until 1880. A wave of settlement and development was set off by the construction of major landmarks **between 1860 and 1880**, such as the Suncocks' quarter, the Saint George Hospital, the Al Hikmah School, the railroad, and the expansion of the port. The religious institutions and planned development (established by the Jesuits in particular) brought wealthy Christian families to the area, such as the Suncocks and Salwans, either fleeing massacres in the mountains or drawn by the sea view and fresh air. In a very short time the population of Rmeil had multiplied by a factor of ten.

I first fell for this apartment was because it was 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.



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 'châuffeur 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. In 1922 rented the home where I was raised. My father, who was born in the neighbourhood and sixty years I feel that we're inseparable. I always close to the brewery, and now I've lived here close to the brewery, and now I've lived here sixty years I feel that we're inseparable. I always a part 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 resubst. 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.

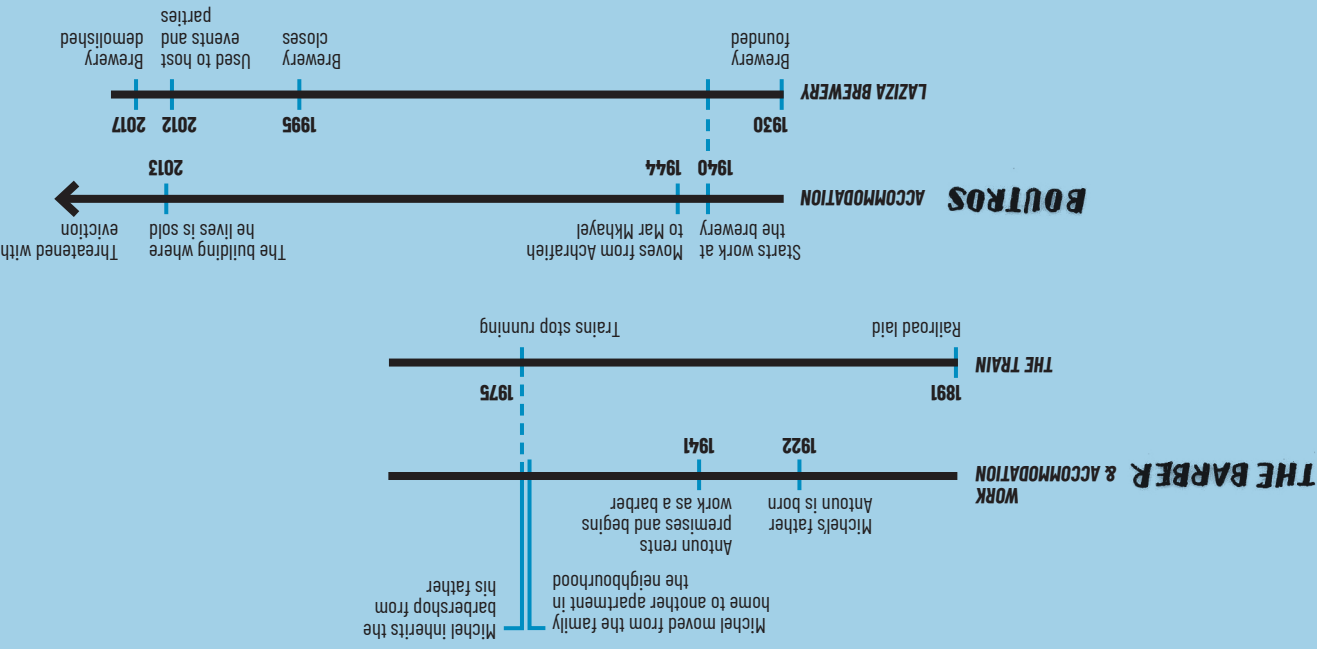
— Dictionnaire Group, *Topography of Descent: City Walk Performance from Sursoc Museum to Koronia*, 2015

— Layla Saleh Kameel, *Un quartier de Beyrouth: Saint Nicolas, Bar al-Mashreq*, 1998

— Linking Economic Change With Social Justice in Mar Mkhayel, Research report published by Galia Heritage, Sciences Po, and the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, 2019

— Mona Fawaz, Mariette 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 Tong El Jideh Through its Tenants' Narratives workshop



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 storeys 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.

— May Davie, *Missions traditionnelles de Beyrouth : typologie, culture domestique, volet patrimonial*, Volume 1. Le secteur de Rmeil-Madawar, Association pour la Protection et la Sauvegarde des Anciennes demeures (APSAJ), 2004

— Head Salman El Jouneir, Summary of Studio work, Faculty of Fine Arts and Architecture at the Lebanese University, Urbanism Department

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.

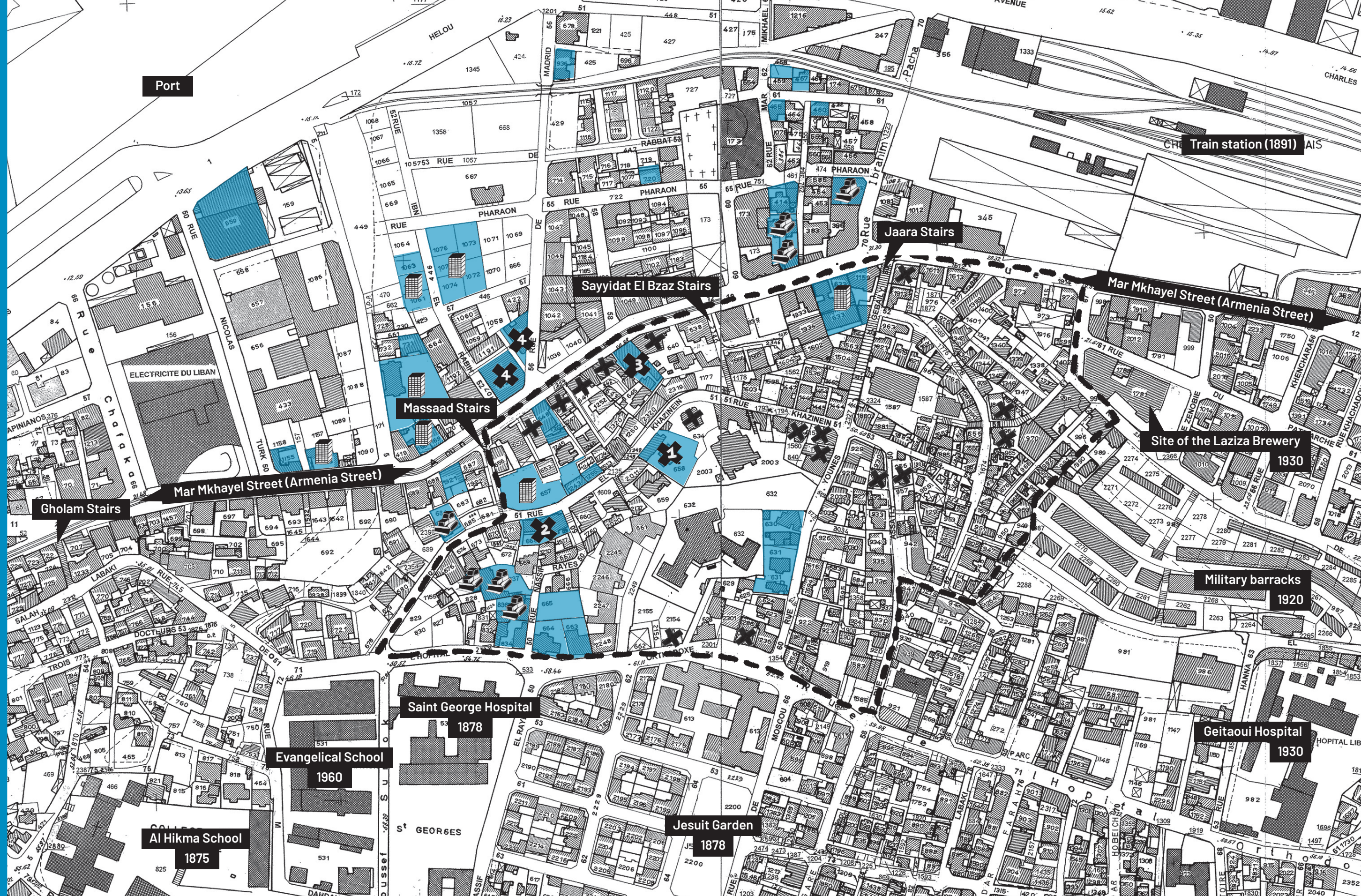


Property no. 658

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.



Khazenine street



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

- Property either sold or granted a building license
- Building demolished
- Eviction
- Construction site
- Extent of the survey

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. 391 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.