Contradictory values in the morphology of Dandan Alley: Quality housing versus property investment

The alley consists of 21 one- or two-story buildings. Neighbourhood zoning regulations allow for a built-up area of greater density than currently exists.

Unn Matar Halli, mother of Boulos Al Matar, who used to have a shop in Allenby Street, says that the empty rooms on the Matar family property were occupied by acquaintances from their village who came to Beirut, but that the majority were taken by members of her growing family. Today, none of her children or grandchildren live in the alley. Her's to these properties refer to the ongoing renovation of the narrow lane with its small, singly-let rooms, that the landowners refrain from conducting renovations.

The narrow lane with its small, singly-let rooms, the majority of which are rented to Kurdish families, is a neighbourhood that throngs with life, its history having passed down the street to pay his respects to local and foreign visitors. Children play safely up and down its cramped alleys, and old men sit together out on the pavement, talking and passing the time. Commerce in Bachoura remains vibrant, as witnessed by the shops, car mechanics, small printshops, and stamp tradesmen, including carpenters' workshops, antiques shops, car mechanics, small printshops, and stamp factories on the fringes of Bachoura Cemetery.

Housing Monitor

This series of pamphlets is associated with the Housing Monitor, an online platform which collates research, lays the groundwork for advocacy, and proposes policy changes. The objective is to promote 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 the phenomenon of urban displacement, and the other side of the numbers, the stories and the people behind them. The Another City Series is an approach which gives us space to reconsider dominant models of urban development and the policies which shape the housing market.

Anyone who wants to see a living representation of the stages through which Beirut has passed, should head to Bachoura. Of all the city's neighbourhoods, it is the closest to a picture of historical Beirut, and its mixed architectural heritage is a record of the city formation. There are old houses owned by wealthy families, and ancient courts with narrow alleys branching off from the main streets. Bachoura is a neighbourhood that throngs with life, its history having allowed for the development of unique social relationships. Children play safely up and down its cramped alleys, and old men sit together out on the pavement, talking and passing the time.

Commerce in Bachoura remains vibrant, as witnessed by numerous small shops and outlets for professional tradesmen, including carpenters' workshops, antiques shops, car mechanics, small printshops, and stamp factories on the fringes of Bachoura Cemetery. Markets in the neighbourhood include the Carpenter's Souk, the Metalworkers' Souk, the Antiques Souk, and the Glass Souk. However because of its unique location, Bachoura has become the focus of real-estate speculation, the pressure of which is most evident in the radical architectural changes that have taken place over the years.

The expansion of companies such as Beirut Digital District is one example of the processes that threaten the neighbourhood’s diverse social and architectural fabric.
Al Bachoura

Approximately 15% of Bachoura’s old buildings are empty:

- 30 abandoned buildings
- 92 historically listed buildings
- 8 buildings are both abandoned and historically listed

Until the year 2000, a large proportion of these abandoned buildings were occupied by people displaced during the civil war.

Public spaces in Bachoura

Aside from the alleys themselves, officially designated public spaces are few and far between. On the southern boundary of the neighbourhood by Independence Avenue, there are two municipal gardens: Lower Bassa Garden and the slightly larger Al Arees Garden. In 2001, the Beirut Public Library opened its doors in Bachoura. The largest piece of public land in the area is the grounds of the French Hospital overlooking the city centre. Built in the 1930s, the hospital’s land was converted to a football field in 1972. This space attracted a number of visitors from nearby neighbourhoods until 2003, when the investors who had bought the plots in 2000 decided to raise the ground in preparation for a real estate development project.

The discovery of archaeological remains pushed the Antiquities Department to halt work. The excavation works have been left untouched, with the archaeological remains exposed.

The alley facing the football stadium

Residents in this alley feel vulnerable to eviction after the sale of the land on which the football stadium was constructed.

Saad Street

A plot bought by Maha Nasoua, owner of Naanou, located in Al Bachoura. Bought in the 1990s, it still contains a single abandoned building. The lower storeys are occupied by a printing press, and the remaining floors rented out by room at a rate of $100 per month, mostly to Syrian families.

The courts

Most of the residents in the courts pay old rent. If the new rent law was applied to these residents, it would have catastrophic consequences, because the courts are not contained within buildings. Rather, they extend between them, covering parts of each plot of land. The average size of a court is approximately 100 metres squared, even though the actual home itself may be just a single room.

Haramiy Alley

Haramiy Alley runs parallel to the edge of the cemetery in Rachad Al-Janine. A long pedestrian passage, it is two metres wide branches and divides into three courts: Matar Court, Harball Court, and Ellt Court.

The alley’s name is in the 1950s, when haramiy (thieves) would use it to hide after committing robberies in Beirut’s commercial center. They would enter the alley then jump over the stone wall into the Bachoura Cemetery, where the civil guard would be unwilling to pursue them.

Matar Court

An old area that can be reached through alleys branching off from Khandaq Al Ghamiq Street. It is separated from Bachoura Cemetery by Haramiy Alley. Matar Court consists of a single plot containing a number of single rooms situated around an inner courtyard. Residents are a mix of old and new tenants.

Ellt Court

This court is established on a single plot of land and includes: Al Hay street, living conditions in the court have deteriorated. A resident here, Gamarie, describes how living in a single room means she has to keep a gas stove in the bedroom, while the bathrooms are shared by all the courts residents. There are rumours that the court has been sold, but Ali Khallal has not been able to meet with her former owner.

Kurdish Court

The Kurdish Court was demolished years ago. It was a camp for Kurds who used to trade in vegetables in a neighbouring district, which was also demolished.

Habsout Court

According to local residents, this court stood on a plot bought by Jabda Ilari, who demolished the court in 2012. Ilari also bought the property facing the court and demolished the building that stood there.

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