

# Open spaces in Hamra: Promoting Active Public Spaces through AUB's Neighborhood initiative

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**Abstract** Ras Beirut, Hamra specifically does not have public spaces that cater to people from varied backgrounds; therefore, this results in decreasing diversity and social interaction. In addition, existing open spaces are becoming quickly privatized, and animated by consumer-based practices.

This proposal aims to explore the potential of open spaces in Hamra to become active spaces and ways in which AUB/NI can transform them into vibrant, accessible places. It seeks to do so through intervening in two types of open spaces, building on a community-based participatory approach.

The two types of spaces include: i) neglected and abandoned squares on the ground floor of commercial buildings along Hamra Street; and ii) narrow streets and alleys. The aim of this proposal is to provide the Ras Beirut community (residents and visitors), as well as the AUB community (faculty, staff, and students) with places where they can freely enjoy their time, in comfortable, appealing, green, and shaded settings, without being obliged to consume.

Several methods will be used in this project including research using available data, interviewing as well as participant observation, mapping, videos, and photography.

NI should be involved in leading the project since it would be upgrading neighborhoods in Hamra through public spaces, where it would be fostering social inclusion and bringing the community together.

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## Case study profile and problem definition:

“Urban streets that are rich in common spaces and attract people of diverse cultural backgrounds fashion a self with porous boundaries who will be comfortable with the challenges presented by encounters with the other. Empathy and sympathetic engagement will define the texture of such exchanges.”(Seidman, p.5)

Neighborhoods surrounding AUB in Hamra lack public spaces that are freely accessed to everyone. This decreases the opportunity of interaction and gathering of people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, decreasing chances of the sense of community cohesion and collectivity.

Despite the fact that AUB includes open green spaces for its faculty and students, these spaces lack some qualities that characterize a public space. On one hand, accessibility of spaces in AUB is restricted to locals; on the other hand, although AUB is a large campus including different spaces to sit or enjoy the greenery its still a controlled academic institution where students and faculty wouldn't feel as free and comfortable as they would be in a public space outside their daily routine and professional life.

Currently, the only places where residents, visitors, and students can gather or meet are places in Hamra such as coffee shops, restaurants and pedestrian sidewalks. However, the coffee shops and restaurants are commercial entities inaccessible to everyone and restrict interaction within a dominant consumer's environment.

While the pedestrian sidewalks are crammed with motorcycles, huge park-meters, electricity poles, and other obstacles in addition to lacking the proper furniture for the public such as benches. Thus, sidewalks do not provide pleasant meeting or walking environments. “Sidewalks suddenly break off forcing pedestrians to walk on the street or a dirt walkway; streetlights

brighten Hamra and Bliss but many other streets stay darkened in the evening; navigational signs, marked pedestrian crosses, public restrooms, and public clocks are either absent or impossible to locate. The soft furnishings that provide urban comfort and aesthetics have fared worse. Benches, monuments, and landmarks are absent; many streets lack any green space while those with planters or trees often betray long term neglect” (Seidman, p.5) Therefore, the available meeting places around AUB lack quiet and comfortable qualities and are not conducive to informal social interaction among diverse groups.

Given its historical significance and role as the prime educational and cultural institution in Ras Beirut fostering diversity, it’s important that AUB addresses this problem of scarcity of public space through the Neighborhood Initiative. AUB is a spacious, green, beautiful campus for people to enjoy walking in, gathering, sitting, and spending time in. However, it’s enclosed and it can’t open up to outsiders because of security reasons, but this results from its detachment or disconnection from its surrounding neighborhoods. What if AUB campus penetrates Ras Beirut and generates public spaces within some neighborhoods?

NI is seeking to improve public spaces either through small interventions like the “people places” initiative or through researching on how AUB can interact with its neighborhood and create a lively public space. One example would be the “Ras Beirut Rassessanah” project. This project aimed at activating the Gefinore Plaza in Hamra through a public concert in 2008 on New Years’ evening. ([www.aub.edu.lb/ni](http://www.aub.edu.lb/ni))

Another example was the study on Bliss Street, Hamra lead by professor Robert Saliba through his Urban Design Studio. The project was entitled: “City –campus interface: Towards an Urban Design Strategy for Bliss Area” which introduced many interventions and research approaching the Neighborhood initiative with an Urban Design perspective. One of the main project components was enhancing the “aesthetic and environmental quality” of public spaces including streets and open spaces. (Ibrahim Mneimneh, Abdallah El Hajj, Sandrine Samaha, Masa Charara; URDS 602 presentation)

NI could also plan other strategies that can have a long-term effect on the community and visitors for interventions on enhancing public spaces in neighborhoods surrounding AUB in Hamra.

Hamra has many neglected spaces that have potential to become public spaces that can accommodate different activities. Some of these spaces include alleys between buildings, parking spaces that can be negotiated to become public spaces, narrow roads with low vehicular traffic, and neglected and abandoned squares on the ground floor of commercial buildings along Hamra Street. However, open spaces like alleys between buildings and parking spaces, are difficult to operate in. First, the narrow alleys between buildings need a lot of work and require a lot of expenses because they are full of clutter and are filled with waste dumps, generators, and water pipes. Second, the parking spaces need a lot of negotiation with owners of the parking and expenses to acquire the land.

The following map (adapted from an AUB student’s Architecture final project in 2011, Sarah Naim) shows various “pocket spaces” or alleys, which may be activated and used, as public spaces.



Yellow circles are the narrow streets/alleys located: Makdessi and Jaber Doumit Streets.



Green circle marks one of the ground floors of commercial buildings: Strand Building

Therefore, the research will aim to investigate two types of spaces:

- i) Open spaces at the ground floor of commercial buildings that can be considered as semi-public spaces: These spaces are completely neglected, lacking greenery, furniture, and pedestrian activity. Examples of such spaces include the spaces under Strand building located on Jeanne D'arc Street, and the building in front of café Younes located on Neehmat Yafet Street. (Picture three & four)

The strand building has a spacious area below that is accessible from Hamra Main Street and Jeanne D'arc Street. The space is surrounded by shops (retail, electronics (like RadioShack), a hidden cafeteria "Cafeteria Strand" that is located in the Basement, and a Hairdresser directly after the staircase). It also has an unused fountain on the left side of the space and some greenery. In addition, sunlight penetrates this area since it has an open ceiling (pictures one & two).

Strand Building, Hamra; author: M. Majzoub, 2012.



Building in front of café Younes, Hamra; author: M. Majzoub, 2012



- ii) Narrow streets and alleys that can be considered as public spaces: These spaces include some greenery but cars parked on the sidewalks of these streets make it unappealing for pedestrians to gather along the sidewalk. Examples of such spaces include “Jaber Doumit Street” located perpendicularly to Jeanne D’arc Street, close to AUB. It has some greenery, low vehicular traffic, but a lot of cars parked on the sidewalk and is being used by the valet of tasty café to park the customers’ cars. Another street with similar characteristics is located on Makdessi Street (pictures five & six).

Makdessi street, Hamra; author: M. Majzoub, 2012.



In dense urban neighborhoods like Hamra, these spaces become very valuable since there is no possibility of establishing public gardens given real-estate costs. Some people have already noticed the potential of narrow streets/alleys and invested in these places. Examples:

- 1) Bread Republic café Hamra (picture seven): Located in an alley connecting Hamra Main Street and Makdessi Street. The owner of this café has made an agreement with the municipality and the neighbors in order to make it a pedestrian only alley to establish his café. The alley is paved and greened, where a market displaying local farmer products, namely, “Souq Al Tayeb” is held each Tuesday.

Bread Republic café, Hamra; author: M. Majzoub, 2012.

- 2) The Alleyway (picture eight): Recently several pubs have opened in this alley, which is accessible from Hamra Main Street or Makdessi Street. This street started to function exclusively for pedestrians especially during the night, since a lot of people gather around the pubs making it inaccessible for cars. Therefore, establishing these pubs and the gathering of people have obstructed and prevented accessibility of cars.

The Alleyway, Hamra; author: M. Majzoub (2012).



Therefore, these spaces portray successful examples of transforming alleys and narrow streets into pedestrian environments that are freely accessed, pleasant, comfortable, and secure; however, they are consumer-based spaces, and they do not cater for families or children.



#### Literature Review:

The proposal will focus on case studies related to public space interventions in dense urban neighborhoods. Most articles I located are about cities in Western developed countries. In the article “A fresh future for Vancouver’s back alleys”, Farida Hussein describes the process of choosing a pilot alley to be replicated in the rest of Vancouver. “Livable Laneways” movement, which is headed by a small group of locals, initiated the idea of upgrading back alleys in Vancouver. This group held many meetings with local businesses and residents in order to convince

them and provoke interest in the importance of enlivening these alleys through minor and do-able changes. They chose an alley in order to implement a pilot project that can be replicated in other areas in Vancouver. This team partnered with local artists and musicians, businesses (restaurants and furniture shops) in order to enliven the alley.

Similar case studies include reviving alleys in the city of Sacramento. The article entitled “Urban Salvage: Repurposing Alleys as Public Spaces” written by Michael Scott, describes alley revitalization in the Midtown District of downtown Sacramento. Through the “local Alley Improvement Alliance” formed from community members several alleys were identified in order to enhance and beautify them and using them creatively by nearby businesses and residents. This case study shows how cluttered, abandoned alleyways can be transformed into interactive spaces promoting “civic and economic vibrancy” attracting pedestrian activity.

In "The forgotten and the future: reclaiming back alleys for a sustainable city ", by Jennifer Wolch Josh Newell Mona Seymour Hilary Bradbury Huang Kim Reynolds, and Jennifer Mapes, the potential of revitalizing abandoned alleys in L.A., California is discussed. The features and dimensions of these alleys are described, in addition to the activities that take place in these spaces. The article focuses on following a participatory approach including “community based

organizations”. The main methods that were used in this research were: observations, spatial analysis, and focus groups. The article concludes that alleys can be valuable assets that can carry socio-economic, environmental benefits contributing to a “sustainable urbanism”.

The value of exploring and activating spaces between buildings in residential areas will be explained through referring to Jan Gehl’s book, “Life Between Buildings”. Gehl explains how spaces between buildings enhance and improve the quality of life and liveliness of cities and suggests ways and strategies on how these outdoor spaces can be used.

Research Question/Hypothesis/objectives and significance:

<b>How</b> can the AUB Neighborhood Initiative make use of the abandoned small streets and open spaces in Hamra and activate them to become socially active and pleasant public spaces?
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<b>Because</b> AUB’s open spaces are not truly public and the AUB community can benefit enormously from promoting public spaces in Hamra.
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<b>In order to</b> enhance social and economic diversity in the neighborhood and to promote the right of people to enjoy public space in their city.
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**Hypothesis:**

My strategy is to identify existing open spaces in Hamra and work with the community through a participatory planning approach, led by AUB-NI, towards transforming them as public places.

- Open spaces at the ground floor of commercial buildings: these spaces have shops or cafés surrounding them; however, there is still ample of unused space in front of them; These spaces can be activated by installing few benches, adding greenery, or creating play spaces for children through consultation of the community.
- Narrow streets and alleys: these spaces are mostly residential quiet areas. Based on my preliminary fieldwork and observations, most of them have beautiful, relatively clean streets with low vehicular activity (cars are mostly parked there only). Therefore, these streets have potential to be pedestrianized; however, this requires more observations and research regarding the traffic flow in these areas such as conducting a traffic/transportation study in order to assess the feasibility of pedestrianizing the streets.

**Objectives/significance:**

AUB/NI would be providing a meeting place between students, faculty, and the local community, which spills in AUB’s mission of creating a diverse environment. It would also be providing different vulnerable social groups such as children, youth, elderly and women with spaces whether they can sit or hang out.

In addition, AUB/NI would be improving and upgrading neighborhoods in Hamra through public spaces, since these interventions transform spaces into more secure, cleaner, and socially diverse environments for residents to gather and connect acting freely without having to consume.

Such projects involving a community-based approach contribute to social inclusion and bringing the community together. NI would be giving back to the community by benefiting them

through implementing a project that would enhance their environment through consulting and involving them in the intervention.

### Methodology/tools:

For this intervention the following research methods would be used:

- Academic journals, websites, and blogs including case studies and experiences related to public space interventions in dense neighborhoods in other countries, and strategies to enliven alleys and transform them into public spaces. Books, such as “Life between buildings: using public space” would also be used in order to be inspired by Jan Gehl’s human-based approach for implementing public spaces between buildings and integrating the social dimension in the intervention.

### **Fieldwork:**

- Primarily, locating and identifying neglected open spaces that have potential to become public spaces through mapping.  
Second, assessing available open spaces, I will include videos and photography to portray the activities, conditions, dimensions, and aspects of the selected open spaces in Hamra.  
Participant observation is also an essential tool in order to understand the spaces being studied and researched. In this case, active observation is required for a specific period of time like a month of detailed observations and note-taking, and informal conversations with people surrounding these areas such as shops and neighbors passing by in order to understand what activities occur in these spaces, where they can share their experiences and concerns regarding these open spaces. (A. Singleton Jr. and Straits, 1999, p.328)  
Surveying the number of open spaces that can be easily designed and accessed than others (less financial cost: not much waste and vehicular traffic for example).
- After assessment of these spaces, community stakeholders should be identified and selected through sampling; such as owners of buildings, tenants, and local businesses (such as shops, cafés, and hotels), and Hamra residents who don’t live directly adjacent to these spaces, but in neighborhoods close to it and who will be affected by the intervention.  
Focus groups should be conducted including these stakeholders in order to extract and understand their perceptions, opinions, and attitudes towards these spaces, and how would they be involved in activating these spaces including the aspects and changes they envision in these spaces. In addition, these meetings can be useful whereby these community members would be convinced by the value and importance of reviving these neglected spaces to improve their environment and wellbeing.  
After developing a relationship with the community through informal interviews and focus groups, “snowball sampling<sup>1</sup>” could be used in order to give leads to other key community stakeholders that can be potential participants in the intervention (A. Singleton Jr. and Straits, 1999, p.354).

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<sup>1</sup> “Snowballing”: This method consists of one respondent leading to another, where one person being interviewed can give leads to locating another person.



- Face to face interviewing using open-ended questions (A. Singleton Jr. and Straits, 1999, p.284) would be conducted with a sample of AUB students/faculty, and staff in order to understand how they perceive these spaces, their opinion about creating such a public space in the neighborhoods, and how would they be involved in the project. AUB departments that could be major actors in this intervention would also be approached by NI, namely, the Architecture and Design and Landscape Departments. This includes interviewing the faculty in these departments will better portray the extent to which they would get involved in proposing design scenarios for these spaces. Through meeting and interviewing the faculty, NI would inform and convince the faculty by explaining the benefits of involvement in such interventions. The faculty/departments would be enriching their curricula by working on new subjects/projects related to community-based interventions on public spaces in the city, which will generate research and publications. In addition, students involved can gain hands on experience by working in real case studies in the neighborhoods surrounding AUB.
- Interviewing will include potential donors (financial support) such as the municipality, banks, schools, cafés, shops, in order to see which entities/actors are willing to fund and what are they willing to fund in the intervention.

Finally, the methodology entails Implementing a pilot project in each of type of the two open spaces: i) neglected and abandoned squares on the ground floor of commercial buildings along Hamra Street; ii) narrow streets and alleys. These projects would help in highlighting success and weakness in this intervention, which will help in planning and designing other open spaces in Hamra.

#### Implementation Strategy:

#### **Type one of open spaces: neglected and abandoned squares on the ground floor of commercial buildings along Hamra street.**

After identifying the open spaces and conducting introductory meetings with local businesses and residents/neighbors as mentioned in the methods section, a steering committee can be established by the Neighborhood initiative. This committee will include the following members that would be selected by NI: representatives from local businesses (hotels, café, shops), members from the AUB Departments (ArD, LD) including faculty and students, residents, landowners, and representatives from a bank. Several committees should be formed for each project or this type of open space since the local businesses and neighbors surrounding each space are different.

The general criteria of membership includes: individuals who will be committed to remain in the committee during the course of the project from the planning to the implementation phase, and actively attending the committees' regular meetings.

The objectives of the Steering Committee include: i) reaching consensus regarding planning the features of the space being rehabilitated; ii) conduct feasibility studies (setting a timeframe for project completion and identifying and contacting potential donors who can contribute in financing the project), where a representative from the bank would contribute to the feasibility studies.

Although this process may require more time, it privileges the incremental approach or “small steps in the beginning of a planning process create a joint engagement in defining the situation and the gradual development of shared values” (Weiwel and Lieber, 1998). The process

privileges establishing strong ties with the community through meetings and deliberations in order to understand their perception and needs, and long-term involvement in the project. This can be established through a process where the steering committee should be responsible to meet with nearby neighbors and residents to see their potential and possible involvement for the sustainability of this space. For example, after meeting with neighbors, a local neighborhood committee can be formed including nearby residents and neighbors, that would report on a monthly or bi-monthly basis (depending on the need) with the steering committee in case they have any concerns, or just reporting on the conditions of this space. The criteria of membership include individuals who are willing to be committed for sustaining and maintain the space for the future. The steering committee can meet on a bi-weekly basis at the beginning (planning phase), and once the project has been implemented, the committee can meet with the local neighborhood committee on a monthly basis for updates regarding the space and reporting any concerns. NI would act as a mediator between these committees.

Regarding the implementation and feasibility of this project:

The steering committee and NI need to communicate with commercial entities and institutions for financial support. NI/committee should establish a relationship with schools/educational institutions in Hamra; where institutions such as schools maybe willing to offer support and contribute in these interventions including planning children activities in these spaces (such as painting, readings books, competitions, and others) or donating a play structure for children where children maybe charged a minimal entry fee. Commercial entities surrounding these spaces (such as retail shops or cafés) can be contacted in order to donate seating arrangements, shading devices, greenery, and lighting posts for example. They would be convinced to invest in these spaces, since enlivening the spaces surrounding them will attract customers and consequently reviving their economic condition.

Other entities that could be major partners that could participate in donating furniture and activating these spaces are: art galleries and theaters, which could be very interested in investing these spaces by holding exhibitions or movie screenings through projections.

### **Type two of open spaces: narrow streets and alleys.**

A steering committee and neighborhood committees would also be established for each open space under this category of narrow streets and alleys by NI including major stakeholders of the project following a similar structure and mandate as the steering and neighborhood committees of the first type of open spaces involving the surrounding community including businesses and neighbors, but interventions in such spaces require additional negotiation with the municipality.

Regarding the implementation and assessing project feasibility:

These spaces probably require even more negotiation with stakeholders especially the municipality and the private developers, it also requires more physical work. The Neighborhood Initiative already has contact with the municipality, which would facilitate cooperation and support. However, blocking vehicular traffic is a critical decision that needs a lot of negation with the municipality and most importantly with the residents and shop-owners; therefore, NI can form advocacy groups selecting members that are highly motivated and have strong interest in implementing the project from the community surrounding theses spaces to negotiate and convince the municipality of the project.

Private developers may be a threat to this intervention, since they wouldn't benefit from turning many spaces into public non-consumption-based spaces. In addition, they may be attracted to invest in these spaces; therefore the meetings should also be conducted with them to reach consensus where NI could be the mediator in this process.

In order to enliven these places, an open-air “souk” can be held occasionally. The Souq can display local farmer’s products, or any other type of Souq. Such examples include the “AUB Healthy Basket”<sup>24</sup>.

Regarding financing this type of open spaces, the municipality can play a major role in donating the rehabilitation of these spaces. The steering committees of these types of open spaces and NI should also follow a similar process of the first type of open spaces by communicating with commercial entities and institutions for financial support such as banks, firms, and restaurants. Another major entity that can be NI/committees’ partner is “Hamra’s merchants association” (“Jam’iyyat Tujjar Al-Hamra”) that would help in mobilizing and advocating for project implementation. In 2007, the Head of Hamra’s merchants association called for the importance of rehabilitation and improvement of Hamra’s streets. He explained that the Head of Beirut’s municipality and its members should visit Hamra’s streets and plan for their improvement and requested that “Sukleen”, the company responsible for cleaning the streets of Beirut, should make an effort to clean Hamra’s streets ([www.lebanonfiles.com](http://www.lebanonfiles.com)). This reveals that the association is actually in need for such projects and will benefit a lot by making the streets attractive for pedestrians. Therefore, they can play a major role in joining NI and the committees in mobilizing the municipality to fund for the project.

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