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AUB and The Neighborhood Initiative
Regenerating Ras Beirut Through providing Housing
For transient populations

Abstract:

Ras Beirut has been recently invaded by gentrification which dramatically affected its urban and social characteristics. As a response from a good neighbor, the Neighborhood Initiative in the AUB is working on protecting the diversity of Ras Beirut and providing housing for middle incomes. This proposal is an attempt to improve the integration of the two projects. It seeks to investigate the role of AUB as an urban developer for its neighborhood using housing for transient populations as a strategy for the urban regeneration of Ras Beirut. Moreover, its suggesting the long-term rental and partnership agreements as a new strategy to reduce the costs, save the ownership of the properties and decrease the limitations of the regeneration process. It describes the phases of the intervention starting by renting the properties and appropriating them to transient populations' housing and ending with a huge intervention on a district scale to regenerate Ras Beirut by improving the linkages between properties. The last section of the proposal provides the tools on which the research will be built and defines the strategy for implementation.

Introduction:

This proposal seeks to investigate the role of AUB as an urban developer for its neighborhood using housing for transient populations as a strategy for the urban regeneration of Ras Beirut. It starts by a case study profile which briefly describes the

history of the area and its current situation. In the second section, I clarify the research problem describing the invasion of gentrification throughout the area and the exclusion of the middle class. Then I propose an intervention to regenerate Ras Beirut through preserving unique buildings and appropriating them for transient populations' housing, then improving the linkages between the properties on an urban scale. The last part of the proposal describes the methodology and the implementation strategy.

Case study Profile:

Ras Beirut is one of the sectors of municipal Beirut in which AUB is located, it underwent rapid urbanization from swamps and farming areas to a dense middle class neighborhood that attracted a large number of families, professionals and students. This process of urbanization resulted in a heterogeneous ethnic and religious composition and a growing population of transients and marginal groups (Khalaf & Kongstad 1973: 5). The history of the area until the early 1970s can be described in two periods. The first period associated with the establishment of the Syrian Protestant College (later to become AUB) and the protestant community dependent upon it. The second period with the subsequent inflow of English-speaking population groups, increasing commercialization of land-ownership and land use and an emerging middle-class structure. AUB students and employees who were living in the neighborhood added value to the diversity of Ras Beirut. The built up fabric of the area contains many layers from different periods such as the Ottoman, the French mandate, the Modern and the current period of time. Many buildings from old layers are unique and need to be preserved in order not to lose the urban identity and save the urban diversity of the area.

Problem definition and literature review:

In current times, the gentrification process of Ras Beirut is negatively affecting the urban, social, political, economic and environmental characteristics of the neighborhood. The urban context of Ras Beirut is being invaded by luxurious residential and office high rises. The low-rise old buildings from the Ottoman, French and Modern periods are being bought-off and destroyed by real-estate developers as they represent significant investment values. The disappearance of these buildings which are characterized by their unique architectural and urban values is dramatically affecting the identity of the neighborhood and its diverse social structure. The current architectural

and urban identity of the neighborhood reflects the invasion of high rises which erases the mixture of different units in terms of age, condition and height. These high rises are also blocking the sea views throughout the area. Moreover, the commercialization of the area has made it one of the most crowded markets in Beirut and encouraged the opening of a large number of pubs and clubs throughout the area which makes it even crowded at night. In addition, the high prices of the new luxurious properties are unaffordable to the middle income residents of Ras Beirut and thus exclude them from the neighborhood. Moreover, the environmental qualities of the area have been strongly affected by the added congestion in the streets.

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Figure 1: Photo showing the multiplication of high-rise buildings in Ras Beirut. Date:2011

With a sense of responsibility toward these increasing urban challenges within Ras Beirut, AUB established its Neighborhood Initiative in 2006. As a good neighbor and through the NI, AUB wants to play a positive role in developing its surrounding urban context. Many initiatives have been proposed by the NI, two of whom aim at "protecting the diversity of Ras Beirut" and "providing housing for middle incomes".

While the NI is still working on the two initiatives, my proposal is to improve the integration of both in a mutually beneficial way. As Cynthia Myntti (the NI manager) described in an interview, one of the most important strategies against the gentrification of Ras Beirut is through preserving unique old buildings throughout the area and preventing their take-over by new high-rises. One of NI's possible proposals is for AUB to purchase at least an apartment in every building it wants to preserve. This would allow AUB as an owner to take part in the decision making process about the future of these unique buildings in particular and the neighborhood in general.

This can be considered as a top-down and a limited approach for the process of the neighborhood's development. The ownership approach excludes the original apartment's owners and limits the impact of the decision-making shared process, especially taking into consideration the low budget of a non-profit education institution like AUB. How about AUB thinks instead to rent these old buildings or parts of them or conduct a partnership agreements with the owners in order to use the properties in providing housing for transient populations?. The transient populations include students, exchange students, visiting faculties, alumni, employees and faculty members. In that sense, linking the two proposals of preservation and housing becomes interesting especially when we see it as the first step of a further development on the urban context's scale as I will explain further below.

Cynthia Myntti described in the interview that AUB's students and a high percentage of its faculty members and employees prefer living around the university. Taking into consideration the costs of transportation, they realized that living in a walkable distance from AUB even costs less. They usually try to find a place in Bliss, Hamra, Ein El Mrayse or Karakas to save the costs of transportation and enjoy living in the neighborhood. What students usually need is the social networking which helps them to find and choose their flat mates, the apartment's size and location which is suitable for students' life and the payment's rules and conditions of the contracts which are not more demanding than what a student can afford. Brokers make use of the opportunity to gain as much as they can from the students and the landlords. However, I will be studying those issues more throughout the research.

Figure 2: Photo showing how the high rises block the sea view in the neighborhood.

http://www.skyscraperlife.com/projects/13646-u-c-beirut-hochar-tower-17f.html Date: 2010

Learning from other case studies in USA and Europe can be beneficial to explore the role of the university as an urban developer. Housing for transient populations becomes here as a strategy for urban regeneration. This strategy can be used by the NI in the regeneration process of Ras Beirut and the protection of its diversity. While a lot of literature has been written about urban regeneration and about housing, my literature review will be focusing on what brings the two concepts together. I will start by a definition of urban regeneration and a description of housing as a strategy. I will use the

article of Stewart Murdoch to know more about "the history of urban regeneration in the UK and its connections with the community development" and the difference in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Then I will focus more on the role of the university as an urban developer and its partnership with community for affordable housing using an article for Wim Wiewel in which he addresses the experience of university-community partnerships for affordable housing. It contextualizes the housing issue and provides a brief background on the university-community partnerships in providing housing. Then it discusses the more general issue of partnerships, their strengths and weaknesses and their political significance. Then it concludes with the optimal model of university-community partnership. Then I will provide case studies about preserving unique buildings and appropriating them for housing as a strategy for urban regeneration. For instance, a case study described in an article for Hilde T. Remøy and Theo J.M. van der Voordt which is the "conversion of vacant office buildings into housing". In this article they define the purpose of the intervention, the design approach, the findings, the political implications and the value.

| Figure 3 | Figure 4 |

Photos showing some examples of historical buildings from the modern period in Ras Beirut that could be used by AUB.
http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=1018347/Date: 2010

Research Proposal:

Research question:

How can the AUB contribute to the urban regeneration of Ras Beirut by developing planning strategies for transient populations' housing?. Long-term rental or partnership contracts with the owners of the properties can help the AUB as a non-profit institution to play a major role in regenerating the area. In that sense, AUB can play the role of a good neighbor.

Hypothesis/Intervention:

The role of the university will start by gaining funding from the interested institutions for protecting the diversity and the uniqueness of the area. The Alumni donating of money and/or properties is a second source of budget. Long-term rental contracts of at least 75% of the property (legislative requirement) or partnership contracts with commitment to renovate it can encourage the owners as they will not lose their properties at the end. The AUB will renovate and use those buildings to host different activities proposed by the NI including housing for the university students, accommodating various transient user groups, exchange students, visiting faculties, alumni, employees and faculty members. Managing the housing process for the students will decrease the costs taking into consideration that students will be able to share rooms and will pay monthly.

As a next stage, and after acquiring different properties, there should be a study to consider linking different buildings through improving the connections between them (via streets, arteries and open spaces). The improvement of the linkages will be through urban design interventions on street furniture and greening that serves not only the properties' owners, but all the residents of the neighborhood.

In this sense, the intervention relies on multiple stages. First, choosing unique buildings which have an architectural and urban value. Second, renting out the buildings from their original owners with long-term rental or partnership contracts. Third, renovating and ear-marking them for middle income's housing and using them temporarily for transient populations' housing and activities. This will be done through creative architectural and urban studies which save the identity of the building and reduce the costs of the renovation process by using local materials and labor and distribute the area of each apartment in a way that makes it suitable for middle income's housing. The final stage being the improvement of the linkages between those unique properties through urban design interventions to regenerate the area.

Objectives and significance:

The rental and/or partnership strategy allows AUB to save the ownership of the properties, to expand the process to include buildings rather than apartments with the same budget, to provide solutions for transient populations' housing problems and to use the ground floor of these buildings for future projects proposed by the NI. The benefits for the NI is the strategic plan starting on an architectural level with low costs (by renting the properties and rehabilitating them into transient populations' housing) and ending with an intervention on a district scale to regenerate Ras Beirut (by improving the linkages between properties). It would also help in solving other problems like the traffic congestion since many students, faculty members and employees will be able to live in a walk-able distance from AUB. The university will gain a reputation as a good neighbor besides providing housing solutions for its students, faculty members and employees knowing that 12% of AUB students are living in dorms and that its still needs a lot of space for its teaching/research growth. Moreover, it will be a model for other universities like LAU.

Methods:

I will be using many kinds of research methods in this proposal such as fieldwork, surveys, research using available data, interviews and GIS. Starting by data collection through fieldwork, interviews and surveys. I will be using the framework proposed by Singleton and Straits to design the surveys. The data analysis will use qualitative and quantitative approaches depending on what will be needed for each phase of the methodology's seven phases.

The first three phases are about data collection which are: locating unique buildings, Assessing the ownership status and approving the need for housing. The next two phases are about data analysis which are: Mapping the information and Choosing the sites of intervention. The sixth phase is about providing an example of a renovation process for one of the chosen buildings through an architectural, urban, legislative and market studies. The final phase is about providing an example of the urban design intervention which improve the linkages between the properties.

1- Locate Unique buildings

I will start by field work visits and conduct surveys to locate the unique buildings which need preservation in Hamra in particular and Ras Beirut in general. Reading more about the architectural and the urban history of the area will help me understand the historical layers in a chronological order. Many studies about the area will support the qualitative approach of the research by gaining more information about every building separately. In addition, I will conduct interviews with experts of the area's history on both architectural and urban levels to put the process in the right direction. This will help in developing preliminary criteria of what makes a building unique.

2- Assess the ownership status

The first step of this phase is meeting with key informants in the municipality and other governmental institutes which are responsible for ownership issues in order to assess ownership status for each unique building in the area. In addition, several interviews with the owners will help me understand the reasons behind the current situation of each building. Negotiations about the proposal will be part of these interviews to understand the owners' needs and find means of agreement.

3- AUB and transient populations' housing

In this part I will focus on users which are the AUB students and other transient user groups like exchange students, visiting faculties, Alumni, employees and faculty members. I will be collecting information about AUB students throughout AUB's history. Analysis will be done about the percentages of international, national, regional and local students of the AUB. I will visit the students affair's office to get those information. In addition, I will conduct an interview with director of the office to know if there is any proposal for improving student's housing. I will also visit the students' dorms and interview some of the students to know how they evaluate the dorms. I will search for students' clubs which are related to the issue of housing. For example, there are two groups on facebook through which students manage the issue of housing in terms of networking. I will use those linkages to contact the students, ask them questions, analyze the information and (if needed) do an online survey to gain quantitative information about their age, gender, nationality, budget for accommodations and preferred flat mates. Specifying other users, I will talk to research centers in AUB and ask

them if they would be interested in having a sort of hotel for the conferences' guests that AUB holds. Then I will conduct interviews with administrators, deans and chairs to see if they could also benefit from short-term housing for people who visit to give lectures and workshops. Alumni can also inform me of their and their families need for temporary housing over summer.

4- Mapping the information

In this phase, I will use the GIS software to map the gathered information in terms of location, relations with focal points in the area, building's age, building's area, building's condition, typology and ownership. The software will help me organize complex information about each building. On the other hand, knowing how much square meters do we need to cover the needs of housing and the total area for the buildings will help to put limitations for the number of buildings that we need to intervene on.

5- Choosing the sites of intervention

After analyzing the data that I gain about each building in terms of age, area, condition, location and ownership, I will be able to do comparisons and make decisions about buildings that I want to intervene on. The plan will be divided into several stages starting from the most prioritized building for intervention moving toward the less prioritized in an open ended process. The criteria that will be used based on the listed variables focuses on:

   -buildings which have an urban scale features like courtyards, arcades and different masses (for example, Strand and Al Hamra Cinema).

   -buildings which are in a good or moderate condition in order to reduce the costs of the intervention.

   -buildings which have good locations in relation to other chosen buildings.

   -buildings which have been built in the Modern period because of their suitable structural systems and scales.

   -buildings which have less owners.

In other words, I will prepare a matrix which shows the chosen buildings ordered from the most suitable to the less suitable cases.
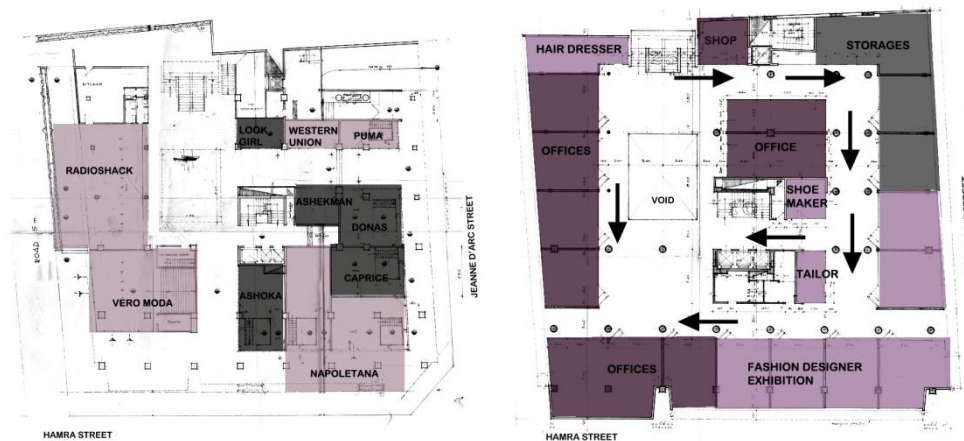
Figure 5
Photos showing the Strand building in Hamra and its plans as an example.
Taken from a proposal done by an AUB student

6- Case study

In this phase I will be providing an example for the preservation and renovation process. One building will be taken as a case study and will be studied in terms of the legislative framework needed for the agreement, the architectural and urban study and the cost-benefit analysis.

Legislative study

In this phase, I will meet the owners of the chosen building, the director of the students affairs' office and an expert local lawyer. Negotiations will be made about the needs and objectives of the groups. The target of this phase is to build a base of an agreement between the stakeholders. I will end up with a suitable legislative strategy to be used by AUB in different cases including long and short time renting and partnership processes. Then I will implement the strategy on the case study.

Architectural and urban study

In this phase, I will provide a full architectural and urban study for appropriating the chosen building for transient populations' housing through a preservation process. The study will include plans, sections, elevations and 3D perspectives showing the before and after situations.

The market feasibility study

In this phase, I will provide the cost-benefit analysis for the case study. The study will take into consideration decreasing the costs by using local materials and labor and regarding the good or moderate condition and the valuable heritage quality of the chosen building. That will provide information about the budget needed for the starting phase of the project. It shows also the time needed to regain the money in order to invest in another building.

7- Regenerating the urban context

In this phase, I will provide an urban design study which shows a virtual predicted scenario for the future of the project. It will be a predicted scenario for the next intervention on the urban scale that links the properties together and shows how the urban context can be regenerated through these linkages. Activating, revitalizing and regenerating these linkages in terms of public spaces, different activities and different means of transportation will be the target of this phase.

Implementation Strategy:

In order to assess the implementation strategy for the proposal, we need first to identify user groups and stakeholders, to categorize them and map them in terms of their interests and influences. Conducting the work to assess who are winners/losers can help us adjust the process to minimize costs on the groups who are losing and make sure that they are not losing more than they can afford to lose while some of the winners can afford to lose as well. Working on blurring the boundaries between the user groups themselves will also help in building "relationships" between them to serve the objectives of the proposal (Wiewel and Lieber 1998).
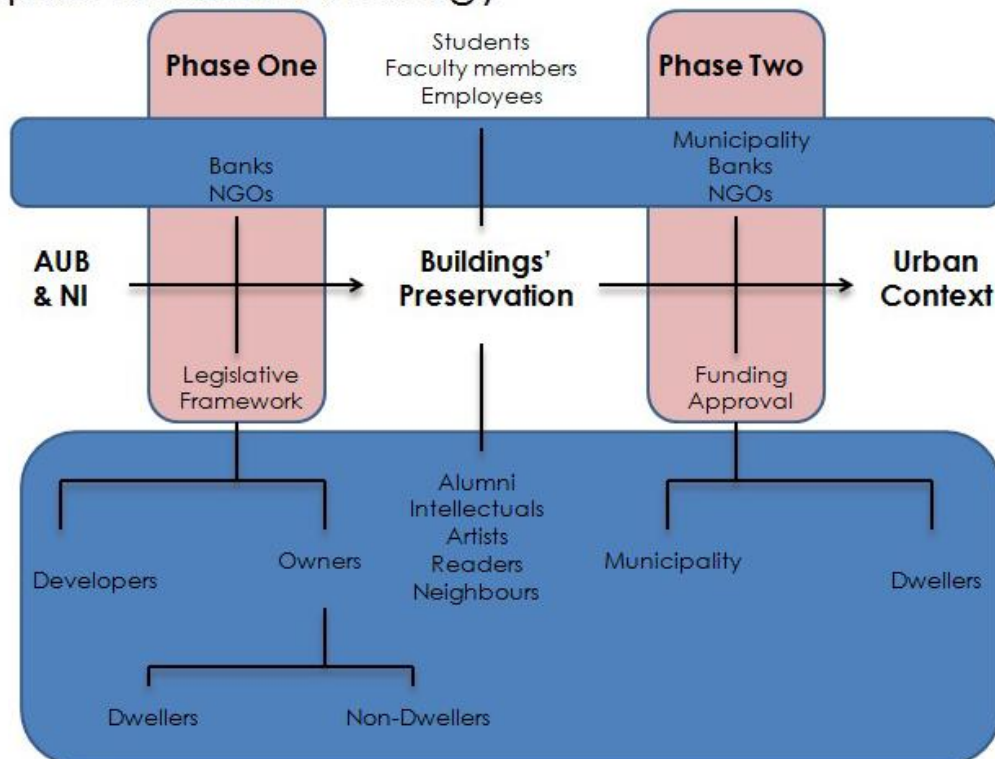
The stakeholders analysis of this proposal shows the role of AUB and NI as a mediator between two groups. The first group represents the sources of money needed for the project's implementation, while the second group represents people who gain benefits from the project's implementation. The role of AUB here is to share its academic knowledge to act as a planner and/or a manager of the project using a community-based approach rather than a top-down one. The diagram also shows how the groups differentiate in relation to the two phases of the project. The first phase which includes the preservation and renovation of individual buildings, and the second one on an urban scale. The main context setters for the first phase are the developers while in the second phase we have to take into consideration the municipality since we will be intervening on public owned lands.

In order to create strategies for implementation, what we have to start with is to find solutions which meet the interests of the context setters. In order to do so we must understand the context setters' "incentives" and "capacities" and to create the "institutional space" for an agreement. While the main interest of developers is money making, that is why they always focus on properties which have development rights (Ferman and Hill 2004).

What I am proposing is that we focus on buildings which are not the target of developers as they don't still have development rights to be gained. Those unique modern buildings which have been built in the 1960s and 1970s are appropriate to our proposal for many reasons like their structural systems' module, their condition, their mixed used characteristics, their urban scale features and their ownership status.

The implementation strategy must be "incremental, process based and flexible". In other words, while working on the implementation new information may rise and conditions may change. We must take that into consideration from the beginning to keep the process flexible and work on alternatives in order to reach our objectives. The NI is the body needed for the implementation of the project. The participation of the students, alumni and faculty members is needed in the data collection phase and will also be useful in terms of the architectural and urban design competitions which the NI will be conducted during the implementation phase of the first building's renovation for the next interventions.

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