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Essay

Planning and the refugee crisis: Informality as a framework of analysis and reflection

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In December 2013, a few months after the dramatic influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanon had transformed the housing landscape of the country, I found myself sitting across the table from a European planner leading the housing sector in one of the largest relief agencies operating in Lebanon since the outbreak of the war in Syria a year earlier. Eric and his "shelter" team composed of both Lebanese and foreigners who all had previous experiences in housing refugees in other national contexts could hardly conceal their frustration with the Lebanese government's position to block what they described as the efforts of the international community to respond to the shelter crisis for what was then nearing 1 million Syrian refugees.[1] The only solution to provide the required number of shelters rapidly, they argued, was to establish "camps."

In his years of experience as a shelter sector manager, it was the first time Eric faced such a challenge, particularly as national governments typically prefer to round refugees in camps, a preference shared by international organizations concerned about targeting relief (Kibreab, 2007). Furthermore, Eric looked positively at the option of building camps to house refugees because of his own successful experiences in "site development". Indeed, prior to coming to Lebanon, Eric had worked in Africa where he used government land to house refugees after installing rudimentary infrastructure, latrines and tents. It responded to the main concern he had: How will it be possible to secure shelters rapidly to the estimated million refugees who had flooded a country notorious for its lack of affordable shelter?

As a Lebanese planner with experience in the housing sector, I had been called to advise on the best strategy to supply housing to the very large number of refugees who had arrived into the country. To most of the planners, architects, and engineers specialized in the shelter sector, the problem was very clearly framed: Lebanon, a country

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already struggling with an acute crisis in affordable housing before the influx of refugees had seen its overall population increase over the course of a year by 20%. Several hundreds of thousands of housing units had to be produced to compensate for this deficit in supply. Mechanisms had to be put in place to organize the production of these shelters. Building on earlier experiences in Africa, Bosnia, and elsewhere, many relief agencies were recycling their most successful recipes, but, as expected, transposing blueprints is easier said than done. To exacerbate things further from their perspective, the Lebanese government wanted to hear nothing about camps. Not even the Ikea prototype of dismountable house-tents, tents that could be dismantled and rebuilt in Syria once the war is over, provided sufficient reassurance about the transience of refugee presence to Lebanese decision-makers.[2]

I had not, until then, reflected critically on the question of housing Syrian refugees. Yet my own training as a planner had taught me that the answer to this question rested less in the recipe book, the "trash can" of previous planning experiences (Cohen et al., 1972), than in the actual practices of the refugees themselves, many of whom had visibly found shelter and organized their livelihoods during the long months in which public agencies and international organizations negotiated the possibility of establishing camps. This was truly an achievement in a city where affordable housing has never been on the public agenda and the median price of an apartment is set around the million dollars, while the minimum wage remains below USD500.[3] Having investigated the city's informal settlements for over a decade, I could predict that some of these neighborhoods, particularly those that counted a large number of Syrian migrant workers prior to the outbreak of the war, were likely to have accommodated a large number of those refugees. In the months to come, and as the national government continued to block the establishment of camps, the large flow of refugees into the country continued unabated, bringing the ratio of nationals to refugees in Lebanon to about 1:4, the highest in the world. During that period, I spent every free minute I had walking around the city's so-called slums, its informal settlements, and figuring out the types of housing arrangements that have been put in place. How did these refugees find shelters? What kind of accommodations did they seek? How did they negotiate their access to housing? And how did they defend themselves when faced with the threats of eviction?

The divergence between Eric's team's approach and mine rests on differences in the framework through which one reads conditions of displacement, uncertainty, and forced population movements. While Eric's team looked at refugee shelter needs as a "humanitarian crisis," I located this shortage of shelter in the framework of a failed or absent national housing policy and the long view of Beirut's history which was consistently marked by flows of refugees. While Eric understood refugee settlement as temporary, to be addressed on the humanitarian relief clock of emergency spending, I understood it as a protracted crisis, one that we are likely to deal with for several years to come. While Eric's team saw in the infrastructure of the camp an ideal solution for producing rapidly the needed housing units, I expected a large section of the Syrian refugees to capitalize on historical networks of migration and employment and prefer the independence and the opportunities offered by Lebanon's cities over the confinement and dependency of the camps (Fábos and Kibreab, 2007; Grabska 2006).

In this essay, I begin with the assumption that the growing global reality of long-term protracted crises and extended forced population displacements requires a shift from the "humanitarian crisis response mode" to accepting that forced population displacements are part and parcel of our global reality. Furthermore, and given global urbanization trends, most of these refugees will seek shelter, employment, and livelihoods in and across urban contexts (Campbell, 2006; Fábos and Kibreab, 2007; Jacobsen, 2006). The "refugee crisis" is hence increasingly an "urban" crisis and many of the challenges it poses fall in line with existing debates about contemporary urbanization. However, planners, planning theory and planning debates, have yet to properly engage the question of refugee settlement in urban contexts. This is perhaps because questions in the planning discipline are too often framed within the context of the global north where the challenge posed by asylum seekers and refugees has been, until recently, less pressing (Darling, 2016). It may also be because the perception of temporariness and "crisis management" has placed "refugee policies" at odds with the long-term future-oriented approach of planning. Yet, I want to argue that once we accept the inevitable premise that refugee crises are essentially "urban" crises, it becomes obvious that the discipline of planning has a lot to offer to those thinking about refugee responses, both in its tools of learning and intervention. I further argue that it is particularly the frameworks developed in planning in relation to the complexity and uncertainty of the urban frameworks such as "informality" and "resilience" that provide the urgently needed tools for knowledge and action. In that sense, the essay is a plea for planners and planning theorists to take questions of forced population displacement seriously and engage with them through the methodologies and lenses developed in this field for several decades in order to inform current debates in refugee studies but also the responses of cities confronted with growing refugee populations around the world. To argue these points, I will flesh out the methodology of learning I developed to understand processes of refugee settlements in Beirut (Lebanon) and show how research findings encourage us to look at the wealth of planning lessons and devise ways of adapting them constructively to the current crises.

Learning the refugee crisis, a methodology for understanding and reacting to refugee shelter needs

The tension outlined above between a humanitarian approach that seeks to build housing or camp units for refugees and one that looks at their inscription in the city and seeks to facilitate it is reminiscent of an earlier debate within the planning discipline, a debate that opposed in the early 1970s advocates of so-called "self-help" or "spontaneous" housing, on one hand, and advocates of public housing, on the other. John Turner (1968, 1972) was perhaps the most vocal advocate for the necessity to accept self-help housing as better adapted to the shelter needs of low-income city dwellers than state-provided housing. This position was buttressed by the failure, across numerous contexts, of state-provided housing which remained either inefficient or inadequately rigid, often both (Koenisberger, 1986). While national governments frequently tolerated "self-help" forms of housing acquisition, they described them as temporary, a short-lived transition before adequate modern housing could be provided. Instead, a handful of planners, architects, and

anthropologists advocated for accepting "self-help housing" as a durable and legitimate mode of housing acquisition, in other words "a solution to a housing problem rather than a housing problem by itself," as the 1976 United Nations (UN)- Habitat meeting will declare. Furthermore, these architects, anthropologists, and planners lobbied for public interventions that would upgrade what they described as self-help neighborhoods, guiding and supporting the production of self-help housing and learning from its strengths (Peattie, 1968; Turner, 1972). Four decades later, with changing economic and political circumstances, the commodification of urban land, and numerous other changes in the global political economy, some of the shortcomings of this approach have become increasingly visible (Fawaz, 2009b). In particular, the Marxist critique denouncing the way in which self-help advocates failed to question the larger framework of inequality, celebrating resilience sometimes in circumstances where low-income city dwellers were exposed to excessive hardship, proved particularly prescient of the dismal housing conditions with which many city dwellers struggle with today (Burgess, 1982, 1985). Despite these critiques, the basic premise that the complexity of urban conditions and the resilience and strategies of city dwellers need to be supported and enhanced remains largely valid. This premise is increasingly audible in the planning field, particularly through concepts such as "informality" that are requiring us to acknowledge flexibilities and modes of adaptation in what was often imagined as rigid institutional structures and to think of modes of harnessing and strengthening these flexibilities, limiting their possible negative externalities rather than trying to formalize them. Furthermore, planners are increasingly recognizing high levels of uncertainty and unpredictability that they have to tolerate when articulating plans, a trend visible through the growing adoption in the discipline of terms such as "resilience" to measure the ability of an urban agglomerations to rebound after destruction (Vale and Campanella, 2005) or to respond and adapt quickly to unpredicted internal or external pressures (Davoudi, 2012; Parthasarathy, 2015).

Drawing a parallel between, on one hand, our contemporary moment and the settlement of refugees in urban centers and, on the other hand, the "self-help" housing debate, it is possible to activate some of the frameworks developed for the study of informality in order to inform our understanding of processes of refugee settlement as well as ongoing responses to the refugee crisis. More specifically, by adapting strategies articulated for the study of informal housing markets to the study of processes of refugee settlement and shelter acquisition in a case study taken in Beirut (Lebanon), this research shows that the city's ability to absorb the very large numbers of refugees rested on the flexibility and responsiveness of informal housing markets that reacted resiliently and promptly to the spike in demand. This response, I will, however, argue, exposed the city's infrastructure, its dwellers, and the refugees to high levels of vulnerability that need to be curtailed. The challenge hence is to shift policies from the emergency relief mode of immediate service provision that seeks to supplant and replace informal mechanisms to a long-term planning framework invested in harnessing the resiliency provided by informal channels and mechanisms of housing provision and acquisition while curtailing their negative externalities. In other words, to recognize the positive attributes of informality is not to make do with the existence of an active regulatory mechanism, but rather to compose with it a more effective planning response to the ongoing refugee crisis. So how would this work in Beirut?

Syrian refugee settlements in Beirut 1: where do refugees go?

UN agencies estimate the number of refugees in Beirut at 350,000 individuals. By crossing the city's map of informal settlements with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data, we find that the majority of refugees who have arrived to the city since 2011 have found shelter in the city's informal settlements and its pre-existing Palestinian refugee camps.[4] In these areas and elsewhere, refugees typically rent existing apartments, rooms, or makeshift housing units anywhere they are available. Furthermore, the high concentration of refugees in some of these neighborhoods has turned them into de facto camps where most apartments are rented out by refugees, stores are run by Syrians, and more generally, the neighborhood immediately betrays a high level of refugee presence through the dress codes, accents, practices, and other visual and socio-spatial indicators. This was further corroborated through conversations with refugee families who frequently explained their housing choice by the availability of affordable housing units and also the selection of a neighborhood where they could rely on thick networks of solidarity that secure direly needed information about employment opportunities, health care, and other vital necessities; access to neighbors and friends who may lend you money when in need; as well as visibility to relief agencies who typically target areas known to house a high concentration of refugees.

Among the areas of high refugee concentration, Nab'ah provides an excellent case study because the neighborhood is at the top of refugee destinations. Nab'ah is located within the jurisdiction of the Bourj Hammoud Municipality that borders the northeastern edge of Beirut. Historically, Nab'ah is one of Beirut's oldest informal settlements. The neighborhood had developed in the 1940s and 1950s in the immediate vicinity of the sites allocated by French Mandate authorities for the permanent resettlement of Armenian refugees. It housed at the time the flows of rural migrants seeking employment opportunities in the nearby port and/or industries of the city. Buildings developed incrementally, eventually forming a dense residential area of multi-story apartment buildings counting in average three to five floors. Many among the early comers became property owners, residing on the ground floor and renting out the rest of the building to those who reached the city later. The forced population displacements trigged by the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war as well as the failed resettlement policies in its aftermath were to change this social morphology of the neighborhood, but also its physical attributes by generating a large stock of rental housing held by absentee owners. As of the mid-1990s, these housing units responded to the growing shelter needs of poor Lebanese families as well as non-Lebanese migrant workers (e.g. Ethiopian, Nigerian), including a large number of Syrian workers employed in the construction boom of the city and its menial services (e.g. street cleaning). This increased the density of the area, causing further deterioration in its built fabric and in its crumbling infrastructure (e.g. exposed electricity wires, narrow sidewalks often piled with trash).

In the aftermath of the war in Syria, Nab'ah's large stock of rental housing quickly emerged as an attractive housing option to numerous refugee families. As the number of refugee families arriving to the neighborhood increased, they rapidly outnumbered the Lebanese families and single migrant workers living in Nab'ah. Of the randomly selected

508 units surveyed in the neighborhood's inner core in January 2014, over two-thirds were occupied by Syrian refugees, while another one-third was distributed among Lebanese and other foreign migrants. Furthermore, and given that Syrian households tended to be much larger than their Lebanese counterparts with typically six individuals/unit in this neighborhood (against three individuals/unit for Lebanese households), we can deduce that the vast majority of the neighborhood dwellers in 2014 were already Syrian refugees (UNHCR and UN-Habitat, 2014). An update of the same survey in October 2015 showed that the trend had intensified with about 70% of the neighborhood housing units now occupied by refugee families. Looking further at the spatial organization of the neighborhood, we found that in the inner core of the neighborhood where lighting and ventilation qualities are the worse, the rate of apartments occupied by Syrian households is even higher, reaching in some blocks 100%. Furthermore, many of these refugees had established small stores, acquired push carts, and/or became involved in local forms of petty trade occupations that enabled their survival, extending their presence in the neighborhood beyond residence. These refugees also met in the street, creating a visible presence, and sustaining a thick network of social and economic relations and exchanges that rendered a refugee's housing choice in the neighborhood a broader investment in networks of information and exchange about vital needs such as employment and others—so much so that by December 2014, Nab'ah could be described as a de facto urban refugee camp. These changes made the neighborhood an interesting case to study processes of housing acquisition for Syrian refugees.

Syrian refugee settlements in Beirut 2: how do refugees access housing?

UNHCR's (2014) shelter surveys indicate that throughout Lebanon, refugees access housing primarily through rent.[5] The trend is particularly strong in cities such as Beirut and Tripoli where almost all refugees are relying on this form of housing acquisition. This was certainly true in Nab'ah where virtually all refugees accessed housing through rental (UNHCR and UN-Habitat, 2014). It requires us to study processes of housing production and acquisition through the lenses of a "market" as the key channel of housing acquisition, investigating the nature of the housing market segment that is currently responding to the needs of the Syrian refugees, particularly the most vulnerable among them. To this end, we can apply the methods developed to investigate informal housing markets over the past decades (Fawaz, 2009a; Jones and Ward, 1998) and raise questions such as follows: What type of housing product are these refugees accessing? What are the channels of its production? Who are the actors involved in the process? And how are the refugees securing the various ingredients or elements needed to access shelter (e.g. information, forms of contract/agreement, and security)? What types of (formal and informal) institutions structure and organize access to each of these ingredients (Fawaz, 2009a; Jones and Ward, 1998; Smith, 2003)?

This approach builds on earlier studies in the field of planning, particularly within the debates about informal housing outlined in the beginning of the article, that have acknowledged the centrality of the market as a mode of housing acquisition, irrespective

of the categorization of the housing product as "legal," "formal," or "informal" (Durand-Lasserve, 1998). It reversed a tendency to consider processes of "informal" housing to be "sectors operating outside the market" by showing the linkages and continuities that organized processes of housing acquisition across the blurred boundaries of domains considered as formal or informal. It also indicated that far from being "market inefficiencies," as they are often dismissed (De Soto, 2000), so-called informal land and housing markets operate as dynamic venues of property exchange that can respond well to the needs and circumstances of many low-income city dwellers (Berner, 2001; Fawaz, 2009a; Fekade, 2000; Jones and Ward, 1998; Keivani and Werna, 2001; Kironde, 2000; Kombe and Kreibich, 2000; Van der Linden, 1994). As a consequence, this research advocated a shift in thinking about housing policies where efforts to improve access to housing for low-income city dwellers need to include learning about existing informal channels of housing provision and building on the strengths of these channels, including informal institutions such as social networks that proved powerful in sustaining housing exchanges in efficient and secure forms (Fawaz, 2009a; Smith, 2003). Based on this approach, I developed in January 2014 a case study of the neighborhood of Nab'ah that counted the highest concentration of refugees and conducted interviews with actors in the neighborhood. In the next section, I report on the findings of this fieldwork.

Understanding refugee settlement I: the production and management of the housing stock

How has the neighborhood been able to accommodate such a large number of refugees? What processes and transformations have been put in place to increase housing supply and facilitate its transfer to refugees? The answer to these questions rests in the history of informal housing production and transformation in the neighborhood. Since the mid-1990s, Nab'ah had responded to the pressure of an affordable housing demand by increasing its housing stock informally. Typical of slum patterns in inner cities elsewhere, existing two- to three-room apartments were sometimes re-subdivided into single-room apartments where ad hoc kitchen and bathroom facilities were added. These new housing units were frequently shared among migrant workers, be they Syrians working in the building industries or the nearby port, Ethiopians or Nigerians working in informal cleaning services, or others. Furthermore, rooms were frequently added on building roofs and rented out for additional income. It comes as no surprise that much of these processes of housing production occurred in the "shadow" of the legal system. While they often violated flagrantly zoning and building regulations, they occurred through processes of exemption, bribes paid to policemen, and the protection of local political forces and religious actors, when necessary, in the assemblage of arrangements typically witnessed in this form of neighborhood in Beirut and elsewhere. The arrival of Syrian refugees in 2011 precipitated this process rapidly. As the demand rose, prices spiked and the incentive of rapid and lucrative profits to be reaped from the refugee rental market became enticing. Thus, both the trends of increasing floors and subdividing apartments were exacerbated. This was already visible in the January 2014 survey which indicates that the most typical housing unit rented by a Syrian household in the

neighborhood was a single room with a mediocre, makeshift bathroom and a kitchen, often limited to a sink and located within the main living area (UNHCR and UN-Habitat, 2014). Furthermore, half the surveyed households occupied a single room subdivided from an original apartment, while only 10% rented a full-size two- to three-room apartment with facilities that they typically shared among two or more families. A rapid visual investigation reflects further the difficult everyday reality of living in re-subdivided apartments. Aside from structural cracks, the typical scene is of peeling paint, humidity, and poor lighting and ventilation especially in the central areas of the neighborhood where the concentration of refugees is high. In addition to the poor conditions of these housing units, the neighborhood's shared infrastructure is also dismal, with garbage amassed on sidewalks, electric wires floating between buildings, the absence of streetlights, and many other deficiencies.

Not only did the nature of the housing product change with the arrival of refugees, but so did its channels of acquisition. Indeed, the large volume of demand triggered important changes in the structure and organization of the market. Over the first few months, rent prices peaked, particularly as the lure of relief payments from international organizations affected landlords and realtors' perception of the refugees' capacity to pay. While UNHCR numbers indicated that there were very few cases of direct cash subsidies and/or rent subsidies in Beirut during the winter of 2014, the cash flow available to refugees from relief agencies was generated indirectly from selling back relief material such as mattresses, blankets, and food, as evidenced by their display in the windows of several refugee-run stores in Nab'ah. Refugees also declared relying on meager savings and borrowing from relatives (UNHCR, 2014; UNHCR and UN-Habitat, 2014). Yet encouraged by the sheer volume of demand, apartment owners were raising their asking prices rapidly. "The Syrians drove the prices up," explained one realtor. "When they arrived, they were desperate and willing to pay anything to access housing. […] Over a few months, the rents doubled. We had never seen such good prices before."[6] Enthralled by the possibilities of high profits, a handful of realtors led the processes of apartment re-subdivision described above as a strategy to expand the opportunities to improve their revenues. The intensification of building and subdivision processes during the first months of the war was in fact remarkable. In October 2015, one realtor estimated that it took him less than 5 months to recuperate the investment of reconfiguring an apartment and beginning to accrue profits. He described the process of transformation, explaining how he and other realtors had pursued the takeover of neighborhood buildings aggressively, approaching Lebanese landlords, encouraging their departure, and taking over the management of their buildings. The profits were so large that several investors living outside the area bought entire buildings that they converted to rental housing for profit. Conversely, unless they benefitted from rent control, Lebanese tenant families found it financially disadvantageous to stay in the neighborhood. As its residential density rose and prices increased, they began to move to other areas closed to refugees where they could secure better quality housing at the same rate.

As a result of these changes, 2 years into the crisis, one could observe the expansion of the hold of realtors over neighborhood buildings in a model reminiscent of the description of "slumlords" elsewhere. In January 2014, it was estimated that about 40% of refugee households in Nab'ah were dealing with a mediator (a building manager) rather than

a landlord directly (UNHCR and UN-Habitat, 2014). Fieldwork in the neighborhood further indicated that three realtors had taken charge of a substantial number of buildings that they managed for absentee property owners who received the payment on the first days of the month. The strongest among them was held by October 2015 over 81 buildings or 2400 apartments, which he managed on behalf of absentee landlords living in other sections of the city, in rural areas of the country, or abroad. His tasks included rental agreements, the collection of fees, but also building maintenance, management, and the re-organization of rental units in order to increase profits. He also implemented evictions when tenants had not paid their dues for over a month, a task he boasted as one of his most important strengths since his presumed backing empowered him to enforce regulations that neither the local municipality nor the "normal" landlords could enact.

Understanding refugee settlement II: refugees securing housing ingredients

How do people secure the ingredients of housing? A first pre-requisite for housing acquisition is access to information. Field findings in Nab'ah indicate that refugees relied essentially on social networks to access information about a possible housing opportunity, to learn about acceptable conditions, to "trust" a realtor, to articulate an agreement (or contract), and also to resist, when possible, the threat of an eviction in cases of conflict or payment defaults. Thus, at least half the households who have settled in Nab'ah had followed an immediate family member (e.g. husband, son) who they settled with either temporarily or permanently. Others built on a thick network of social relations that had been produced through the flows of migrant workers from Syria prior to the outbreak of the war. These networks enabled the circulation of information such as potential housing options, better contractual conditions, or going rent prices that allowed sisters, former neighbors, and friends to locate first settlement option in the neighborhood and eventually, as the crisis extended, to move to one's individual housing option.

Agreements about rental remained largely flexible. Thus, more than 75% of the interviewed tenants recognized that there was no written contract with the realtor or the landlord, only 10% stated that they had a contract (but rarely showed it), while the rest answered that "they didn't know" (UNHCR and UN-Habitat, 2014). Even when a written contract was signed, there are no witnesses on the document and the contract was almost never registered with public authorities. Tenants and landlords also rarely exchanged receipts for payments, while realtors distributed receipts from ordinary receipt books purchased in local stationeries.

Despite the absence of written documentation, one could uncover clear rules and expectations from open-ended discussions with tenants. Thus, tenants converged on the fact that a typical term of contracts runs for 1 year, during which the rent is not expected to increase. Such contract is furthermore renewable so long as the tenant is able to absorb an increase in rent if the market dictates so. There is a mutual expectation that no more than one family would occupy a room and that should the number of tenants increase, the property owner can increase the rent. There is a general sense that if the rent were to increase, the realtor or landlord would have to provide a 1-month notice to the dwellers. Such terms signal the

prevalence of relatively clear sets of rules observed in transactions and clear expectations, even if realtors and tenants were typically reluctant to exchange paperwork. This reluctance, furthermore, seemed "studied" rather than the result of some kind of weakness or ignorance, as if both tenants and realtors saw advantages to the informalization of their exchange, particularly as transaction costs were perceived by both as very high. To realtors, dwellers are unreliable, may disappear anytime after spending a month in the apartment, or may damage the apartment in ways that require their eviction. To tenants, the constraint of paying a rent for a long duration can only be maintained if they maintain secure employment, an unlikely possibility given precarious employment conditions, particularly as the vast majority of those interviewed, as corroborated by UNHCR and other surveys, are daily workers with no stable income. Furthermore, even those who have more permanent employment conditions in industrial or construction work remain in precarious conditions. These refugees were therefore typically reluctant to sign long-term contracts, which they perceived as a commitment they may not be unable to honor. Their reluctance was further increased as national policies began to require refugee registration and to render their presence precarious and illegal as of winter 2015, a situation that wiped the possibility of formal contractual agreements for most. Even the few who declared that they had asked in January 2014 the realtor for a contract explained that they had been discouraged by the threat of paying additional fees (e.g. municipal taxes).

What if one of the parties breaches the contract? In case of payment default, tenants face the realistic threat of eviction. In order to reduce this threat, many households resorted to sharing the premises among several families, hoping that at least some members could secure employment. This is however typically met by resistance from landlords who sometimes find it also a good alibi to increase the rent. Eventually, if a household is unable to pay the rent, it is very likely to be evicted. True, some landlords were described as patient and/or understanding, allowing their tenants to delay payments for several months (UNHCR and UN-Habitat, 2014). Others—particularly realtors—were described as typically intransigent and inflexible, particularly when demand is high and they know they can secure other tenants quickly. Relating narratives of evictions, respondents described a mundane recourse to violence, with realtors appealing to a network of local thugs, armed members of political parties, elements of the police, and similar strongmen whose ability to cause a credible threat lies in having implemented evictions before, often violently. As a sign of their actual power, it is interesting to note that realtors do not wait for the evening or the weekend to implement these evictions. Despite the lack of legal grounds, they execute evictions in broad daylight, using the occasion as an example to teach others who may default in their payment (UNHCR and UN-Habitat, 2014). In the most typical scenario, a landlord—or more often a realtor—issues several oral warnings over the duration of at least 1 month, sometimes more, before enacting the eviction. The incidence of the latter appeared however less frequent than predicted, particularly because tenant families tend to flee the neighborhood at night if they are unable to pay the rent, leaving the landlord with an unpaid debt he has no hope of collecting. As for realtors, they seemed keen on maintaining their credible reputation in delivering apartments, keeping their words to the tenants about the amenities they promised, and also in implementing evictions when payment defaults accumulated. This credibility, particularly in the ability of securing payments, gradually transformed the

nature of the market as landlords found it easier to rely on realtors for rent collections and began to delegate the task to them, even if they lost some of the profit.

Looking at the transacting conditions between the two parties, it is easy to understand why market conditions have deteriorated, and with them refugees' living conditions. In an environment of high uncertainty, property owners preferred to rent through realtors. Indeed, transaction security from the perspective of landlords could only be secured through the takeover of these local strongmen turned realtors who now control the majority of property transactions, pushing prices up for everyone, but also demanding adequate rent payments and forcing evictions when tenants default. Conversely, long-term dwellers with some experience in the market explained that they avoid renting from realtors and prefer to deal directly with landlords. Several long-term tenants described their struggle shifting from an apartment rented out by realtors to an apartment directly managed by a present landlord. Asked about the reasons behind such a decision, one tenant explained that he could "beg" the landlord not to increase the rent when he asks for it, something he could not do with a realtor. Others described landlords as "more humane," more "flexible," and "easier to negotiate with" even if not entirely compassionate, while realtors were frequently seen as "politically backed" and "harsh."

Tracing changes in the neighborhood

How has Nab'ah been affected by the arrival of these refugees? As noted above, the first important observation to be made is that the increase in neighborhood population has triggered a dramatic deterioration in the neighborhood's living conditions: higher density and crumbling infrastructure are the order of the day. In the municipality, the engineer in charge argued that the changes are all "illegal" and the municipality will have nothing to do with this reality outside its control. Her office hence refuses to organize transactions, limit densities, and/or upgrade the infrastructure. When I spoke to her last in Spring 2014, the engineer was further disheartened as one of the large relief agencies had approached her for permits to place latrines on the sidewalks, something she rightfully described as outrageous and borrowing from an imaginary of refugee camps in Africa that prevents relief workers from seeing the dense urban fabric where they are planning to intervene. This is not to say, however, that all changes are negative. To begin with, interviewed families who have chosen or selected to stay in the neighborhood described an improvement in security conditions triggered by the influx of families that replaced the flows of single (mostly male) migrant workers. "Since Syrian families arrived," one responded explained, "you can see children and women again in the streets. It is a nice change from the concentration of young, single males." Several also commented that this population change has had a calming effect in the neighborhood where street fights have been considerably less frequent. As for refugee families, they frequently described a preference for living in Nab'ah where they felt that thick social networks provided a direly needed safety net.

Learning from informal markets

What do these findings tell us? The first obvious conclusion is that planning methods are effective in informing our understanding of refugee processes of settlement. As

international organizations and scholars in the field of refugee studies grow increasingly aware of the "urban" nature of the refugee crisis (Campbell, 2006; Fábos and Kibreab, 2007; Jacobsen, 2006), planning has also an important potential in informing what should be done to respond and improve processes of shelter acquisition.

Going back to the debates in the field of planning about the nature and organization of informal segments of the housing markets, we can see that the rental housing market through which refugees have accessed shelter reflects many of the characteristics, both strengths and weaknesses, observed in informal land and housing markets elsewhere: it is a resilient and highly responsive market that relies largely—but not exclusively—on informal institutions, particularly social networks, but also on the sometimes abusive weight of powerful political parties and the strongmen that they support (Fawaz, 2009a). Thus, informal institutions secure today for refugees in Beirut many of the indispensable ingredients of housing acquisition, but they leave them too often vulnerable to eviction and confined to inadequate shelter conditions with no recourse to negotiate better contractual deals or housing conditions. Inadequate spatial conditions furthermore extend to entire neighborhoods where shared amenities are, as described in the article, crumbling. So if we are to locate the Beirut neighborhoods sheltering large numbers of refugees today within their own trajectory of change, as is commonly done among planners who articulate intervention strategies in informal settlements (Durand-Lasserve, 1998), these neighborhoods all appear to be rapidly deteriorating, requiring planning interventions to improve both their institutional and spatial conditions. There is a lot to be learned, here, from the wealth of planning experiences developed through interventions in informal settlements in cities throughout the Global South since the mid-1970s (Fernandes and Varley, 1998). Such interventions would begin by instituting neighborhood-based community organizations where refugees and local populations can work together, encouraging landlords and members of the local Lebanese population to stay in the neighborhood, establishing a local community registry to record housing transactions and to clarify the contractual terms in ways that protect tenants from land price increases by securing the appropriate circulation of information and that provide room for negotiation and recourse outside the abusive frameworks imposed today by unchecked realtors. Such neighborhood-based institutions could eventually also create sufficient accountability from the perspective of landlords so that they don't have to resort to realtors who introduce a more intensive, if not abusive, use of space. There is furthermore a dire need to appeal to the integrated, neighborhood-upgrading types of interventions that combine physical upgrading and institution building in order to improve the shared amenities of the neighborhoods sheltering refugees today, such as waste collection, street cleaning, water and electricity provision, and other dire needs. There is finally a need to involve local municipal authorities and acknowledge the excessive burdens that have been imposed in their jurisdiction, to improve their capacities to deal with the challenges posed by the influx of refugees (Boustani, 2014). In the field of planning, such interventions are obvious, yet they are still far from the agenda of international relief organizations, particularly because the latter have largely maintained the traditional framework of short term, emergency relief responses. This makes for the urgency of engaging planning to contribute to the current refugee debate, in housing, but also in other sectors of development.

Thinking through planning theory, I first go back to the debate about informality through which I framed the approach to studying the ongoing shelter refugee crisis in Beirut. The trends outlined in the case study reflect and echo ongoing scholarly debates about the nature, potentials, and vulnerabilities of informality. As in the aftermath of the 2005 floods in Mumbai (McFarlane, 2012), the Mexico earthquake (Davis, 2005), or the post-Katrina reconstruction in New Orleans (Nelson et al., 2007; Berke and Campanella, 2006), informal networks of social relations and solidarities proved effective, responsive, and reliable in providing an otherwise unavailable security net to the flows of refugees looking for shelter in the city. Furthermore, and specifically in relation to the resilience of "slum" dwellers and their ability to forge a response built on networks of solidarity at a time when state authorities are in disarray (McFarlane, 2012), the recent experience of Beirut in sheltering refugees indicates that not only has "social solidarity" been at work in volunteer interventions of the type described elsewhere, but also, and at least equally relevant, the informal nature of the processes through which spatial production and allocation are managed has provided the flexibility and responsiveness needed to absorb the flows of refugees arriving to the city. The informal networks of actors, as well as the informal institutions to which they appealed, formed a social infrastructure (Simone, 2004) that was able to transform several urban neighborhoods in record time, doubling the number of housing units and adapting transaction mechanisms in ways that responded to the demand posed by refugees but also capitalized on the economic opportunities that their presence had generated in terms of shelter demand. In this context, the negativity in which informal settlements are typically perceived by public authorities, particularly their common depiction as "vulnerable" urban spots equated to the "weak points" of a city (Seeliger and Turok, 2014), is balanced by their potential to help the entire urban agglomeration, as in the case of Beirut, absorb the shock of the refugee influx. Yet in the absence of a long-term resiliency plan where the physical infrastructure of the neighborhoods absorbing large flows of refugees is upgraded and consolidated, it is expected that the flexibility that informality provides in helping secure shelter for the refugees will also be the main cause of their long-term vulnerability. As neighborhood densities skyrocket without public interventions to buttress the neighborhood's shared amenities, living conditions in the neighborhood deteriorate rapidly, increasing also the area's long-term vulnerability to any external pressure. Furthermore, and as seen in the essay, the rapid spike in demand precipitates the takeover of the housing market by realtors whose unchecked power translates in higher threats of eviction, lower negotiation power for tenants, and hence poorer tenure security. Ultimately, the cost of the refugee crisis appears unequally distributed, with informal settlement dwellers responding resourcefully to the crisis, yet bearing the brunt of the pressures exerted on the city.

These trends, in turn, reflect the importance of putting the debates about urban informality in conversation with ongoing debates about urban resilience and its constituents. Notwithstanding its perhaps overly scientific origins, attention to resilience is at least partially the outcome of a growing recognition that planning's "will to order" (Davoudi, 2012) and its assumptions of a knowable future are contradicted by the complex, inherent uncertainty of future projections. As cities globally come to the realization of their vulnerability to man-made and natural disasters, increasing attention is paid to their ability to bounce back, adapt to unexpected shocks, recover from a

hazard, and transform as a result of stresses when new challenges occur. Within this context, "resilience plans" frequently describe informal settlements as the weakest/most vulnerable points of a city (Seeliger and Turok, 2014), particularly when a binary reading of urbanization as formal/informal conceives of informal settlements as the "unknown" neighborhoods where data and demand cannot be forecasted, in contrast to supposed "formal" sectors of the city where forecasting is possible. Thus, Seeliger and Turok (2014: 188) write, "the presence of large informal settlements can increase the pressure on citywide systems and push infrastructure networks to the limit unless decisions are taken to invest in larger and more versatile systems." As noted above, however, the ability of Beirut to absorb the large number of refugees and secure shelter rested specifically on the ability of the city's informal settlements to accommodate these refugees. It also depends on the resilience of informal social networks to guide and sustain refugees, property owners, and realtors in organizing the production and allocation of housing units in an otherwise impossible context where market transactions are only secured through informal institutional mechanisms. If the recent Beirut experience teaches us anything, it is that the existence of social networks and informal modes of housing production and re-subdivision help foster adaptive urban capacities and enhance transformative resilience. It also tells us that this adaptive capacity remains nonetheless vulnerable to intolerable pressures and needs to be harnessed, not just celebrated. Thus, the deterioration of living conditions tells us that such systems are "not a substitute for responsive and accountable governance" (Davoudi, 2012: 305). One can hence only think of informality as an important asset and secure its sustenance if it is integrated in a larger framework of disaster management response that includes so-called "slum" dwellers as active participants in decision-making. In that sense, slum dwellers need to be considered as a key part of the disaster planning—and the planning of the city, more generally (McFarlane, 2012). Resiliency to crisis such as the ongoing crisis hence requires planning to harness, learn from, work in partnership with, and integrate (rather than seek to regularize) existing informal institutions and modes of operation. This is well in line with recent debates about informality where scholars working on waste collection (Fahmi, 2005; Miraftab, 2004), housing markets (Fawaz, 2009a), and other sectors have called for the necessity to learn from and build on informal assets, integrate them, buttress them, and recognize the valuable role they play in the city.

Finally, an article that speaks of the importance of planning and outlines the multiple parallels between processes of refugee settlement and other low-income urban communities should not conclude without noting that despite these similarities, there are important differences between refugees and local citizens, particularly in terms of their entitlements and vulnerabilities, the frameworks through which they can reclaim their rights and negotiate their presence. Since December 2014, the Lebanese government has begun to require refugee registration in increasingly difficult conditions that have materialized in the criminalization of the refugees' presence in Lebanon. This will no doubt further disenfranchise refugees and increase their alienation and negative experiences. In that sense, one needs to pay special attention to the vulnerability of this group in comparison to other, low-income city dwellers in Beirut and elsewhere.

Notes

1. Various estimates place the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon today to 1.5 million. This number cannot, however, be corroborated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) refugee registration figures because the Lebanese government has required UNHCR to stop registering refugees since May 2015. For more, see http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122
2. Drawing parallels with the presence and organization of Palestinian refugees who have been in Lebanon since 1948, the Lebanese government continues to see camps as a concession to the refugees that embodies some form of entitlement they may have over the country.
3. See Ramco Study findings in *Al Akhbar*, 14 February 2014., Bank Audi, *Annual Report, Lebanon Real Estate Report*, 2013.
4. Maps for refugee settlements can be found at http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122
5. These patterns are corroborated by the 2015 UNHCR shelter survey findings that were presented in several occasions in Beirut. Based on large-scale phone interviews, the shelter survey presents the most accurate national document about housing conditions for Syrian refugees in Lebanon.
6. Interview held with realtor in Nab'ah in October 2015.

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