

Planning the City through Play: Youth Efforts in Making Communal Football Fields in Beirut

Project by [Public Works Studio](#), first initiated as part of “Practicing the Public” (2014-2015), and developed in 2015-2016 as part of a research grant from the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship

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1. About the Project

At the age of 11 I started playing football. Our field was the Tannoukhiyeen Street where I was born. There is a tall building, which used to be my playground before. There is also an old house, and that whole area was my playground. The street was a dirt road and that's where I learnt to play football with a tennis ball, wearing what they used to call “espadrine” the rubber canvas shoes which you could buy for 2 dollars. People were watching us from balconies and thought we had potential and that's how we ended up in Nijmeh team. So I became a Nijmeh player, me and a famous guy called Mehieddine Itani. He was a very naughty boy and never the obeyed rules. Facing the house where I lived was a huge Carob tree where we used to run away to spend the night. Most of my adventures were concerning play. We were going to the sea and picked sea urchins. Our best place was called tehweeleh. At that time, it was a small site and all the rest was a free beach.¹ – Tamim, a former football player

This anecdote is set in Beirut. But what Tamim describes is 1950s Beirut, a city with little urbanization and an abundance of open spaces for playing. Today, Beirut is a very different city. An all-time economic vision to favor the service and real estate sectors has resulted in a city that bears no attention to its shared spaces, and where private capital overthrows the common good. Exacerbated by a 15-year civil war and post-war reconstruction policies, Beirut has witnessed the disappearance of its coastal lands, the closure of its largest public park, and the emergence of new luxury buildings erected over the rubble of old homes and shared spaces. This control of public space in Beirut is also intensified with the securitization of almost all city streets, as well as the closure of all official football stadiums.

Yet, despite these conditions, Beirut dwellers still lay claim today to a number of open areas in the city. Amongst these areas are informal football fields that the urban youth freely access, simply for the enjoyment of play.²

To think through the city from the lens of “play” provides us with a new way of seeing its spaces. Arguably, play is a form of knowledge about the spaces where the practice occurs through

¹ This quote is borrowed from the work of Maria Abu Nasr, the AUB Oral History Project, supported by the AUB Neighborhood Initiative

² For more readings on the informal public use of urban space in Beirut, refer to the “Practicing the Public” publication (Mona Fawaz, Ahmad Gharbeia, and Public Works), and to Abir Saksouk-Sasso, “Making Spaces for Communal Sovereignty: The Story of Beirut's Dalieh,” in *Arab Studies Journal* (Vol. XXIII No. 1), Fall 2015: 296-319.

imaginative, often spontaneous actions linked to everyday encounters. Through this lens, outdoor-play practices are forms of spatial appropriation and reproduction; they introduce unpredictability and consequently new possibilities.

As Tamim explains in his childhood adventures, and in line with Lefebvre's conceptualization of play, these spatial practices extend beyond the confines of time and place, and spill over to embody borderless play in the city. These are occurrences that transcend planning regulations and provide the opportunity to imagine an urban playground that comprises the entire city.

Hence, we began this project with a simple question: where do people play in Beirut? Given its wide appeal as a practice, we navigated towards football as perhaps the most enduring popular public practice. We did not approach football as a "modern sport", tied to a system of institutions that represent and defend the interests of the sport (Bourdieu 1978). On the contrary, our interest lied in the 'simple playing of games' that Pierre Bourdieu found distinct from the modern sport³. As such, we looked for informal football fields that the youth freely access, individually or collectively, without institutional support; simply for the enjoyment of play and being together.

This research explores youth organizing, and their aspirations, and challenges they face. By recognizing the claims posited by the youth on urban spaces, this project impacts governance and planning. To do so, we traced stakeholders, property owners, and neighborhood histories. In this search, the makers of the fields - the youth - were our main concern. We tried to understand their profiles, their networks, their modes of acquisition and organizing, and the obstacles they face. We also tried to develop ways to support their collective initiatives in finding their space in the city. Given the wide appeal of football, self-made fields appropriated at the scale of neighborhoods provide the best opportunities to observe the production of "public space" from below.

In other words, **this investigation explores the agency of the youth, but also sheds light on the functioning of the city, providing potential paths for impacting the practice of planning**, where the youth's agency becomes a guiding process.

After all, an essential part of the right to the city as elaborated by Lefebvre is the need for creative activity, the imaginary, and play; the right to participate, the right to appropriate, the right to complete usage of moments and places (Lefebvre 1996, 179). The young football players we encountered are making these claims and engaging in such practices.

Thus, we consider this report as a basis for further work we will pursue to(1) **sustain these fields**, (2) **assert youth practices and strengthen their social networks**, and (3) **celebrate an alternative experience of the city**.

³ Pierre Bourdieu, Sport and Social Class, Social Science Information, December 1978 17: 819-840

3. Stories from the Field

Karantina Field, also known as al-Khodr

How is this field governed and maintained? And in what ways do these youth organizing efforts impact life in the city?

Situating the Field

Karantina or al-Khodr field has a lot to say about community and youth organizing, and the opportunities and possibilities that may be created, especially in a historically marginalized neighborhood like Karantina. The area was completely isolated from the city, as the 1956 Northern Highway separated its inhabitants from the “outside world,” according to one of its residents. It suffers from high unemployment and lack of access to public transportation. It was turned into a dump for the city of Beirut; its residents have been completely neglected, while most of them hadn’t even finished their official education. (DPU Summer Lab brief, 2014)

In such a context, there is great hope in this neighborhood, simply by looking at how the youth locally organized themselves to be able to play football, and how this fosters a sense of belonging to the city, and having an active social role.

Historically the Karantina area is made up of two-story buildings owned and occupied by Armenian families such as the Donikians, the Chalwarjians, and others, since the 1930s and 1940s. It also houses the al-Khodr neighborhood, which has always been inhabited by “Arabs” (nomads) who worked in the slaughterhouse.

During the Lebanese Civil War, an entire Armenian neighborhood was torn down and bulldozed by the militias. Back then, the Armenian residents and property owners (about 40 small plots) were displaced to other areas; most of them immigrated to the United States and other countries.

Their lands remained vacant until the end of the Civil War, when some of the residents of the Khodr Neighborhood returned home. When the area came back to life, some young residents wanted to set up a football field. So they used the empty lot facing their neighborhood, raised some money from the residents, lay sand on the ground, and installed crossbars.

Today, the field is surrounded by narrow roads from three sides. These roads are rarely used by cars, which opens them up for playgrounds for the children of the Khodr Neighborhood, which is separated from the field by a street. From the southern side, the field is adjacent to another vacant piece of land that has a different level from the field.

The field is known for its sturdy and new crossbars, red sand, and clear boundaries. It is regularly maintained and used for games, which makes it a dynamic space.

Team Selection

Khaled Daou is a 26-year-old repairman who maintains industrial equipment. His father, Mohammad Daou, and Basset El-Khatib were the first to cover the field with sand. When he was 10 years old, Khaled Daou used to play with al-Ansar; he’d won a certificate for best goal keeper.

He played with the Beirut Youth Team in 2015, then left them and started his team in Karantina on his own.

Mohammad Matar (born in 1960), one of the coaches, says:

"We've been here for one hundred years. My father was born here. I played football between 1973 and 1980. In the late 1980s, I was injured in Khaldeh during the Israeli invasion. In 1973, I played with al-Ansar. In the 1960s, there was a football team, which used to play in the Municipality Square here, which is now the square facing the Army base. I remember all the players' names from back then: Chafik El-Khodr, Ahmad El-Moustafa, Ahmad Deaibes, Abdallah El-Moubarak, Abed El-Khatib, Jamal Abadi, Walid Diab, and Shehadeh Shehadeh. Khodr el-Khodr was the coach. The same team still plays today under the same name of Khodr Team, after the Imam Khodr, and the mosque here."

In 1979, the team's cubs joined the First League, but they stopped playing during the War between 1985 and 1986. The team returned to the game after the Civil War, with the First League cubs. The current team, which has cubs, and first, second and third league players, is made up of 15 main players and four reserves. Khaled Matar (Mohammad Matar's son) is the captain. The rest of the selection consists of Jamal Daou (his nephew), Mahmoud Al-Hussein, Ali Houssam, Hatem Zahran, Mohammad El-Said, Haytham al-Zoabi, Mohammad Khaled Said (Mohammad's el-Said's cousin) and Hassan El-Ahmad. There is also Radwan who in 1986 was one of the Khodr team cubs. His father also played in the first league with al-Ansar in the 1960s.

The sense of belonging to the team is clearly enduring from one generation to the next. Because parents are relatives, they are jealous of each other, so they encourage their children to play. Also, Khaled Matar began about a year ago to set up a girls' football team, which they're very excited to support and strengthen.

Community Organizing and Field Management through Social Networks

In maintaining and running the field, there is a personal and communal effort which allows the young players to keep using the field. Their main method is to rely on raising funds from each other, which doesn't go without difficulties. In February of 2016, for example, they wanted to raise some funds to fix up the field, particularly to change the crossbars. But the crossbars cost \$250, which they couldn't afford. Some players couldn't pitch in, while 10 did, knowing that three of them were unemployed at the time. One of them explains:

"There were players who could afford \$50 or a little less, but the rest of the players didn't have jobs. Some of them were students who had an allowance from their parents. In my case, for example, all my friends go to school during the day, and play football around 5:00 or 6:00 o'clock in the afternoon. I myself go to school in the afternoon, and work at night. So I play with them on Saturdays and Sundays. At night, I work. In the morning, I sleep."

In some cases, they use the available resources around them and their social connections in the neighborhood. Mohammad Matar, a player and neighborhood resident, says that one day he found a bulldozer working on a piece of land not so far away from their field. It belonged to a company that was working on the infrastructure in the area, and installing pipes. Mohammad went to the bulldozer's driver and asked him to clean the field for \$50. The driver said yes. That's

how he cleaned up the field trash, and leveled the ground without having to incur the cost of renting a bulldozer. Another time, Mohammad was able to get crossbars made for half the price, thanks to a blacksmith he knew. He explains:

"I had made the crossbars according to the adopted standards, using pipe iron, and had them done at the blacksmith. I bought them for half the price from an iron factory. The iron and labor cost amounted to \$800, which means that they got paid \$400 for the iron. The pipes were at least 10cm thick."

Players also mention other challenges:

"The field here is always open and in use, even at night. But this year it was deserted, so dogs started digging deep holes in it. We need more than the existing sand to fill them up again. In 2014, we brought 70 trucks, which transported each day, for two weeks, four or five truckloads of sand that the bulldozer scattered on the ground. Under the sand, there were landfills, but the thickness was good enough: 20 cm of sand. Today, there's a 30-cm difference between the field and the adjacent land."

Sometimes they turn to the recently founded local organization "Khodr Development Organization". But the latter clearly say that they don't ask for funding from anyone, and they haven't turned to any political leader. "We want the young people in the area to get used to relying on themselves," says Hisham El-Diab, a Sukleen employee and the Chairman of the organization. "We only take funding from the people in the area." Haytham El-Zoabi is responsible for the Football Department in the organization, and has been a member for 16 months. With a small financial support from the organization's Football Department, fixing up the field became easier.

Breaking Neighborhood Boundaries and Playing to Fight Unemployment

In spite of all these challenges, the players never stopped working towards improving the field, and organizing football tournaments.

In 2000, 2005, 2008 and 2012, they organized friendly games between the Khodr team and an Egyptian team from the neighborhood. Games used to take place in the Khodr field weekly, at the rate of approximately two games a day. Teams from outside the region took part in them too: The Armenian team, Ararat, from Burj Hammoud, Racing from Karm El-Zeitoun, and the Gemmayze team.

They also organized in August 2015 the "Martyr Abdel Basset Matar" Tournament, after the son of Mohammad Matar, who was martyred on May 7, 2008, and his name was engraved on the championship cup; a surprise planned by the players. Teams from several regions, like Naameh, Burj Hammoud, Jnah, Ouzai, Mar Mikhael, and Sin El-Fil, took part in the championship. The Khodr team won.

Also, as a way to keep the spirits high, the captain frequently challenges other clubs from other neighborhoods. "I have a team ready to challenge you," he tells these other clubs. And he schedules games with them in the Karantina field. Once, in preparation for these challenges, he trained 16 players (the oldest of whom was 15 years old) during the summer, when schools were closed. The players get very excited to challenge other teams outside their region. They even complained to the captain because he refused to train them during winter time. The captain didn't

want to train them in the cold, under the rain so that they wouldn't get sick, and their parents wouldn't be angry with him. But the players were so upset and angry about not being able to play during winter that they broke the crossbars as an act of protest! This act was led by 9-year-old Bilal, and six or seven other kids who loved football!

These tournaments that the captain organizes in other neighborhoods break the barriers between Karantina and other areas. According to Haytham, when done locally, they also “create a beautiful atmosphere, which is better than wasting time, smoking the shisha, and doing bad acts.”

Needs and Ideas for the Field Voiced by the Players

Mohammad Matar is the general supervisor and executive in the team. He says they need logistical not financial support. They would like to have socks and numbered jerseys. They also struggle with maintaining the field.

“Historically, training used to take place here in Karantina. It was only this year – 6 months ago to be precise – that we started training in the field of the Armenian team, Homenetmen, which belongs to the Burj Hammoud Municipality, which is alright. We're neighbors. When the player is comfortable in the shoes he's wearing, he can kick the ball with a lot more confidence. In the Khodr team, we buy used shoes that become worn out three months later. Radwan's father – for instance – used to play with Al-Ansar before the war, in their field in Tarik El-Jdideh. One time his shoes were torn and people laughed at him. 'You're still wearing these shoes?' So he bought an original pair of Adidas boots for LBP 45,000.”

Today, their larger project involves merging the field with the adjacent, empty piece of land to make up one big field in length, not width. There is a big difference between the levels. “We won't fix it up with our own money,” says Mohammad, “because one day the owners of the land might come and kick us out, and we would have incurred all this cost for nothing.” This is where the challenge of the private property of the nearby piece of land plays out, which is not the case with their current field whose owners are absent.

Stakeholders

Players, coaches, residents, Khodr Development Organization

Mar Elias Palestinian Camp Field

How does youth organizing in Mar Elias re-affirm a sense of belonging to the city, in a context where minority national groups are stripped off their basic rights?

Situating the Field

The Mar Elias Palestinian Refugee Camp was built in 1952 on a piece of land belonging to the waqf of the Orthodox Church. It was surrounded by groves until 1980. Back then, the youth from the Camp used to play football on a nearby piece of land, before it became a construction site. In 1997, the football players in the Camp – 20 players to be exact – decided to fix up the big adjacent piece of land nearby. This land was at different points in time either a waste land, or a parking lot. It also had an amusement park with swings. During the Civil War, the Syrian Army built rooms, and garages to sleep in, and used the land as a military outpost. This didn't sit well with the owners of the land, who built a fence around it.

After the War ended, this land was abandoned. Thus, the football players decided to turn it into their field.

The 20 youngsters raised some money from residents of the camp. They brought a bulldozer to level the ground, and convinced a blacksmith in the Camp to make and install crossbars.

For a long time, the field was used to host football tournaments during the month of Ramadan, bringing together teams from the different camps around Lebanon, in addition to teams from Tarik El Jdideh and the Safa Club. For the families in the Camp, the site was a place for walks, and precious time with their kids. So they set up an iron ladder to make it easier for the children to access it.

The floor of the field was covered with asphalt, since the land was formerly an amusement park. This meant that it didn't absorb the rainfall which gathered and created cracks in the ground. The potholes multiplied in size two years ago due to the rain and attrition. The people in the Camp collaborated with Palestinian organizations to change the direction of the field, and reduce its surface into half its initial size. That's how they were able to use it as a football field after it was barren.

Teams, Tournaments and the Sense of Belonging to the City

In the past, all the youth groups in the Camp had their own football teams. The names of the teams are very old. The most prominent ones were the Ramlet Team and In'ash Team.

One year ago, the two teams merged to form the Mar Elias Club, with two coaches: Fares Ahmad and Abu Rami Khalifeh. The Club has four teams covering different age groups. Each team has two uniforms:

- First Category (25-33 years): green and blue
- Second Category (18-24 years): blue stripes and orange
- Third Category (teenagers: 11-16 years) and Fourth Category (kids: 7-10 years): Abu Rami used to buy and wash the uniforms himself so that the colors would not fade. He used to hang the laundry on the porch of his house.

According to Fares Ahmad, they're currently setting up a girls' team. During the summer of 2015, they trained them for four months in the Qasqas municipal field.

During the month of Ramadan in 2015, they organized matches, and many people from the camp came to the games. Many Palestinian teams took part in these games; teams from Jadra, Naameh, and the camps in Burj El-Barajneh, Sabra, Shatila and Mar Elias, of course. They invited several teams since it was the first tournament happening in Mar Elias for a long time. The Mar Elias Team won, and they celebrated by firing a water cannon at the crowd in jubilation.

At the end of 2015, they organized a tournament named after the martyrs of Tal El-Zaatar.

On Saturdays and Sundays, they organize games for the cubs, i.e., the teams from the first, second and third category. The Adults Team trains outside the field because of its derelict situation. So they believe that rehabilitating the field is a necessity, instead of having players pay costly rents when they want to train, or have a game in fields outside of Mar Elias. Coach Fares Ahmad explains:

"Many times not all people can pay. So the players who can afford it pay for those who can't. Other times, if the location of the game is far away, like in the Taybeh Camp (Bekaa), for example, the team we're playing against covers the cost of the field rental and hosts us as guests."

Many times the team trains in the Safa field for free. "Safa is an international team like Al-Ansar." Abu Rami says. "The coach sympathizes with us as Palestinians."

Also, many Palestinian activities and celebrations, like Land Day, used to take place in the field. Old Oum Ali told us about her son's wedding, which was held in the football field. This is how the field becomes a common and shared space for the people of the Camp and other Palestinian camps, a place for walks, leisure time, and activities.

There's another dimension to this field, which relates to the selection of teams and communal work in the city. Most teams are made up of Palestinians. The formation of Palestinian teams was very important at a time when the players used to feel like strangers within the context of Lebanese national teams. The most important games are held to commemorate national Palestinian events, like the Right of Return, or the Start of the Revolution. Through football, Palestinian teams found themselves able to reinforce their presence in this country, and turned themselves into people who are visible and have a voice in the public realm. This contributed to reinforcing their sense of belonging to the city.

Sustaining the Field and the Ownership Problematic

Players say that their priority is to rehabilitate and fix up the field. According to Ismail (a player and member of the club), trainings have become scarce because the field is rundown. He explains:

"It's dangerous to play here because of the potholes. The adults all have jobs, and they have to avoid injuries. They can't afford to stop work, even for one day. Every team trains two days a week in outside fields. In Jnah, the field is for the Amal Movement. It was privatized recently. It's rented out per hour, to the tune of LBP 90,000 per game. Every player pays from his own money on game day or when training. The managers of the

field can make \$1,000/month. Wouldn't it be cheaper if we gave this money to the Mar Elias Popular Committee so that it fixes up the field for the Camp?"

The Popular Committee's role is essential in the running of the camp and providing some of its needs. A year ago, the Popular Committee established a sports group for the Mar Elias Camp, and dedicated a hall for the team to meet and organize different activities.

Players say that fixing the field needs a lot of money. But funding organizations refuse to support them because the land is privately owned. The players always insist that the owner of the land (who according to them lives in Kuwait) does not mind them playing football in it, as long as it isn't used as a construction site. Brigadier General Samir Abu Afesh (nicknamed Abu Yussef) is the treasurer of Fatah in Beirut; his office is in the Mar Elias Camp. Abu Afesh says that he's in constant communication with the legal trustee of the land called Ms. Hanane and whose practice is called "Hanane for Litigation and Law". Abu Yussef notifies and asks her about any issue related to the land. She clearly states: "Use the land for football as long as there's no project, and without building a stadium or doing any land filling."

At some point, they wanted to cover the ground with grass. They worked on a preliminary study that showed that planting or laying grass would cost them \$10,000 to cover only half the field. Back then, they suggested the idea to the owner of the land and her representative, who didn't approve of the grass idea at all, for fear of it being used for economic purposes or investments.

Recently, an organization offered to clean up the field. For six hours (from 9:00 AM till 3:00 PM) a bulldozer worked on picking up the dirt. But cleaning isn't enough. According to Abu Yussef, any sport field must run "always and forever" north to south. The field was initially in the right direction. Today, the field occupies half the land, which runs east to west. It's better to use it in length, which requires them to rehabilitate it and install a water dispensing system.

With regards to ownership, and when looking at the official land registers, another dimension becomes apparent. According to the official certificate of plot 1581 Msaytbeh, the majority of the land belongs to "the waqf of Muslim scholars under the supervision of the Mufti of the Lebanese Republic, Beirut Islamic University." This change in ownership took place in 2009. Neither the players nor the residents of the camp know this information, which may be crucial to thinking about the future of the land as a public and common space for the Camp and the city.

Stakeholders

Players, coaches, Popular Committee, camp residents, land's legal representative, Safa Club, Sunni Waqf / Beirut Islamic University

Salha Field, or the Field of the 6th Zone Martyrs

How has communal work in Horchel Qateel been undermined by the control of political parties, and what is the dividing line between “party members” and “community”?

Situating the Field

In the Southern suburb of Bir Hassan, West of the Airport Highway, lies a sandy, wire-fenced, rectangular lot, with two football goals located on each of its shorter sides. On its longer edges, the field is contiguous to a residential lot on one side (part of the Salha neighborhood), and faces the Amal Movement headquarters on the other. To its north is a commercial street, and to its south lies the low-income Salha neighborhood and a Husseiniyeh (which uses the field as a parking lot during some ceremonies). On its northeastern corner is an informal coffee and shisha kiosk.

The main access is through a wide opening in the fence, facing the entrance of the HQ. There are other openings in the southern edge of the fence due to lack of maintenance, from which neighborhood children also enter. A boom barrier at the main eastern entrance keeps vehicles from accessing the field. Near the main entrance, men and boys in paramilitary uniforms are usually occupying two plastic chairs, or standing around them. When present, they monitor the field visitors.

Historically, the field is tightly connected to the history of the development of Horch el-Qateel's informal settlement that was gradually built starting the 1950s. In the late 1970s, the residents of the Salha neighborhood in Horch el-Qateel formed a team and began to play in the field. It was known as the Salha Field. Prior to 1982, many residents of Horch el-Qateel also played in the Tadamon field on the old airport road. In 1982, when the Tadamon field was replaced by a building, the players moved to Salha field. By the late 1980s, the informal settlement expanded in a speedy urbanization that accompanied the arrival of a new wave of migrants. However, the football team members refused to let the settlement expand over the field. Through negotiations with the main actors, they agreed to the expansion in a way to preserve the field.

At first they had wooden makeshift goals. There are stories of how the first players would collect scrap metal found on the Airport Road, bring them back, and build goals for the field. It was entirely self-funded by gathering donations from the neighborhood and players.

They used to invite people from Bir Hassan, from Bourj el Barajne, from Jnah and Ouzai, from Hay Farhat and Sabra to play.

Before becoming a football field, this piece of land was used by the UNIFIL and the Italian troops. It is also said that the current Amal headquarters used to be the Palestinian Fateh headquarters. The field used to be bigger, but politically backed / actors built into the field and reduced its size in the 1990s. The Amal Movement – which has politically and militarily controlled Horchel-Qateel since the 1990s – is likely involved in the deal, which is why they allowed it. But they haven't allowed anything else to encroach on the field since. With their strong presence in the area, they have named the field “Martyrs of the 6th Zone” (Shouhada' al Mantiqa AlSadisa).

Today, the field usually looks abandoned in the winter, but Amal maintains it before annual tournaments by cleaning up the debris accumulated in the past months, and leveling and drying the ground. They have yet to fulfill their promises of fixing the fence, providing adequate seating

and building a wall to prevent people from throwing garbage from the main street.

Encounters with Players and Team Selections

Abbas, team member and head of the Amal Movement Boy Scouts (1990s)

Abbas is in his mid-thirties. He is wearing civilian clothes and stands at the HQ entrance, surrounded by men in various degrees of uniforms. He has been playing football since the 1990s, "when the football field started." It was in use freely until 2008. Then the Amal movement started imposing rules, and the games became less and less frequent because of the "situation." He says the field has always been here, that no one knows who the owner is and that it is likely mashaa (commons). Abbas also says the Movement protects the field from being used as a construction site. But he does know of one incident that reduced the size of the field. He describes it as being corrupt "Men el 3ebb lal jaybe", meaning he knew that the field was bigger and that Amal allowed the construction work by way of a corrupt deal.

Ahmad, painter, juice cart owner, team coach (2011)

Ahmad goes by "Bablo". It's the name of a famous football player. He is 29 and has been coaching for the past five years. Every year he prepares a team for the tournaments, in Ramadan and other occasions. His players' ages range from 18 to 23. His older cousin Hussein Maanaki (39) used to coach before he took over. Ahmad works until 3 pm and trains his team in the evenings and on weekends. He never played football himself but watched all the games and always wanted to be a coach, as a hobby. When he first started coaching, he wasn't very good at it. But he eventually got better.

Last year, Ahmad's team played three tournaments, but only made it to the final in one of them. This is the second year his team participates in a tournament, and he promises they will make it to the finals this time. They have uniforms that they pay for by collecting donations from the neighborhood. The participation fee for the Ramadan tournament is \$50 per team. But Ahmad is in the Sports Committee for Bir Hassan so he doesn't have to pay.

Past tournaments attracted larger crowds. More women attended too. Now mainly the men come down to watch the games. Amal promised them bleachers two years ago, but they haven't seen anything yet. He thinks a lot more people would come to watch if the field was better equipped. Now they only place rows of chairs around the lot. There are about 15 light projectors in the field, which are mainly used during celebrations and tournaments. The rest of the time it's up to the Amal Movement's Bir Hassan Youth and Sports Coordinator to decide whether players are allowed to practice or play after dark.

Imad, shisha kiosk owner in Salha neighborhood, ex-player (1990s)

Imad started playing in the 1990s. At that time, players from Nijme and from neighboring Ouzai trained in the field. He stopped playing in 2006 and quit football altogether. He says in Lebanon "football is no good" (ma byeswa). "It's all politics." According to him, the

Salha residents initially built the field in the 1970s, and then they were willingly absorbed by the Amal Movement with its arrival to the neighborhood in the 1990s.

Hassan Maanaki, ex-player, original Salha Team (1970s)

Hassan started playing in 1977-1978, at the time of the Palestinian Resistance. He was in the first team, Salha, that founded the field. Soon after, there were 12 teams playing on the field (from Jnah, Ouzai and Bourj el-Barajne). Friends from the neighborhood, from work or from school, would play together and grow into teams, then start to play tournaments. They hosted other teams and were invited to other fields. Hassan says he even played in East-Beirut in 1994. He adds that professional teams and players trained here. Abbas Chahrour, Jamal Hajj, Abu Ghandi, they all used to play here. "They graduated from this field." They would sometimes invite professional referees, and share the money to pay his fee. It wasn't long before all the guys left the country to find work. Now they only come on vacation, so they don't play anymore.

Ramadan Tournament

Ali Younes - Amal Movement's Bir Hassan Youth and Sports Coordinator - explains the steps of organizing the Ramadan tournament. He says:

"The A.M. puts out an invitation to a tournament. Coaches then respond by gathering players and forming teams. The A.M. registers the names and vets them to avoid problems. It's the coaches' responsibility who they bring to play. They must know them to a certain degree."

Then the auditions for the teams begin, and each coach nominates the players he wants to include in his team. The team consists of 7 players, a goalie and 8 reserves. Each coach submits the names to the Youth and Sports Coordinator and tournament coordinator, Ali Younes. He's the one who organizes all the tournaments and is responsible for the field. Ali checks the list for any players that have been getting into fights or known to cause trouble. Accordingly, he may deny them registration in the tournament. He gets the last say after the coaches nominate their players. Each coach pays a \$50 registration fee for each team they enter in the tournament. The money usually goes to the Husseinieh nearby, for maintenance or to the Amal Movement Scouts.

There are about six teams from the neighborhood, and six others from the nearby areas, like Haret Hreik, Ouzai, Jnah, and Hay Farhat. This year's teams included: Islamic Scouts, Amal Net (set up by the owner of an internet shop), Hayek (neighborhood residents), Assaily (upper neighborhood), Salha, Hneineh Cell (set up by the owner of a mobile phone sales shop), Abu Hassan, Jalloul, Ali Hamad (who set up a team made up mainly of Syrian players), and others.

They usually begin the tournament season with the Ramadan Tournament. If everyone is on their best behavior and there are no fights, they subsequently host more tournaments. They organize around three or four tournaments a year.

The Youth and Sports Coordinator is the one who breaks up the fights and mediates any conflict by expelling the players or canceling the tournament. It has happened in the past. Whoever doesn't maintain a good attitude is thrown out. This year, the Ramadan tournament was cut short a week before the finals because of a fight between players over the score.

Reflections on Governance: Community vs. Party

Historically, a significant proportion of the neighborhood surrounding the football field accommodated displaced populations that fled South Lebanon during the civil war and the 1978 Israeli invasion. The entire area, including the field, is popularly considered as part of the commons ("mashaa"). The football field was managed by the Amal Movement since the 1990s. Any use of the field runs by the Movement, as a de-facto situation imposed by the party. Allegedly, no one is usually refused access as long as they are ready to be identified – "for security reasons." All maintenance works are performed in partnership with the Ghobeiri Municipality and usually funded by the A.M.

Amal Movement's Bir Hassan Youth and Sports Coordinator handles everything related to football fields and similar spaces/activities in the neighborhood. The Coordinator changes every four years. But if he's suitable they usually keep him. The current Coordinator, Ali Younes, is in his second year. This is how the Movement has been maintaining and managing the field, organizing free tournaments on different occasions (anniversary of Musa al-Sadr, in honor of martyrs, Movement Boy Scouts, etc.) and paid tournaments during the month of Ramadan.

In addition to this form of governance, the Movement regulates cycles of activity by exerting control on amenities such as seating and lighting. On one hand, the absence of permanent seating arrangements prevents substantial gatherings. On the other, inaccessibility to proper lighting after dark prevents most activity in the field.

Recently, there were plans to turn the field into a "mini-football" like the ones in the Atletico Club nearby, with grass, nets and a private administration. But the residents refused to have to pay an entrance fee, and rejected the project. The Amal Movement is usually responsive to community decisions and public opinion. Accordingly, the project didn't pass.

The field is suffering from several issues that obstruct play. As expressed by the young players, the field is riddled with bumps, and scattered garbage. When they clean it, it gets filled back again with garbage immediately, mainly due to littering passersby. The field also needs a structural wall that can support the difference of level between the pavement and the field. The Ghobeiri Municipality has already built one wall that collapsed soon after. Amal Party claim that they have filed several requests to the municipality to rebuild the wall, but the municipality has not responded.

Today, the Municipality is trying to negotiate the removal of the Amal-supported informal coffee kiosk on the northeastern corner of the field in exchange for much needed maintenance work.

Stakeholders

The players, the residents, Amal Movement, Ghobeiri Municipality

ArdJalloul and Bashoura Fields

How are historical sites with social and cultural values suddenly undermined for the exchange value of the land?

Situating the field

Only three years ago, Ard Jalloul was the biggest open football field on the southern edge of Municipal Beirut. Situated close to the Chatila Palestinian refugee camp, the popular Sabra market, Tarik El-Jdideh neighborhood and affordable housing complexes, this field was a vibrant space for a variety of publics and a number of activities. The area surrounding the field is houses some of the biggest communities of low-income dwellers in the city.

Many teams consisting of Palestinian, Lebanese and Syrian players have been training here since 1970, many of whom made it to leading national teams: Jamal Khatib, Mohamad Zaka, Abdallah Zaroura, and Ahmad Khalil, to name a few. The field was well equipped and had a stadium. Matches took place daily, mainly between 4:00 and 6:00 in the afternoon. On holidays, priority was given to ceremonies. Preparations for these events would start early in the morning, preventing any other use throughout the day. Still, this did not create conflict with the teams. On other occasions, horses would trot in the lot and swings were set up. Teams faced only one hierarchical situation: priority to play generally went to older players.

On one edge of the field, from the main street side, blacksmiths built their informal shacks. On the other inner edge, a garbage sorting mechanism is taking place where the sorted material is either sold to industrial companies or displayed on the sidewalks for local purchase.

Between these commercial activities and Ard Jalloul now rises a murky white brick wall, bearing some graffiti and occasional holes fencing off the once open, accessible and vibrant field. Building the wall, started around three years ago, but construction workers had a hard time finishing it. "The owner sold most of the shares to Hariri, but then a dispute arose that led Jalloul to fence it off," says Abed, the player who works in the nearby parking lot. But they could not do it right away. They would come in the morning to put up a wall on one side, and at night the players would remove the bricks. It was like that for a while: On one side, they piled the bricks. On the other, they took them out. The players eventually grew tired of this 'game' and went to play football in Qasqas." He adds: "Although playing in Qasqas is for free (since it is a municipal playground), it is almost impossible to get a turn! But when the field was fenced off, the players were able to get a *wasta* to get a turn to play each Friday. Other times, players take a bus to Khalde to play."

Abandoned, the land played host to changing activities. It has become a heavily vegetated land. Jad, a 25 year old man who lives nearby, knows the spots where the grass is clean to pick dandelion (hindbeh) and mallow (Khebbeizeh) and where it is being used as impromptu toilets. He also remembers the swings and three football fields on this plot.

He still enters the plot to hang around with his girlfriend or friends. Here, they can drink, set up tables and chairs and sunbathe freely. "Many people still use it, but for different things," he says. "It is so big that there is rarely any conflict around it."

One unusual use of the land has been as a homeless shelter. Two men, who work in the nearby garbage sorting site and sell metal, glass and plastic, have been recently sleeping in the field.

One of the men is an orphan who came from Saida to Beirut a few years ago. He does not know his name and says that people call him 'Asfour' (bird). The other has been living in Lebanon for the past 11 eleven years. They sought refuge in this vast land and imagine it as an enormous bed, where they can choose any spot to lay their heads on. When it rains, they sleep in their friends' cars parked around the plot. They suspect that the landlord reported to the municipality because they have already been fined millions of liras they cannot pay.

Making and Sustaining the Field

A vegetable vendor on the corner has been in the neighborhood ever since its establishment. He recounts a legendary story of how Jalloul came to be the owner of this vast land. During the French Mandate, the area was a field of peas and beans. One day, Jalloul's grandmother was passing by and charmed a French commander. Apparently, he harassed her. To make up for that incident, the French authorities gave the Jalloul family most of the pieces of land in the neighborhood, including the plot of this football field, the big parking lot next to it and the other lot to its east (now a garbage disposal site).

The Jallouls never built anything on the land or fenced it. During the sixties and seventies, the land was used as a training space for Palestinian factions, such as al-Sa'eqa, the Baathists, Fateh, and also Al-Haraka Al-Wataniya. In 1971, anti-aircraft missiles were positioned there.

Eventually, one of the factions (al-Sa'eqa) took control of the land and transformed it into a football field by adding a four-step stadium, changing rooms, field lights, and four goal nets. The heirs of Jalloul saw it as a chance to regain some control over the land. They tasked A. Bilani, an ex-trainer of the prominent national Nejme football team, with guarding and managing the field.

Bilani operated the land as a professional field and an open public space. He allowed kids to play for free, and charged grown-ups LBP 10,000 per match for field maintenance.

Since then, and for more than 30 years, the field served as a prominent public space for the densely populated surrounding neighborhoods and their diverse publics. Thanks to this field, neighborhood football teams brought together Palestinian, Lebanese and Syrian youth. It was also a central space for communal festivities, and it was a significant destination for residents beyond the surrounding neighborhoods. In the early nineties, the site was also occasionally used for wrestling competitions.

According to the neighborhood residents, it was not clear whether the deal with Bilani and the Jallouls was made for 30 years or the more common 99-year period. When the Jalloul family decided to fence the land, three years ago, Bilani negotiated with them to keep the field. He was keen to preserve it, because "if this space is lost, there would be no place left for the kids and youngsters of this area to play football," he says.

Football, Community Building and Social Cohesion

In the eighties, belonging to teams was very significant to the Palestinian youth who felt estranged from national Lebanese teams. Ard Jalloul gave them the opportunity to form teams mostly with Palestinian players, even though Lebanese as well as Syrian players used to join. Sometimes national teams played against each other. Other times, the teams were made up of different players. The most prominent teams that played there were called Ariha, Soumoud,

Karama, Yafa, and Jabaliya. And the most renowned tournaments happened on National Palestinian occasions, such as the Right of Return day. A number of Ard Jalloul players and their coaches grew to become professional football players and play with leading National teams like Nejme and Al-Ansar. Al-Ansar team is said to have trained on Ard Jalloul.

With the rise of unemployment, the deteriorating economic conditions of middle and lower income classes, poverty, absence of shared spaces and activities, Ard Jalloul played a significant role in keeping the minds and bodies of the youth busy. Kids and youngsters formed a number of clubs that were independent from other clubs affiliated with parties. The independent clubs also formed a committee that organized, along with the older prominent party-affiliated teams (mentioned above), sport activities and tournaments.⁴ At the time of the decline of realpolitik, many Palestinian social workers believed that creating activities with the youth outside the constraints and agendas of political parties was indeed much needed. They were also keen on keeping the teams mixed. The independent clubs had clear objectives: to keep on building professional football players who might possibly play on a national or even international scale.

Nowadays, the Ard Jalloul field is fenced and abandoned. It no longer hosts organized football games. According to official property records, the land (formerly owned entirely by the Jalloul family) was mostly bought in 2008 by the Nadco Real Estate Company, which is owned by members of the Hariri family. There are different rumors as to the plans for the land. Some say it will become the site of a university, others say a shopping mall, a market and parking lot. The Municipality of Beirut can still save the football field and return it to the neighborhood. The residents see great – historical and social – value in this space; they consider it central to building a sense of belonging and social cohesion. For them, it is a rare constructive outlet and a dynamic space within the socio-urban fabric.

As such, with land ownership moving to members of the financial/corporate and political elite, real-estate development is threatening the Ard Jalloul field, as well as other informal fields in Beirut.

Social Value vs. Real Estate: The Similar Case of Bachoura

The Bachoura football field is another case of how social and historical values of a land are undermined, in the absence of state regulations or municipal decisions that support them.

For over 40 years, the Bachoura site was sustained as a football field and a main social space for the Bachoura neighborhood, situated on the edge of downtown Beirut. The land is strategically located in the heart of Beirut and has the potential to welcome all city residents, as it measures a total area of 15,000 square meters. Historically, weddings and celebrations were held on this land, as well as diverse activities and family gatherings. It was an outlet for many surrounding neighborhoods, especially for football games. Many nearby informal football teams had played here like Msaytbeh, and Burj Abi Haidar.

Originally it was the site of the "Heart of Jesus" French hospital that was built in 1862. In 1972, the hospital was relocated to another area in Beirut, and the building remained vacant. Fearful that the building would be turned into a military base during the Civil War, the residents

⁴ ملعب جلول ساحة نضال لأجيال فلسطينية كروية، عبد القادر سعد، الأخبار، تحقيق رياضة، العدد ٤٨٢،
الثلاثاء ٢٥ آذار ٢٠٠٨

demolished it (so the myth goes). Soon after, it was transformed into a football field through neighborhood efforts.

In 2006, the land (plot 1114) was bought from its old multiple owners by a real-estate company under the name of al-Aliya. Recently, construction works on the site started, and bulldozers were seen excavating. The excavation works had to be halted upon finding that the site houses archeological ruins. The Directorate General of Antiquity conducted their survey, until construction works resumed in 2016. Today, the site is fenced and many of the ruins have been destroyed through extra-legal ambiguous ways.

Although the neighborhood youth have recently claimed the adjacent parking lot as their temporary football field, the residents are wary of what's happening to their neighborhood. They consider the loss of this site "a real loss to the neighborhood and the city," as one resident said. It is also synonymous to the threats of eviction that they constantly face, in an old neighborhood that is being taken over by the real-estate expansion of Solidere.

Today, children are seen jumping over the fence of the former field and playing in the now-green pockets of the site. While they lament over the loss of the field, they express their willingness to fight to reclaim it. "We all want to do something to have the field up," says one child beaming with hope.

Stakeholders

Municipality of Beirut, Directorate General of Urban Planning, landowners, the residents, the players, Al-Ansar and Nejme football clubs, activist groups for public space

Ras el-Nabeh Field

Why is the battle for the field significant?

Defending the Field

The plot of land in Ras El-Nabeh was first turned into a football field in 2004. Before being completely asphalted, the land was mostly sandy with pebbles and small spots of asphalt. It was always a fenced property, surrounded by shops and residential buildings. On one of its sides lies the main road, where the only gate to the land is situated. The land is called Khairallah, in reference to the name of the petrol station that was once there. Young residents of the nearby buildings have formed neighborhood teams to play in this and many other empty lands in Ras El-Nabeh. When the other open spaces were turned into construction sites, this land became the last remaining space for the neighborhood players.

Players never entered the field through the gate. They jumped over the 2-meter-high back walls, by placing stepping tires or stones. They set it up for play by burning the grass in it and playing on the sand. By 2011, entering the field became more challenging. Their field was suddenly asphalted and turned into a car dealership. A small guard's room was also built. The guard kept the young players away from the field. In retaliation, the boys threw stones and empty glass bottles at the cars on a daily basis, halting the project only a few months later. They then broke the lock and drew demarcation lines around the field and the goals, and used the guard's room as a locker to store their clothes. They later demolished the guard's room to make a smaller field for the younger players and delineated it as well.

In 2015, the land was turned into a parking lot. At first, only a few cars used to park there. So most of the playtime took place at night. Later on, the parking started offering memberships, and the guard, present on weekdays, limited the number of players allowed inside, if any. Nowadays, playing football is most likely to happen on Sundays when the guard is not present, and if the number of parked cars is less than usual. Little by little, the spirit of the game was ruined.

The Spirit of the Game

Hassan Sabbagh first played in this field in 2008 when he was 12 years old.

"We never had a coach. There is only the ball owner and his friends. My brother, Mohammad, used to play in this field since 2004. We used to organize friendly championships that lasted the whole day. Four teams participated, and whoever was interested in winning the neighborhood championship needed to stay in the field while teams changed. The age of players ranged from 10 to 25. We were all together around 30 players or more. Of course, the duration of one match was much less than an hour and a half, since many kids wanted to play. Instead, we opted for counting goals, say, 10 goals would decide when the match is over, and the team with the most goals wins. Since the field is not so big, we had one goal keeper for both teams. He is usually the person who runs the least.

The most important game was when the best players decided to compete. They would tell each other: You choose your team and I choose mine. The best five teams would play against the other best five. With no organizer, older person or a coach guiding this

process, the players put together their teams of 30 or so players on their own. For these kinds of matches, we used to agree to wear the same color within our team.”

Mohammad Sabbagh recalls:

“At night, we played under the municipal lights until almost midnight, sometimes starting at 8 a.m. or even earlier. We played so much that on one day we lost count of how many matches we played. During Summer, we played every day, whereas, in winter we played on weekends.”

Controlling the Field

When the field was asphalted and guarded, players still found a way to play. “We used to jump over the wall to enter the field. But after they asphalted it, the gate was mostly open. The guard did not really stay in the room that was constructed on site. He used to come towards us from the main road side. Whenever we saw him crossing the street, we would immediately run off”, says Mohammad.

Today’s parking lot guard says the property owner is a cheerful character, and has so far seen the players play on three different occasions. He tells them: “If you want to play football, just call me and we can open the door for you, but no more jumping over fences and breaking things.” It is the same owner who rented out the property in 2011 to the car sale dealership that failed, and now is a parking lot. The guard protects the cars from the players: “The parking lot now has members who pay monthly fees to park their cars,” the guard says. “I make sure the kids don’t gather too much in here. If a ball breaks a mirror or car window, who would be held responsible for it?”

Nowadays, the brothers Sabbagh play together in the football fields of Al-Ahed, Al-Ansar, Classico, and sometimes outside Beirut. For an hour and a half of play, each team pays \$40. They split the cost depending on the size of the field, and the number of players (four, five or six plus a goalkeeper).

Stakeholders

The players, the guard, the land owner, the parking lot members

4. Conclusion

We presented here the stories of six football fields that were created by communal efforts in various neighborhoods of Beirut. This investigation falls within a wider scope of understanding public space through place-making and communal practices. As such, the details of these stories unfold how communities organize and develop strategies to put forth a collective claim to property. Constrained by a dominant discourse that indulges with private property rights, for the benefit of real estate investment and at the expense of the public good, these claims hold substantial implication on shifting planning practices. The intrinsic relation of these fields with the history of the neighborhoods, mobility of players across geo-political borders, and community ties, provide a city wide interest to preserve and sustain these dynamic pockets. The social networks these fields allow to develop and the play practices they inspire, have the potential to spill over the entire city.

This report / research is the basis for work we will pursue to sustain these fields through alternative planning practices, assert youth practices while strengthening their social networks, and to celebrate an alternative experience of the city.