Article

Reading Publicness: Meaningful and Spontaneous Encounters in Beirut During a Time of Crisis

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Abstract

This article explores a series of narratives collected during the Covid-19 pandemic and after the port explosion in Beirut. The selected narratives cover "meaningful encounters" defined by the authors as acts of urban engagement that are able to challenge dominant or prejudiced perceptions in the city. These spontaneous and sometimes prolonged interactions seem to strengthen collective engagement and foster new opportunities to be together during strenuous and challenging times for all. The importance of this study stems from the fact that most of the designated public spaces are rather exclusive and fall short in bringing together the different factions of the community. In a context of increasing socio-spatial polarization, reading everyday practices, activities, and meaningful encounters in Beirut reveals a more comprehensive and inclusive notion of publicness and challenges the popular and sometimes biased perception of a fragmented city. This research draws from a combination of qualitative approaches that include both observation and collection of narratives. The final selection of narratives was based on their potential to illustrate what we considered to be typical cases addressing three different types of engagements with the urban context. The article seeks to better understand influences exercised by individuals over one another and the subsequent emergence of new places of encounters in the city. Finally, the article argues that the sites of encounters are rather fluid and spread beyond the footprint of traditional and designated public spaces, thus contributing to the reshaping of the public sphere in the city.

1. Defining the Notion of "Publicness"

The prolonged scholarly interest in defining and visualizing the notion of "publicness" namely stems from an effort to understand the characteristics of the built environment, with its semiotic and cultural embodied meanings, which affect the patterns of social encounters (and nonencounters) of its users. The first attempt at mapping such publicness is thought to be Giambattista Nolli's survey of Rome, known as the Nolli map (1736–1748). The cartographer posed a straightforward, convenient, yet revolutionary abstraction of the urban fabric by contrasting public (blank) and private (hatched) spaces.

What demarcated the two realms was the factor of physical accessibility by common people; the interior of churches was thus considered to be included in the public realm (Bosselmann, 1998; Dehaene & De Cauter, 2008).

While the Nolli map proposes a useful pictorial language for representing urban space, still echoed in today's cadastral maps which demarcate land ownership and control, its simple rendition of the public/private dichotomy has been widely dismissed in the academia of recent decades. In the late 1960s, notably, Michel Foucault introduced the concept of heterotopic spaces, defined as spaces of various forms, and uses that fall at a

blurry interstice between private and public. In his essay "Of Other Spaces," Foucault describes those gray spaces mainly in light of their function, rather than specific formal characteristics. Accordingly, he labeled various programs such as prisons, cemeteries, theaters, museums, and libraries "heterotopic," in light of particular temporal qualities, socio-cultural practices, and sacred rituals that they frame (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986). As such, emphasis is placed on the meanings and actions users layer onto these places, which make them escape clear "private" or "public" categorizations.

Subsequent scholarship recognized that "in practice, public and private spaces are a continuum, where many semi-public or semi-private spaces can be identified, as the two realms meet through shades of privacy and publicity rather than clearly cut separation" (Madanipour, 2003, p. 210). From then on, several researchers attempted to instate tools and criteria to measure and contrast the "degree of publicness" of different spaces (Madanipour, 2010). While the studies recognize that the models proposed do not account for the intangible factor of subjective experience, they still provide a helpful starting point to understand the various shades of gray spaces, lying between private and public, tinting the urban fabric. For instance, the "Star Model of Publicness" (Varna & Tiesdell, 2010) proposes five "meta-dimensions" for analyzing publicness: ownership, physical configuration, animation, civility, and control. This kind of representational tool allows us to move away from the idyllic, agora-esque notions of publicness and into a more pragmatic understanding of some key factors that can make spaces feel more or less public. By accounting for the phenomena of inclusion and exclusion, this line of research moves us toward a more accurate understanding of the complexity of social patterns within the urban fabric. However, by being too detached from the encounters, conflicts, and experiences continuously being acted out in any given place, such abstracted notions and classifications may give a false notion of the reality of day-to-day urban life. It seems that these models used alone, pose the risk of falling into deterministic and alienating visions for public spaces in postmodern contexts while mitigating the vital role of people in creating or destroying places through their actions, interactions, and non-interactions on the ground.

The scope of our research thus directs us away from "conventional" conceptions of public space as authored by public authorities and preconceived by urban designers. Rather, we shift our attention toward the way spaces are continuously re-appropriated by their users in order to acquire an alternate dimension of publicness. In doing so, this study aims to help sensitize policy-makers to the importance of fostering meaningful encounters when acting upon the public realm. Indeed, the notion of urban encounters as well as the themes of sociability and conviviality in the city, have been widely discussed in recent social science literature to better understand the complex interplay of improvisations, conflicts,

resolutions, and negotiations that could arise in urban landscapes (Neal et al., 2019; Radice, 2016; Wise & Noble, 2016). Much of this literature has centered on the description of case studies illustrating how encounters can contribute to a more positive sense of coexistence in the city (Darling & Wilson, 2016; Wessendorf, 2014). Conventional policy-making relies on the public or private sectors for the provision of public spaces in the city, often with successful outcomes. However, in light of the shortcomings and failures of many of these initiatives in particular contexts, one can observe an impromptu rise of what may be described as community-initiated placemaking. These manifestations, which tend to fall beyond architecturally delineated and typologically understood "spaces for gathering," are an illustration of the vision that "lived experience should be more important than physical form in defining the city" (Chase et al., 2008, p. 18).

2. Urban Encounters Instating a New Publicness

To gain a sensitive reading of contemporary urbanity, one cannot overlook the layer of city-dwellers as political subjects consciously or unconsciously acting upon the urban fabric. We are here reminded of Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city, which "reframes the arena of decision-making in cities" towards a radical form of enfranchisement based on nothing more than the inhabitance of the city (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 158). Picking up on Lefebvre's comment that the right to the city is designed to further the interests "of the whole society and firstly of all those who inhabit" the city (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 158), Purcell (2002, p. 102) argues:

> Whereas conventional enfranchisement empowers national citizens, the right to the city empowers urban inhabitants. Under the right to the city, membership in the community of enfranchised people is not an accident of nationality or ethnicity or birth; rather it is earned by living out the routines of everyday life in the spaces of the city.

This idea of understanding urban spaces through the lens of the everyday actions of inhabitants led many thinkers to discuss unintended uses of urban public space. For example, Franck and Stevens (2006, p. 4) argue that unintended uses "have the ability to loosen up the dominant meanings of specific sites that give rise to new perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors." They define loose space as "a space apart from the aesthetically and behaviorally controlled and homogenous 'theme' environment of leisure and consumption where nothing unpredictable must occur" (Franck & Stevens, 2006, p. 5). In the introduction to *Everyday Urbanism: Expanded*, Margaret Crawford presents a similar concept. She writes: "Everyday space stands in contrast to the carefully planned, officially designated and often underused public space that can be found in most American

cities" (Chase et al., 2008, p. 9). It represents "a zone of social transition and possibility in the potential for new social arrangement and forms of imagination" (Chase et al., 2008, p. 9). Other scholars, such as Carmona et al. (2010, p. 133), assert that, just as space may influence human behavior, social processes have the potential to influence the urban landscape. Accordingly, the social dimension of the city is to be understood as an active force impacting the public realm both functionally and morphologically. Similarly, the work of Knierbein and Tornaghi (2015, p. 5) advocates for the adoption of a "relational" lens in urban planning discourse—a lens that understands the public realm as "an outcome of contextual and on-going dynamics between social actors, their cultures and power relations."

Such publications ushered a new line of research investigating how people construct meaning from encounters in the city and how they negotiate spaces with each other in a game falling between and beyond the lines of private and public. While these occurrences vary in nature and context, notably ranging from authored to anonymous, collective to individual, legal to illegal, unmediated to mediated actions in the city (Iveson, 2013), they seem to manifest a shared politic in asserting inhabitance as the principle that should underpin the exercise of authority in the city. Academics have been grappling with ways to talk about and refer to these phenomena, with various definitions and terminologies being put on the table. Indeed, these practices have been recorded and categorized under names such as "insurgent," "do-it-yourself", "guerrilla" (Hou, 2010), "everyday" (Chase et al., 2008), "spontaneous" (Crawford, 2012), "participatory," and/or "grassroots" urbanism (Iveson, 2013). Regardless of the nomenclature adopted, according to Hou (2010, p. 2), what gives these various experiments some kind of unity is that they explore, and potentially reveal, the alternative cities within the existing city, occupying urban spaces and "injecting them with new functions and meanings." The city is thus read temporally and idiosyncratically in light of its circumstances, everyday usage, and livelihood, rather than through universalized formal metrics for publicness. Moreover, it should be noted that the act of discussing and recording instances of spontaneous urbanism helps to substantiate collective memory. For instance, the political act of Filipina workers turning the ground floor of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation building in Hong Kong into a community gathering place on Sundays gained relevance and reach when it was recounted in *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities* (Hou, 2010). By shedding light on localized case studies around the world, most often stemming from marginalized groups, the literature on everyday urbanism is cultivating a space for scholarly debate which encourages an alternative reading and enactment of publicness whereby the prime actor becomes the user of the space itself.

3. Publicness in Beirut: A History of Instability, Conflict, and Contestation

While most of the literature tackling everyday urbanism has observed urban encounters in seemingly "normal" or "routinized" urban contexts, from what may be considered as a "first world" standpoint, we believe that the case of Beirut offers a unique illustration of the potential for interaction between people during times of crisis. While Lebanon's capital has been subject to intense turmoil on several instances throughout its history, affecting the inhabitants' interaction with the public realm, the impact of the recent Covid-19 pandemic and the port explosion of August 4th, 2020 on Beirut's publicness is a dimension left unexplored by urban planning scholarship to this day. So, after briefly recounting the evolution of Beirut's public realm through the multi-faceted crises the country has gone through, the article will focus on the way the pandemic and port explosion triggered new occurrences of urban engagement between citizens beyond the boundaries of the city's historically defined public spaces.

During the decades preceding the First World War, the transformation of Beirut followed a spontaneous process mostly driven by necessity and function. The urban form evolved freely without subscribing to any overall scheme emanating from a political or military authority (Davie, 2001). Public spaces did not look like what we see today—formal geometric spaces that are clearly recognized within the urban fabric. Instead, they were often confused with the labyrinth of narrow streets that ran through the old town. Enlargements of a few meters accommodating a particular function or daily activity and usually covered by stretched fabric were referred to as *al-sahat* (squares). These particular configurations often represented an extension of a cafe or a boutique or were occupied by a refreshing water fountain. Picture shows (*Sandouq al-firje*), shadow-theatres (*Khayal al-zhil*) led by a *Karakoz*, and most notably storytellers also known as *Hakawatis*, were famous for their dramatic street performances and were paid by owners of coffee houses to attract kids and customers in the afternoons (Davie, 1999; De Nerval, 1851). There were no clear physical demarcations for these places; they were continually negotiated, fought over, and resolved through challenging demarcations along socio-economic divides (Khalaf, 2006). Historically, then, urban spatiality in Beirut was highly complex and dynamic, with fluid rather than rigid demarcations between private and public realms.

In 1925, the French colonial mandate in Syria and Lebanon embarked on a challenging mission to develop comprehensive cadastral systems in the area. As a result, self-policed and locally maintained semi-public alleyways were classified as *domaine public*. While this normative process emerged as a tool to bring all spaces of the city under the watchful eye of the state, it also instated the post-colonial construct of the public as a planned, delineated urban space imbued with aesthetic

and symbolic values. The city underwent a massive reconstruction project which involved the demolition of old neighborhoods with their small squares and the creation of new public spaces, such as the Place de l'Étoile, based on European planning models (Davie, 2003; Hindi, 2020). Despite the efforts to codify land properties and bestow a Westernized, post-colonial understanding of public spaces on Beirut's communities, local populations rejected such demarcations and their resulting urban forms and continued to encroach on semi-public spaces and alleyways in the city with considerable social tolerance and support (Marcus, 1989). The streets, rather than the newly manicured squares, continued to be the generally preferred loci for encounters, exchanges, discussions, and protests despite the transformation of the urban fabric and the Westernization of the lifestyle in the city. As such, the formally designed public spaces of the city failed to provide a suitable frame to the locals' social patterns and notions of communal gathering.

The Lebanese Civil War broke out in 1975 as a consequence of the deterioration of the state and the rise of armed militias in the country. The war lasted for 15 years during which urban warfare and street fights disturbed urban life in Beirut and other Lebanese cities. Physical and mental boundaries emerged along the urban landscape, imposing a new geography of fear on the ground and alienating people from their streets, with different neighborhoods controlled by different militias and factions (Davie, 1993). Public spaces such as parks, streets, and squares became contested areas, with rival groups fighting for control. Many public spaces were also targeted by bombings and other acts of violence, leading to their destruction or abandonment (Mady, 2022). The Green Line, which divided the city into East and West Beirut, was a physical manifestation of the city's division—a no man's land that separated communities. Many public spaces, such as the Martyrs' Square in downtown Beirut, which was located near the Green Line were thus left heavily impacted and abandoned (Mady, 2012, 2015). However, despite the war transforming people's daily rituals and relationship with the city streets, negotiations, and time-sensitive deals continued to occur among the people as a necessary means to survive the dire circumstances (Salamon, 2004). These events revealed how the city and its residents gradually adapted to new conditions during long periods of crisis.

At the end of the war in 1990, the Lebanese were looking forward to the opening of the country to all of its citizens and to seeing the heart of the country revived. To reconstruct and modernize the city center of Beirut, the Solidere (Société Libanaise pour le Développement et la Reconstruction de Beyrouth) project was established by a private company overseen by the prime minister at the time, Rafic Hariri. The Solidere project aimed to transform the war-torn city center into a modern and vibrant commercial and residential district that would attract local and international investment—at the expense of the urban fabric which predated the

war (Kastrissianakis, 2015). The area of the old markets was razed and then leveled overnight under the excuse that it could not be repaired. Numerous vestiges from the past were demolished. Solidere tailored a historical narrative that suited its commercial objectives, resulting in a pastiche of iconic representations limiting historical associations to the oriental-esque aesthetics of the façades and reducing the old city center to a commodified realm for the privileged few (El-Khoury & Ardizzola, 2021; Mady, 2022). Furthermore, a massive infrastructure of high-speed roads around the newly proposed Beirut Central District effectively amputated the heart of the city from the surrounding urban fabric—leaving it almost void of pedestrian activity in comparison to other vibrant and populous neighborhoods in Beirut. As the imported typologies of public spaces were left underused and neglected by the general population, public life in Beirut often tended to spill onto random sites around the city such as empty lots under speculation. These "vague terrains" witnessed years of unplanned appropriation for various activities such as kids' recreation, temporary markets, or art exhibitions, highlighting Beirut's non-conventional and fluid conception of publicness instated by complex social dynamics (Mady, 2014).

In subsequent decades, Beirut continued to experience political instabilities, which were characterized by a complex interplay of sectarianism, regional geopolitics, and economic challenges. The assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2005 marked a significant turning point in these instabilities, triggering a wave of protests, political mobilization, and international intervention. In the aftermath of Hariri's assassination, protesters gathered in public spaces such as Martyrs' Square and Riad al-Solh Square, which became sites of intense political contestation, with different sectarian and political groups vying for control and influence (Khalaf, 2006; Mady, 2022). In 2016, the garbage waste crisis in Beirut further developed the citizens' relationship with the public space of their city. In response to the crisis, young citizens organized protests and rallies mainly concentrated in downtown's public squares, demanding that the government take action to address the waste problem. These protests often took the form of sit-ins and blockades, with the emergence of grassroots initiatives and community-led projects aimed at addressing the waste problem and cleaning up public spaces, thus empowering citizens as active agents in the improvement of their urban reality (Harb, 2016). In parallel, natural heterogeneous public spaces in the city, notably Horsh Beirut (the pine forest) and the Daliyeh waterfront area, had been subject to years of nibbling, fencing, and real estate speculation by the well-connected upper class. Revolts and campaigns by activists and NGOs were necessary to keep these spaces open for people, albeit partially (Karizat, 2019; Stephan & Chbat, 2019).

In October 2019, the city that was once divided along religious and political demarcation lines, and continues

today to be characterized by discrepancies and inequalities between its inhabitants, suddenly came together as a result of an unprecedented economic collapse. During what came to be known as the October Revolution, public spaces such as Martyrs' Square, Riad al-Solh Square, and Horsh Beirut were transformed into gathering places for protestors, who used these spaces to express their dissent and demand political change. Protesters created makeshift camps in these spaces, organizing sit-ins, cultural events, and other activities that brought people together and fostered a sense of community and solidarity. The revolution also led to the emergence of novel forms of urban activism and engagement, with grassroots movements and civil society organizations using previously abandoned public spaces to promote social and political causes. A new type of public space, defined by social contracts and self-governance principles emerged. These spaces appear to be very diverse, yet they are clearly characterized by their social and temporal nature while being completely freed from any form of a spatial or legal framework. The urban landscape of Beirut was subject to spontaneous acts of reappropriation and placemaking in unexpected spaces. For instance, the "Egg," an abandoned cinema structure, was used for political debates (Barrington, 2019). Major highways were blocked by protestors and furnished as outdoor living rooms. Likewise, various nodes and roundabouts in the city were flocked by chanting citizens (Sinno, 2020). Overall, the October 2019 Revolution in Beirut reinvigorated the city's *domaine public* as a site of political and social engagement, highlighting the potential for urban spaces to serve as platforms for civic action, community building, and public discourse.

4. "Exceptional Everyday" Practices in Times of Crisis

As the historical context of Beirut suggests, the crisis is neither a transient occurrence nor an exceptional circumstance in the collective memory of both old and young generations inhabiting the city. Indeed, the unpredictable political and economic circumstances which have now spanned decades impose a paradigm of the "exceptional everyday," whereby the population exists within a seemingly normalized state of unrest. Accordingly, Beirut presents a pertinent example of a city that simply cannot be codified according to rigid private-public dichotomies or modernist planning conceptions. So, as the country was plunged yet again into a grave state of emergency in 2019 up until today, the capital witnessed a renewed emergence of unique spatial practices and multiplied urban encounters which are worth highlighting in urban planning scholarship as examples of community-enacted publicness.

In March 2020, the city was subject to a nationwide lockdown due to Covid-19 persisting until August 2021 approximately. As the country was already falling into a grave and unprecedented economic crisis, the governmental measures put in place to slow the spread of the disease further exacerbated turmoil and insecurity in the city. To add to this unrest, the port explosion of August 4th, 2020 gravely shook Beirut's urban and social fabric. In light of the government's absenteeism in all efforts of reconstruction and compensation, the city witnessed a strong movement from the people to spontaneously volunteer and react to the event helping those in need and putting themselves back on their feet. Indeed, Fawaz (2023) recognizes that:

> The recovery of the neighborhoods affected by the port blast brought a flow of financing and experiences that were channeled towards the recovery of public spaces in shapes and forms that Beirut's most progressive planners had not been able to implement in decades of plenty.

So, once again, disastrous circumstances in the country provoked impetuous reactions and micro-interventions in Beirut's urban fabric—dispersed acts of public solidarity bridging sectarian divides and safeguarding communities' livelihoods in light of the stark absence of a welfare state.

In such a context, everyday urbanism cannot be reduced to random, non-specific occurrences, or meditated political misbehavior manifested in the built environment, as recounted in existing international scholarship. Instead, everyday urbanism manifests itself as the disjointed acts of ordinary people finding ever-more unique solutions to merely pursue their day-to-day existence in a highly particular environment. To the extent that the city acts as a "stage on which social processes are played out" (Dehaene & De Cauter, 2008, p. 314), Beirut's "perpetual panic" state has historically been linked to the creation of meaningful places breaking from the dominant and traditional typologies of public spaces. These sites stand as cases of community action, stemming from spontaneous reactions to dire circumstances, managing to challenge physical or systemic boundaries in the city within a specific spatio-temporal frame. In a context of unprecedented socio-political havoc, our article serves to bring to the surface apparently mundane urban occurrences and emphasize their importance as illustrations of communal solidarity. We will thus seek to untangle ephemeral or routinized urban encounters and localized practices empirically observed in Beirut during the Covid-19 pandemic and after the port explosion which influenced a new pattern of collective engagement between the city's inhabitants. These case studies highlight the existence of an under-recognized dimension of publicness that breaks conventional public/private, socio-spatial, and temporal boundaries. Accordingly, our research contributes to the existing literature on everyday urbanism by exploring the way in which difficult socio-economic and political circumstances seem to create a particularly fertile ground for such alternative practices to occur.

5. Documenting "Meaningful Encounters" in the Exceptional Everyday

This study stems from the observation of an overall positive attitude and respect for others during the Covid-19 pandemic and after the port explosion in Beirut. The tendency for people to overcome their differences and come together was validated through our firsthand experience on-site and through information circulating on social media platforms, news agencies, and word-of-mouth. This general attitude, equally attributed to familiar residents and strangers passing by, clearly contradicted the dominant depiction of Beirut as polarized and fragmented. We have adopted a subjective research approach in order to further examine this urban phenomenon. Our personal impressions throughout the research are embedded in the process as we mostly examine human processes manifested through brief and sometimes prolonged social encounters.

We started by compiling narratives depicting "meaningful encounters" that took place in Beirut roughly between March and December 2020. We defined "meaningful encounters" as acts of urban engagement that challenge the dominant perception of Beirut as a fragmented city. The narratives were both collected by all three authors through semi-structured interviews with individuals affected by the two events and compiled based on our observations in the city. We collected a total of 28 narratives during the three months of July, August, and September 2022, out of which we retained 10 narratives for this study. The criteria for this selection were based on the potential of the narratives to illustrate what we considered typical cases covering three different types of engagements within their urban context. We defined the typical cases as: (a) Encounters that worked with/along existing conditions and contributed to exposing or enhancing the initial state of the sites; (b) encounters that challenged and contested material or invisible barriers that were considered repressive and exclusionary in nature; and (c) encounters that redefined or altered the prevailing conditions on site, giving rise to new possibilities, perceptions, and behaviors. This compilation of narratives was an attempt to read influences exercised by individuals over one another as positive and meaningful instances of solidarity. Through this reading, our article aims to portray a more comprehensive and inclusive notion of publicness in the city.

6. Reading Publicness in Beirut Through a Selection of Micro-Narratives

Since 2020, Lebanon has been facing multiple crises including the Covid-19 pandemic, the 2020 Beirut Port Explosion, and a devastating economic crisis that had started to transpire long before. Within this context, unprecedented measures were implemented, in response to which, and in order to adapt, behavioral shifts among the citizens were observed. One major policy that emerged during the lockdown was the closure of all public green spaces such as parks and gardens. The closure of these outdoor spaces was questionable as they are shared places with low health risks: Low-density/open-air spaces compensate for overcrowded neighborhoods with substandard living units and limited access to public space. Despite this policy, the need to seek relief from the pressures of the epidemic, confinement, and economic collapse prompted more people to resort to these outdoor parks and to recall their value, even if it entailed defying governmental measures.

One relevant case study of such a shared place is the Karantina Public Park, which, like many other public spaces in the city, was ordered to close during the nationwide lockdown. In reaction to this decision, children in the area collectively conspired to challenge these restrictions as a means of accessing a space to play. Children trespassed the garden fences, violating safety measures, and creating new accesses to the park. They also negotiated deals with the guard who would turn a blind eye to their infractions or take longer cigarette breaks. Alternative play areas and playtimes thus emerged and questioned both the physical boundaries of the park and the role of the guard:

> While some of the kids turned the guard into an accomplice and were able to persuade him to let them in for a limited period, others learned how to find ways around the park. The sites thus completely transformed into arenas of continuous quests, adventures, and violations. (El-Khoury, 2021, p. 74)

The observed play patterns expanded beyond and/or transformed the areas originally designated for children to play such as playgrounds equipped with toys, gardens, and other protected and fenced spaces in the city. Children's spontaneous ways of engaging with the park contradicted the previous deterministic and alienating visions of publicness. Indeed, their actions demonstrated that the act of claiming urban space goes beyond seeking permission from an established order. Instead, it is a declaration made and verified by the children through their practical engagement with the site, a notion discussed by Ivenson (2013) in "Cities Within the City: Do-It-Yourself Urbanism and the Right to the City."

Besides the case of Karantina Park, similar patterns of subverted engagement were spotted on privately owned sites throughout the city and for similar reasons. Children found spontaneous ways to access play despite a prohibition against it. This was the case in the Hamra area, where refugee kids were able to instate their right to play in a private school playground. Indeed, the National Protestant School was closed due to the crisis, while its play equipment could still be seen behind its closed fences. Children found different ways to break into the playground at different times of the day, risking injuries from falling and causing disturbance to the neighbors.

They were finally able to negotiate a time slot for play during which the school principal would provide them with a ladder to access the space while keeping the gates closed (see Figure 1). Once again, the children's right to access the play space was not officially recognized, rather, an agreement with the caretaker was sought to enable the use of the space.

Evidently, the children's defying acts in all these instances succeeded in breaking physical boundaries, but the case of public parks in Lebanon is more complex and multi-layered. In fact, the different examples observed in this research also reveal how other invisible barriers were challenged. It is commonly known that for many years authorities have consolidated different forms of marginalization through public spaces and gardens. This phenomenon became more visible during the pandemic when the different policies that were implemented exposed the authorities' attitudes and discriminatory practices. In fact, fieldwork research conducted by Public Works Studio in 2022 suggested that the closure of public spaces from the start of the lockdown until now has been inconsistent, following some questionable patterns. For example, in the case of Horsh Beirut, people suspected of being refugees were asked to show a local ID card at the gate and were refused entry upon failure to do so. At the Sanayeh Garden refugees were only allowed in for two hours a day in the middle of the week thus, requiring visitors to provide identification and a signed permit upon entry. These exceptions cast doubt on the argument that the closure of public parks was a safety precaution and instead seem to reinforce the exclusiveness of public spaces in Lebanon. Within this context, children trespassing the physical barriers of the parks were also challenging discriminatory and exclusionary measures and policies.

The different cases recorded in this research reveal that other paradigms of collective social contracts, negotiations, and improvisations can break the hold of dominant boundaries and ideologies. As such, children have managed to create unusual and unique opportunities to access places for play despite opposing hostile attitudes. Our article does not intend to idealize these practices nor portray them as fostering a healthy recreational environment, rather, it highlights people's role as active agents in the creation of their own public places.

Besides recreation, other more pressing needs came to be threatened during the nationwide lockdown. Indeed, the governmental measures put in place during the pandemic to mitigate the spread of the virus by temporarily halting commercial activities significantly affected the livelihood of families that were dependent on small businesses and daily income. Consequently, unique and particular arrangements were carried out by shop owners as a way to bypass the imposed closures of small convenience stores and delis. On the outside, one particular shop, Al-Haitham on Sidani Street, was covered with fabric curtains (see Figure 2), yet a small lamp was kept lit inside to signal the ongoing business.

Figure 1. Picture of the ladder placed along the fence of the National Protestant School in the Hamra neighborhood.
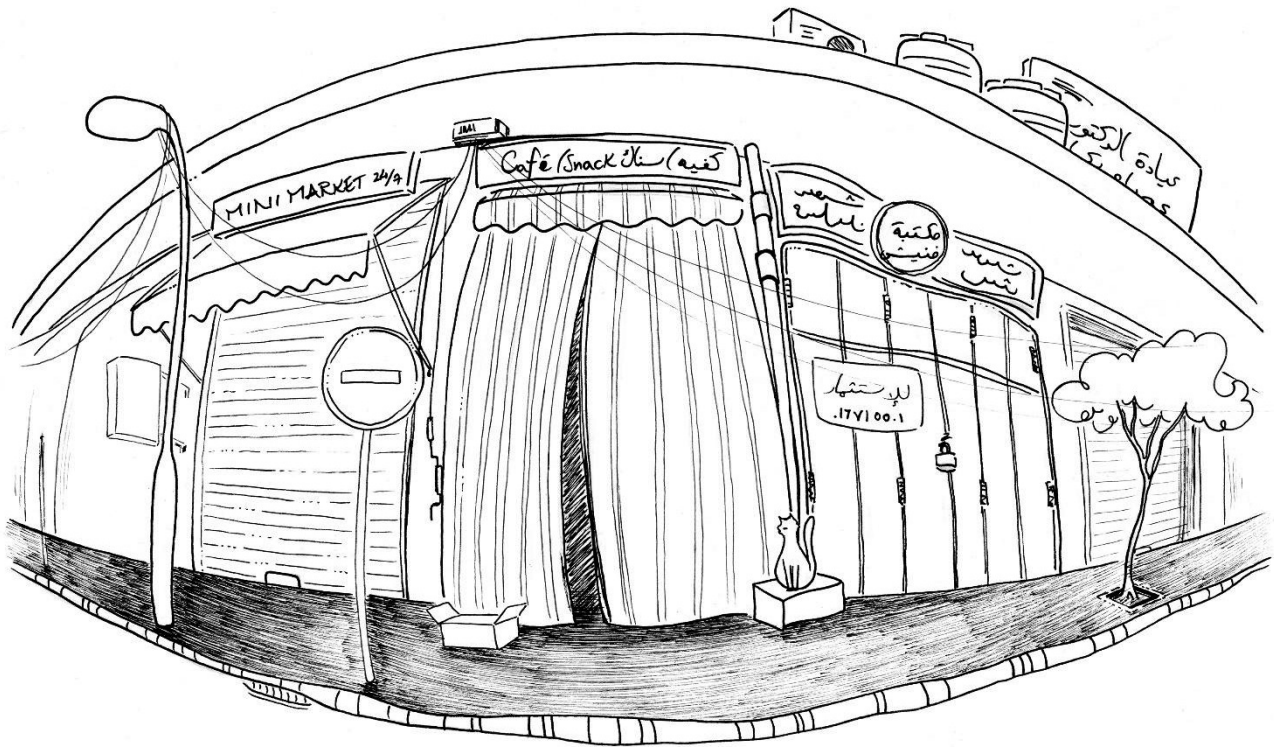
**Figure 2.** Al-Haitham shop façade on Sidani Street.

Sometimes clients would pretend to be casually passing by the shop when police cars or officers were present in the streets. They would then enter the shop once there was no longer the threat of being caught by the police. We also observed how locals would discreetly inform worried passersby about the open covert shop. Eventually, the regulars and the locals who kept turning to the shop for daily needs became accomplices and established a pattern of punctual infractions along the deserted city sidewalks. While these interactions mainly occurred among familiar strangers of the same neighborhood, who might have already known the shopkeeper prior to the pandemic, they indicate solidarity and conviviality in a context of nationwide social disjunction. As such, this urban occurrence suggests the potential of spontaneous individual actions in fostering public familiarity in insecure and uncertain contexts.

During the pandemic, Lebanon was also impacted by a massive explosion on August 4th, 2020, which completely devastated the city of Beirut. This exceptional event required an immediate reaction from people on the ground to contribute toward relief efforts. Besides the dramatic toll of human casualties and trauma, the material damages to the urban fabric were inconceivable. Usually, basic architectural elements—walls, doors, and roofs—define the enclosure of a house. They are employed in order to divide and then selectively re-unite inhabited space. Yet, they often cannot describe clear demarcations between the inside and outside, the unshared and the collective, and the house and the city. Instead, the combination of these elements along with

the social practices that develop around them draws new boundaries that shift and keep redefining the realm of the private and public. This described phenomenon was exacerbated after the Beirut Port explosion, the latter provoking a severe conflation between the realms of the private and the public (see Figure 3). In fact, the Beirut blast destroyed, fragmented, and exposed the buildings in the area. It erased the physical elements that demarcated the inside from the outside, turning the ground floors of the residential buildings and the streets of the city into one homogeneous and uninterrupted entity. This permeability of domestic spaces was sometimes necessary, as bedrooms, kitchens, and living areas became spaces where strangers gathered to share their grief and offer their support. What was described by Toufoul Abou-Hodeib (2017, p. 121) in the context of modern life in Beirut thus acquired new relevance in a totally unexpected circumstance: "Rather than being the realm of the private as opposed to the public, the…home became the place where the two met."

However, as the private life of the home was carried out into the public sphere, the dangers of public life (theft, intrusion, vandalism, etc.) were brought back into the home. Strangers gained authority over private spaces, walking through them and inhabiting them freely as though they were natural extensions of the streets. Consequently, homeowners had to transfer the role of sheltering to a custodian (a doorman) or otherwise rely on thin envelopes of plastic bags to guard their belongings. The inanimate boundaries (e.g., walls, doors, and roof) were replaced by a human agency, the space was
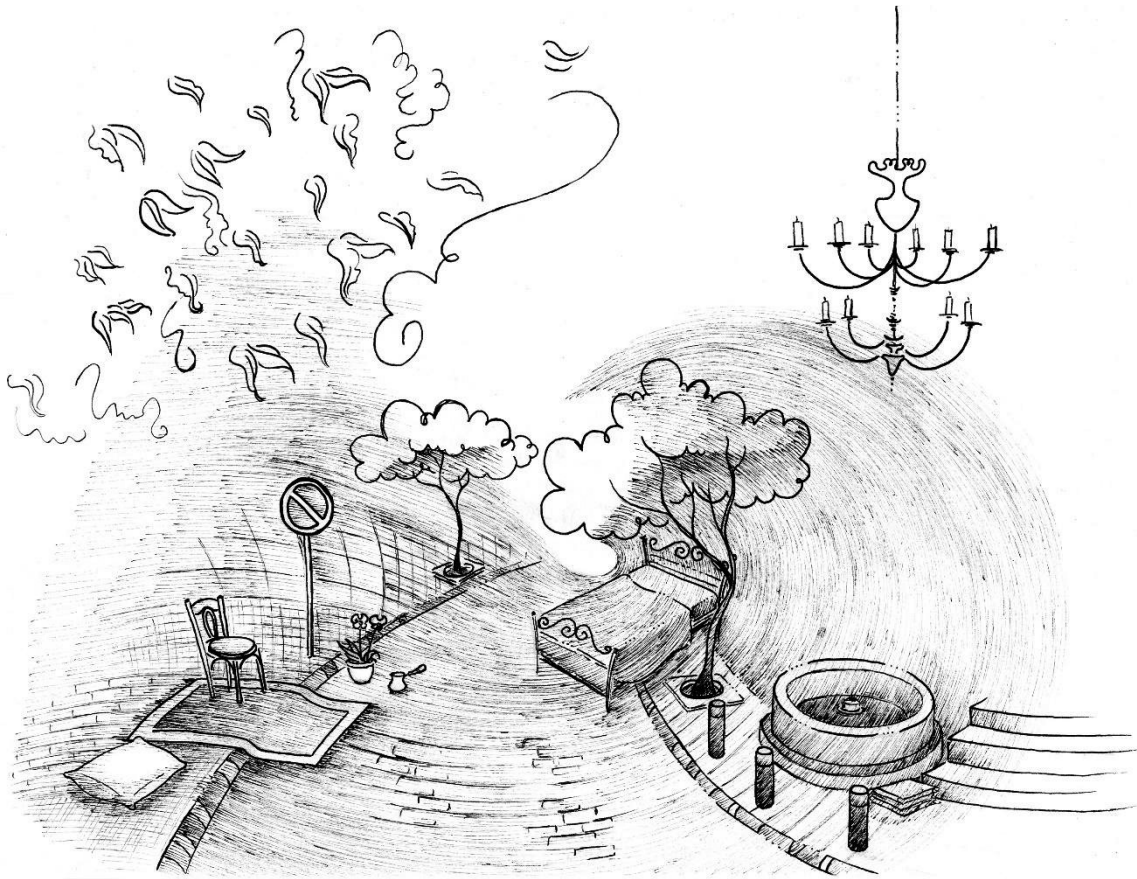
Figure 3. Representation of scattered spaces in Beirut after the port explosion.

no longer being defined by physical elements but by the extent of the eyesight. Thus, the task of ensuring safety was assigned to those with their eyes upon the street and public peace was "kept primarily by an intricate, almost unconscious, network of voluntary controls and standards among the people themselves, and enforced by the people themselves" (Jacobs, 1961. p. 108). Following these events, the inhabitants of the city left and were replaced by strangers who formed a collective of custodians aimed at bringing back peace and safety to the city. Doorkeepers, construction workers, medical staff, and volunteers temporarily upheld the negotiations on behalf of a distressed population. The network that emerged to reconstruct the city was intangible, carried through spontaneous activities, and far from any formal or governmental intervention, physical demarcations, or formal policies.

Another grave consequence of the August 4th, 2020 explosion was the displacement of over 300,000 people (Sewell, 2020). Facing the absence of institutional support, individuals took it upon themselves to offer their homes as shelters, facilitated by the use of social media platforms. Initiatives such as the Instagram pages Open Houses Lebanon and Thawra Map were established to connect those in need with available accommodations. The hashtag #OurHomesAreOpen emerged as a symbol of people's willingness to provide not only housing but

also transportation for those in need. In addition to private homes, hotels also extended their spare rooms to those affected. Closed restaurants and shops opened their doors to provide spaces for people to work, study, and recharge their phones. These acts of generosity and resource-sharing in everyday spaces not only provided practical assistance but also fostered collaborations, conviviality, and tolerance among diverse groups in Beirut. During this time of crisis, those originally designated private spaces gained a new dimension of publicness that served a community in dire need of support.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the Beirut Port explosion both provoked a temporary halt of activities and circulation leaving streets and crowded neighborhoods empty. The restriction on movement beyond a certain radius encouraged people to remain in their homes and to rediscover the places in their proximity. Indeed, people sought shelter in their own private gardens, courtyards, stairwells, and rooftops. While these private spaces had originally been designated as communal spaces, they were primarily treated as utilitarian spaces (e.g., storage units). This tendency was prevalent until the pandemic forced building residents to recall the potential of these shared spaces to bring people together. The rooftop was one of the first spaces to be revisited as a social place rather than solely a depository of water tanks and satellite dishes. Residents extended their activities to the
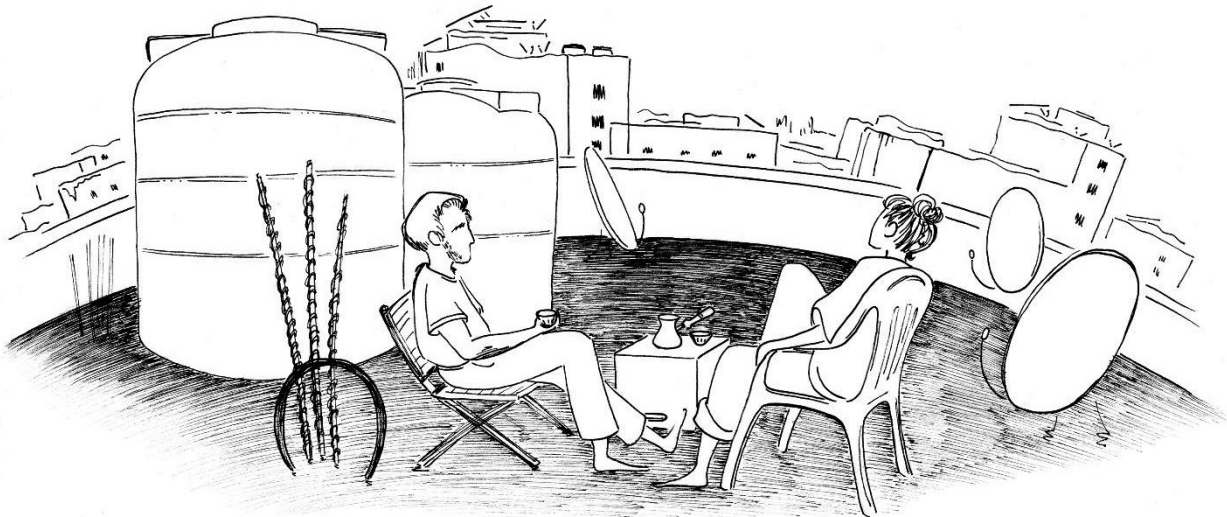
Figure 4. Rooftop in Beirut during the pandemic.

roof, sharing a morning coffee with a neighbor or hosting dinners and small gatherings among family members (see Figure 4). Others even ventured into roof gardening or farming, growing a small selection of their fruits and vegetables locally. Sharing time and space on the roof required new social contracts to take place between neighbors to actively define a public space they could collectively inhabit, thus instating a new social dynamic beyond the boundaries of the private apartment. This spontaneous return to appropriating the roof as a social space instilled a newfound sense of conviviality in a previously inhospitable and neglected place, emphasizing "togetherness as a lived negotiation, belonging as practice" (Wise & Noble, 2016, p. 425).

Finally, a specific instance of reappropriating subsidiary spaces was observed in an alleyway near a residential block in Beirut. Before the pandemic, the use of this street subscribed to the typical practices that privilege vehicular functions over human activities. In fact, the neighbors of this block had devised agreements among each other to allocate the space along this alleyway to park their cars and access their houses. However, with the confinement making remote destinations inaccessible, people had to seek alternative spaces for leisure and gathering, ones closer to where they resided. In light of this new need, the residents of this block voluntarily let go of their acquired right for a parking spot and they re-negotiated new agreements that would allow for the creation of new social spaces. The cars were thus relocated to free up the alleyway, allowing for the extension of living spaces to the outside. This emergent public outdoor space was fluid and flexible, as opposed to its previous fixed character. This way, the call for isolation, or "solidarity in solitude," in some cases, created stronger social ties between neighbors, and reinforced their connection to the places they live in. The global observation of people returning to the in-between spaces surrounding their homes, such as balconies, stoops, and front yards, during the Covid-19 period is supported by various literature that emerged in the aftermath, like Koichiro Tamura's (2020) "Porch Placemaking: Exploring the Functionality of In-Between Spaces During and After the Covid-19 Pandemic."

7. Conclusion

During times of crisis and in the absence of any institutional support, casual encounters in everyday spaces in Beirut have increased and enhanced collaborations, conviviality, and tolerance among different groups in the city. Shedding light on these encounters highlights the vital role of people in creating or destroying places through their actions, interactions, and non-interactions on the ground. We argue that these encounters are "meaningful" because they are able to challenge dominant and prejudiced perceptions of the city and promote a more positive attitude towards others. The article also argues that the notion of publicness in Beirut goes beyond physical boundaries and designated spaces for public activities. This more comprehensive and inclusive notion of publicness can only be reflected through narratives documenting social interactions and encounters across the city.

Through our reading of meaningful encounters, we recognize that understanding the public in straight opposition to the private is problematic and does not address the complexity of social behavior. We also underline the organic and spontaneous nature of encounters that cannot be captured or codified through formal policies and regulations, nor be recognized as social norms. Collected narratives direct us away from the formal and "conventional" conceptions of public spaces, and rather shift our attention toward an alternate dimension of publicness—one that has a softer character and is defined through a social lens. As such, the observed patterns of collective engagement in this study highlight a communal

ambiance reflected through spontaneous human interactions, new social contracts, negotiations, and improvisations capable of mitigating physical boundaries and dominant policies, producing new places, enhancing existing ones, and rendering them more valuable to their users. The scope of this research primarily reiterates theories and principles put forward by scholars such as Franck and Stevens, Crawford, Hou, and others who celebrate loose spaces, unplanned and spontaneous practices, and mundane activities in the city as a manifestation of its vitality and publicness. The article also sheds light on the particularity of the context of Beirut during times of crisis as a crucial element to showcase the validity of these stated theories and the potential of spontaneous social practices in overcoming challenging conditions.

While publicness is often theorized as a notion aspiring for inclusion in ideal types of spaces with a fixed location and open access, this article argues that social encounters in the city—a central component to understanding the notion of publicness—cannot be mapped on a static plan. The fluid territory of encounters spread way beyond the footprint of designated and planned public spaces through emergent networks and topos often defined through ongoing, ambiguous, and contested dimensions. Hence, the systematic and highly codified cadastral plan can no longer be treated as an end-state map of public spaces in a city, nor can we use conventional representations and systems of projections to document publicness in the city. The narratives selected in this study explore and potentially reveal a fluid nature of publicness that cannot be grasped easily in one moment or on a single graphic document. We believe that traditional modes of representation of public spaces and particularly those adopted by architects and planners are too focused on over-determined built forms and could be dismissive of the organic nature of the public realm. While contributions to the discourse of publicness in the city come from a wide range of disciplines related to both design and social studies, it is high time to re-examine and re-consider conventional representation tools and methods, as some researchers have already suggested (Pérez-Gómez & Pelletier, 1992; Stoppani, 2018). It is worth mentioning that during the last few decades, more importance has been given to subjective and more inclusive readings of the city through the production of mental maps, documentation of oral histories, and collection of significant narratives about the city (Ameel, 2023; Darling & Wilson, 2016; Lynch, 1960; Mager & Matthey, 2015). In fact, the city of Beirut has been depicted through different lenses, media, and tools of representation in an attempt to highlight the life on the streets and reveal an identity that cannot be easily deciphered on cadastral maps (Lefort, 2020; Schwerter, 2022). While our article focuses on written narratives or text-based representation, photographs and personalized drawings can depict the complexity of social encounters. This article does not intend to promote or suggest any particular method or tool of representation; however, it pro-

poses to further investigate this area of research and challenge conventional media that are often dismissive of the social dimension and the fluid nature of the notion of publicness.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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