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# GEITAWI URBAN SNAPSHOT

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Developed by Beirut Urban Lab

In partnership with ACTED

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	2
INTRODUCTION .....	3
METHODOLOGY .....	4
I. NEIGHBORHOOD .....	7
II. STAKEHOLDERS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD .....	17
III. RECOVERY STATUS .....	18
IV. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POTENTIAL SITES FOR COMMUNITY-BASED PROJECTS..	21
V. ANNEX .....	28

# INTRODUCTION

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On August 4th, 2020, the Port area of Beirut was rocked by two massive ammonium nitrate explosions, killing over 200 people and wounding more than 6,000<sup>1</sup>. Buildings were destroyed or damaged within a 10 km area around the port, including an estimated 70,000 apartments and nearly 40,000 residential or commercial spaces.

UNHCR partnered with four international organizations (MEDAIR, ACTED, Save the Children, and Intersos) to rehabilitate shelters, restore shared spaces, and introduce the upgrading of selected neighborhood-level communal spaces, in six neighborhoods severely affected by the blast: Karantina, Mar Mikhael, Geitawi, Badawi, Bachoura, and Karm el-Zeitoun. In this framework, ACTED and Beirut Urban Lab at the Maroun Semaan Faculty of Engineering and Architecture (MSFEA) at the American University of Beirut (AUB), partnered to develop an assessment meant to support the effort of locating the recovery efforts within an urban-scale approach in each of the above-mentioned neighborhoods.

This report is one of the six Urban Snapshots conceived by the Beirut Urban Lab (BUL) in partnership with ACTED and funded by UNHCR in Fall/Winter 2020-2021. The reports are designed to a) Inform the understanding of each of the four INGOs and UNHCR about the urban processes underway in each of the neighborhood prior to the blast, focusing on those processes that are likely to slow-down or threaten the return of residents and the recovery of the neighborhood, and b) Whenever possible, point the INGOs in each of the neighborhood towards potential communal projects of important social relevance.

Further, the Urban Snapshots have the potential to support the work of the community of social workers, city planners, urban designers, researchers, activists, and others who are intervening with relief, repair, and recovery in short, medium, or long term development in Beirut in response to the August 4th, 2020 port blast.

The assessment built on the knowledge and research of the Beirut Urban Lab about each of the six neighborhood's history and urban conditions. Additional fieldwork was conducted by a team of field researchers to gather the needed information from neighborhood-level interviews and discussions with residents, NGOs, etc.

Each of the reports locates the effects of the explosion within the larger urban trends that have influenced the studied neighborhood over the past three decades. It does so by providing a preliminary urban documentation and analysis of the neighborhood conditions, including a brief historical overview, insights about contextual urban trends, profiles of influential stakeholders, and a brief review of socio-spatial conditions. To the extent possible, the reports thus cover both urban trends and recovery efforts at the household (e.g., resident, business-owner), building, and neighborhood scales (e.g., shared space, road, recycling).

Each report further unravels some of the critical threats that are likely to undermine the recovery of each neighborhood, including dwellers' return, the rehabilitation of shared spaces and amenities, the reignition of economic activities, and the restoration of tangible and intangible heritage.

The reports are not conceived as exhaustive surveys. Rather, they are snapshots, taken at a specific moment (i.e. November-December 2020), yet located within a solid understanding of the economic, social, and political forces that influence Beirut's ongoing urbanization. Indeed, they build, as outlined thoroughly in the methodological section, on pre-existing knowledge of the neighborhood developed at the BUL and complemented by data gathered during November and December 2020 directly in the neighborhoods.

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<sup>1</sup> Lebanon Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework 3RF

## METHODOLOGY

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The selection of neighborhoods and the delineation of their boundaries were proposed by UNHCR, reflecting its areas of intervention. In order to improve the coherence of the study and its recommendations, the BUL research team introduced mild modifications in delineating neighborhoods to account for the internal characteristics of the neighborhood, particularly lot morphologies, building typologies, and population profiles. Neighborhood boundaries thus do not coincide with official administrative boundaries.

The reports are the result of the work of six field researchers, one reporting officer and one research team coordinator hired by ACTED who were trained by the Beirut Urban Lab (BUL) team and worked under its supervision from October to December 2020. The positions were filled through a transparent and competitive process putting the emphasis on previous experience and methodological trainings; three of the six fieldworkers had worked for the Beirut Urban Lab before, and another was a recent graduate of the Master in Urban Design program at AUB.

The production of this report relied on case-study research methods of data collection as defined by Yin.<sup>2</sup> In essence, Yin sees the goal of case studies as understanding complex social phenomena, relating data to propositions and aiming at analytical generalization as if they were an experiment. By nature, case-study research is qualitative and typically uses multiple methods to collect different kinds of evidence (e.g. documents and archival records; interviews; direct and participant observation; physical artifacts; surveys), as this insures the triangulation and cross-checking of evidence, and hence more rigorous and valid data analysis.

For this report, BUL relied on five data sources collected through: (i) desk reviews of available publications, technical reports, records and other documents; (ii) field observations (direct and participant) using the guide available as annex C; (iii) qualitative semi-structured interviews with key informants (e.g. *mukhtar(a)*, NGOs' representatives) according to protocols described below and available as annex D, as well as informal conversations with residents and business-owners; (iv) data from the shelter technical assessment collected between September and November 2020 by INGOs intervening in the area, and provided by UNHCR in December 2020; (v) surveys and maps compiled by the BUL's researchers about Beirut's built environment in the context of the Beirut Built Environment Database (BBED)<sup>3</sup>.

### **(i) Documents and Records (Desk review)**

Data analysis relies on the review of several gray reports<sup>4</sup>, academic research, and references available about the neighborhood. They are listed as footnotes throughout each report whenever they were used as evidence for the documentation and analysis of some of the neighborhood's urban trends.

### **(ii) Field Observations**

The researcher conducted fieldwork for about 12 full days in the neighborhood (1.5 day per week for a duration of 8 weeks, on the average), observing directly the built environment, documenting damaged constructions and processes of physical repair in residences and businesses, as well as noting the following: shops' activity/closure; buildings' quality and condition; abandoned/dilapidated buildings; clusters of impoverishment; construction activity; heritage buildings; the use of open/public spaces by the community and presence of greenery; infrastructure conditions (access to water and electricity, traffic congestion, conditions of streets, sidewalks and stairs); options for

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<sup>2</sup> See Yin R.K, *Case-Study Research: Design and Methods* (2014) London: Sage.

<sup>3</sup> The Beirut Built Environment database is an online GIS platform developed by the Beirut Urban Lab at the American University of Beirut. The initiative brings together a collection of maps, documents, and surveyed indicators about actors as well as spatial and environmental characteristics that can inform ongoing research, public policy making, and advocacy about the city. It also relies on a database of building permits dating back to 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Gray literature is produced outside of the traditional commercial or academic publishing and distribution channels and typically includes reports, working papers, government documents, white papers and evaluations. Organizations that produce grey literature include government departments and agencies, civil society or non-governmental organizations, academic centres and departments, and private companies and consultants.

waste disposal. The researcher also observed social interactions in the neighborhood, when they occurred and documented them, including groups of migrant workers and refugees. They were tasked to also document key landmarks in the neighborhood (educational, religious, cultural, corporate), and to report visible political sites and signs (flags, icons, posters, markings on walls). These observations were recorded as field notes and mapped, when relevant, serving as evidence that substantiates several claims made in this report, as indicated in the text.

### **(iii) Qualitative semi-structured Interviews and Conversations with key informants**

Field researchers were trained to conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews with key actors in the neighborhood they were able to reach out to amidst the difficult working conditions posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. They interviewed neighborhood's elected local representative (*mukhtar(a)*), NGOs' representatives, as well as dwellers and business-owners who stayed and are engaged in the repair process. The interviews' questions were organized in three broad categories: (a) Awareness about the actors in charge of repair (do they know who is in charge, who visited them, who returned, what support were they provided with thus far); (b) Respondent's tenure status (do they own or do they rent, do they pay in real or Lebanese dollars or in LBP, how precarious is their tenure situation, do they get any support from family abroad, what are their future plans: are they staying or leaving, and why?); (c) Processes of repair (did they receive support, for what, from who, where is the process at, what is still to be done, are damaged common spaces fixed?). In addition, researchers also conducted interviews and informal conversations with residents and business-owners, on selected sections of the interview guide. Overall, 21 in-depth interviews were conducted in Geitawi.

All interviews and conversations were conducted after securing verbal consent and according to ethical standards of social research. Cited interviews and conversations have been anonymized and personal identifiers removed to protect interlocutors.

Field observations and qualitative interviews were documented by field researchers through pictures and detailed notes, geo-referencing the location wherever possible. They then reported the interviews and developed fact sheets that were discussed with the rest of the team.

### **(iv) Quantitative Technical Assessment Data collected between September and November 2020 by an INGO operating in the area under UNHCR funding**

Qualitative findings are complemented by an analysis of technical assessment data shared by UNHCR, providing technical assessment of a prioritized number of damaged houses in the six neighborhoods (according to criteria set by UNHCR) by its INGO implementing partners (one per neighborhood). BUL researchers analyzed this dataset and extracted statistical information from it, which is referred to in the report. It should be noted that the technical assessments were conducted in specific targeted areas of each neighborhood as part of the shelter response implementation, therefore not resorting to any type of probability sampling. Furthermore, the data used as part of this research originates from UNHCR partners only, thereby not taking into account any other technical assessment data that may potentially have been collected by other actors in the area. As such, corresponding findings may not be extrapolated to the entire neighborhood, but rather interpreted as a useful triangulation source for the findings deriving from qualitative data sources. The total number of assessed housing units in the 6 neighborhoods amount to 5262, including 1,001 in Geitawi. It is worth noting that the collected data includes a substantive number of "no entries" (reaching up to more than 90% for some questions and averaging 40% for the others) which means the data needs to be interpreted cautiously. Yet, the data is representative for several sets of assessment variables, and BUL used it to substantiate qualitative findings. This is notably the case for nationality of occupants; level of damage (level 1, 2 or 3); status of repair; mode of repair; type of assistance; reason for lack of repair; mode of occupancy in each neighborhood (old/new rent, hosting, ownership); and type of rental contract (written, oral). This set of evidence is mainly used in the "Socio-Demographic Profile," "Housing Conditions, and "Recovery Status" sections of the report.

### **(v) Spatial Data and Mapping**

The report relies largely on spatial data compiled within the framework of the BUL's Beirut Built Environment Database (BBED), which has been made available thanks to the MoU agreed upon between ACTED and BUL. This includes data regarding population size; density; blast damage assessment; building age; building height; real-estate developers' profiles; vacancy rates; number of loans acquired from the Public Corporation for Housing (PCH); open public spaces and unbuildable lots. Data listed in the BBED is based on official records of filed building permits at the Lebanese Order of Engineers and Architects, official property records from the Land Registry, comprehensive field surveys, and registration records. This information is reported within the text itself, in related

sections, as well as in maps compiled in Annex A. It is used as a main source of evidence in the “Urbanization Trends,” “Socio-Demographic Profile,” “Housing Conditions,” and “Quality of Public Spaces” sections of the report.

Readers should acknowledge the fact that the Urban Snapshots were not designed following a Neighborhood Profile approach, which would have required more time and resources. The Urban Snapshots were developed in the aftermath of the Beirut explosions, during the Fall/winter 2020-2021. BUL relied on the most relevant and up-to-date available data from the sources listed above, while more generally coordinating with the Forward Emergency Room (FER). Figures that relate to emergency response actors’ achievements reflect information as collected during the research period. As such, they are not meant to provide an up-to-date nor comprehensive overview of all achievements as of end of December 2020. No systematic and comprehensive surveys of damaged housing and business units were made available, with detailed datasets regarding associated tenure, socio-economic, infrastructure and other variables, which would have allowed to derive more precise patterns and urban trends associated to the Blast.

The health situation in the country also constrained BUL from conducting a larger number of interviews with dwellers, business-owners, and stakeholders to profile in more depth and with more rigor the modalities of repair in the neighborhood, the governance of actors, and inscribe recommendations for community-based projects in a sound analysis of power groups and opportunities and challenges for intervention. Yet, BUL believes this report successfully point towards potential communal projects of important social relevance, paves the way for this work to be further developed out by actors working on the Port Blast recovery, and presents productive avenues for future research projects and community-level initiatives.

### **What is Unique about Geitawi?**

This report covers the neighborhood of Geitawi. Of the six neighborhoods included in this project (Map 1), Geitawi stands out in its relative distance from the site of the explosion and its relatively more contained level of damage than other areas. It is noteworthy that the neighborhood’s large institutions that serve at the scale of the city, particularly hospitals and schools, were severely affected by the blast. Furthermore, the neighborhood has suffered from gradual impoverishment, the departure of its young population, and heavy speculative building developments after 2008 that render an intervention critical at the urban scale.

Field research in Geitawi was constrained by the pandemic conditions: interviews and conversations included 21 respondents, and relied on the analysis of numerous other interviews conducted prior to the blast for several BUL projects. Field research was conducted by Field Researchers Dounia Salamé.

# I. NEIGHBORHOOD

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## 1. Area of Study

### A. Geographic Context

The neighborhoods of Geitawi, as defined by the UNHCR divisions, was adopted with slight modifications to account for building and social practices in the neighborhood, as seen in map 2. Within this area, BUL can identify a number of neighborhoods, including Roun (around the St. George Hospital), Geitawi (around the Geitawi Hospital), and Khazinein (all along Khazinein Street). These neighborhoods are interconnected by historical, social and morphological elements and together form the neighborhoods of Geitawi covered in this report.

Geitawi's main street connecting Roun Hospital (St. George Hospital) and Geitawi Hospital is a commercial spine running through the neighborhoods (Map 3). While the commercial nature of that street has lost its spark over the past decade, as described in the report, the neighborhoods remain connected through it as residents walk and shop across. This artery is the center of the development of the neighborhoods forming the neighborhoods of Geitawi.

Compared to the UNHCR division, BUL included Zone 39 of the neighborhoods (also called Qobayat area) in Mar Mikhael rather than in Geitawi because of similar urban trends, in particular the proliferation of restaurants, pubs and short-term rentals (such as Airbnb) in that area. In addition, Zone 39 is subject to big scale luxurious residential developments similar to the ones in Mar Mikhael, epitomized by the real estate project replacing the Laziza Brewery. Geitawi, as defined in this report, is not going through the same urban transformations. Similarly, BUL included Zone 34 (Camp Abiad) in the Badawi neighborhoods since the socio-demographic profile of the population was closer to Badawi's.

The borders of the neighborhoods were identified according to social practices and urban transformation processes as described above, and they were drawn more specifically through the following topographic and infrastructural elements. First, the neighborhoods is lineated on the North by a series of stairs separating it from Mar Mikhael. These stairs constitute a pedestrian link to Mar Mikhael as well as used public spaces. On its North-Eastern side, a police base separates it from the neighborhood of Qobayat, which is also part of Mar Mikhael. On the West, St. George Hospital separates it from al-Hikmeh neighborhood. On the south, a highway separates it from Fassouh, and on the East a significant difference in elevation separates it from Badawi.

## 2. Historical Overview

Historically, Geitawi-Roun was established in the 1920s and 1930s with the arrival of Armenian churches and institutions on one hand, and of a Maronite population and their institutions on the other.<sup>5</sup> The Armenian church Surp Hagop (established in the 1920s), the Armenian Catholic headquarters (established in 1934), and the Geitawi Hospital (established in 1927) are among the institutions established at the time and still existing (Map 3). Until today, the neighborhood is strongly anchored around these institutions: two important hospitals and numerous churches and schools are affiliated with the religious identity of the neighborhood. In addition, one can find two political party headquarters, the Kataeb's (established in the 1950s) and Lebanese Forces' (established later), both of whom are prominent political-sectarian groups that maintain a solid Christian base.

In the pre-war period, nascent business owners chose the main commercial street of the neighborhoods to establish their first shops in the city. After establishing their businesses, they would move to the more desired downtown or Hamra Street and transform their commercial space

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<sup>5</sup> Khayat, T. (1996). *La rue Getaoui et la croissance de Beyrouth*. In J.-L. Arnaud, *Beyrouth, Grand Beyrouth* (pp. 81-87). Beirut: Presses de l'Ifpo.

in Geitawi Street into a storage space.<sup>6</sup> When the green line separated West and East Beirut during the Civil War, Geitawi's main street became one of the central commercial streets of East Beirut. This brought new shop owners to the street, both from outside the neighborhood and among its residents. According to Khayat, a number of commercial spaces were squatted by militiamen who opened beauty salons, grocery stores, and gambling spaces, which were dismantled with the end of the war. In the 1990s, the street remained lively and busy, with many brand stores opening a space on it. It was – as today – mainly occupied by clothes, shoes and accessory stores.

Despite its Christian origins, in the past decade, the neighborhood has been transforming quickly, welcoming a much more diverse population. This includes young people from multiple religious groups attracted by its lower rent and purchasing prices.<sup>7</sup> Others include migrant workers who live in pockets of affordable housing. Many of its migrant or refugee population (Syrians, Sri Lankan, and Bangladeshi in majority) also live in the “guardian room” of building ground floors and participate actively in the street life of the neighborhood.

### 3. Main Urbanization Trends Influencing the Neighborhood at the Time of the Blast

Today, in the aftermath of the blast, several urban trends influence Geitawi's urban fabric and have potential to be exacerbated in the future.<sup>8</sup> They also have the potential to be considered and used to the advantage of the neighborhoods in local urban development plans.

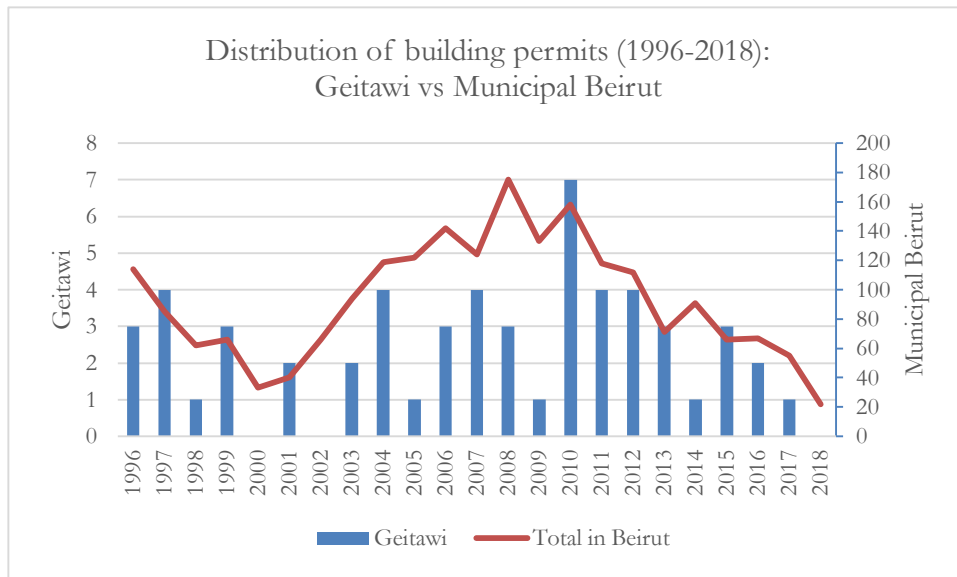
**Speculative Real Estate Developments:** Like most neighborhoods in Beirut, Geitawi does not escape changes brought by speculation over the land and apartment prices. As the graph below (Fig. 1) shows, over the past 20 years, the neighborhood of Geitawi has seen a vibrant building development sector where old buildings have been replaced by high-rises that remain above the financial means of many residents. Consequently, some residents reported that their children had to move out of the city in order to afford an apartment. However, contrary to nearby Mar Mikhael, which was radically transformed by new developments, the neighborhoods' development was mostly concentrated at its southern edge, along the Hikmeh main artery (Map 6), which reflects a city-wide pattern of urbanization along main arteries rather than on an inner street in a neighborhood in the area. It is also noteworthy that the vacancy rate of these new developments is high as discussed below.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> RAMCO (2015 Q1). *SQM Prices in Beirut per Neighborhood*. Beirut: Ramco. [www.ramcolb.com](http://www.ramcolb.com)

<sup>8</sup> These trends, and observations about building activities are all derived from the Beirut Built Environment Database. Data about building permits was obtained by the Beirut Urban Lab from the Order of Engineers and Architects in Lebanon in 2019 and all data points were surveyed to double-check their validity. Please check the Methodology section in the beginning of this report or visit the BBED [website](#) for the detailed methodology used to collect and analyze the data.



**Figure 1.** Graph of building permits filed in Geitawi and Municipal Beirut. Source: Beirut Built Environment Database (BBED), Beirut Urban Lab, 2020.

Inside the neighborhood, although rare, higher priced buildings appear on Geitawi's main street near the St. George Hospital, as well as along Khazinein Street. The developments along Khazinein Street can be read as an expansion of Mar Mikhael's main street's gentrification, which it overlooks. A series of stairs links both streets and can explain the attraction for developers looking for new markets. In addition, a number of lots have been acquired in the neighborhoods in the past twenty years, and some old buildings demolished, only to be replaced today by parking lots. These could be "on hold" today (in a context of economic depression), in the anticipation for potentially more advantageous financial circumstances.

**Vacancy:** The neighborhoods has a significant number of abandoned buildings that have been empty for years, possibly since the Civil War. Many of these mostly one- or two- floor buildings are left to degrade with time, sometimes without a roof and with furniture inside (Figs. 2, 3, and 4). It is possible that the departure of part of the population during the Civil War might have left these buildings behind.



**Figure 2.** Abandoned building in Geitawi near the Jesuits Garden. Source: Dounia Salamé, 2020

Following the trend in the rest of the city, newly built developments also have significant rates of vacancy, more so in the neighborhood of Roum than around the Geitawi Hospital. The BBED recorded a vacancy rate of 30% in these developments, signaling that almost one in three newly-built apartments are assets to store wealth, and not spaces to live in.



**Figure 4.** An abandoned building classified by the DGA near Khazinein Street. Source: Dounia Salamé, 2020.



**Figure 4.** An abandoned building behind the Evangelical Armenian School. Source: Dounia Salamé, 2020.

**Small Business Closures:** As reported during field research and documented through BUL's research prior to the blast, the main commercial artery in Geitawi has been suffering due to the shift in shopping habits, leading customers away from small neighborhood clothing stores to bigger outlet malls. Shop owners identify the building of a big mall nearby in Sassine (ABC shopping mall, opened in 2001) as a moment of significant loss of income. Many brand stores that were bringing clients to the street moved to the mall.

Consequently, today, almost half of stores on the street have been closed for years. The more recent economic crisis accelerated that trend. In June 2019, *Le Commerce du Levant* wrote that in the 15 preceding months, 50 shops had closed in Gemmayzeh, Geitawi and Mar Mikhael.<sup>9</sup> Since then, the devaluation of the Lebanese pound and the multiple political crises that the country has been going through, have only exacerbated these difficulties.

As most buildings (even outside that main commercial artery) have built-in commercial spaces on the ground floor, many empty and abandoned today, a question remains as to how these spaces can be used and what kind of street-level economy can be thought of in light of the current dominant economic model. In some streets, the closed frontage of a shop allows elderly residents to have a sidewalk space to put chairs, sit down and spend the day together.

**A Neighborhood of Institutions:** As written above in the historical overview, Geitawi's urban development was directly linked to the establishment of several institutions in the neighborhoods (Map 3). Today, St. George Hospital and Geitawi Hospital occupy mega-blocks in the neighborhood, sometimes causing traffic congestion from patients and employees coming in and out of the neighborhood. Some of the parking scarcity in the neighborhood has also been attributed to employees of the hospitals, as parking spaces seem to be available at night outside of working hours.

Still, the hospitals bring welcome economic activity to the neighborhoods. The line of cafés and snacks facing each of the hospitals are testimony to the many patrons of employees and visitors spilling out from the hospitals.

In addition, as per BUL's data and interviews held with respondents during field research, a relatively high number of lots and buildings in the neighborhoods are owned by institutions, including a number of street-level shops on Geitawi main street owned by the Armenian Church and others owned by the Notre-Dame de Jamhour College, along with a gas station. This gives these institutions substantive power in potentially transforming the neighborhood. For example, in the first week of December 2020, Notre-Dame de Jamhour College demolished the gas station and appears to be planning to demolish the row of shops it owns to build a parking lot.

**The Fouad Boutros Highway Project, a Planned Disruptive Infrastructure:** The planned Fouad Boutros highway mainly runs through the neighboring Hikmeh and Mar Mikhael neighborhoods (see the Mar Mikhael report for details). However, if built, it threatens to impact Geitawi as well, especially the section closest to it, around St. George Hospital. In particular, it will break the relative walkability of the neighborhood and its ease of access to other neighborhoods by foot through stairs and small streets. This would be similar, if not worse, to the effect of the Hikmeh-Bourj Hammoud highway that broke the walking connection between Fassouh and Geitawi.

**The Loss of Heritage and Urban Character:** Given that new developments are concentrated on the edges of the neighborhood and more rarely on internal streets (Map 8), the neighborhood still maintains spaces where the historical urban character is intact. In addition, given that building development is relatively recent, the incentive to demolish existing buildings to develop high-rises is lower than other neighborhoods because the "rent gap"<sup>10</sup> is relatively narrower. The Roum area, for

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<sup>9</sup> *Le Commerce du Levant*. (2019, June 12). Près de 200 commerces auraient fermé à Beyrouth en 15 mois. *Le Commerce du Levant*.

<sup>10</sup> The rent gap is a concept that points to the tendency of neighborhoods to attract higher investments when the difference widens between, on one hand, the current profit (or rent) accumulated from property ownership and, on the other, the potential profit that could be reaped if residents were evicted and /or the building was altogether replaced by a new, typically higher building. In Lebanon, the rent gap is generally the outcome of

example, between the hospital and the park, was densely built with seven-floor buildings in the 1960s and 1970s (Map 6). Very little of that area has been demolished, and the area has a coherent character still representative of its era (Fig. 5).

Other areas such as the Khazinein area have more buildings deemed as having heritage value by the Directorate General of Antiquities (DGA) before or after the August 4, 2020 (Map 4) and might be more at risk. Today, Khazinein still has an organic urban pattern with narrow streets, public stairs, and private collective spaces between buildings that still hold significance for the elderly population. However, new buildings have appeared on some of its lots already, and some buildings in that preserved old sector have been long abandoned (Figs. 3 and 4). Similarly, new buildings are scattered around the rest of the neighborhoods.



**Figure 5..** Buildings from the 1960s built between the Jesuits Garden and the St. George Hospital. Source: Dounia Salamé, 2020.

## 4. Socio-Demographic Profile

In addition to its initial Christian Lebanese and Armenian populations that are still anchored in the area, people from diverse origins now also reside in Geitawi. Some Syrian migrants have resided in the neighborhood for decades, followed by more people after 2011. Some of them reunited with family already established in the neighborhood; others chose the neighborhood as their residence because of its proximity to their source of income. The neighborhood was also chosen by a number of educated young Syrians attracted by both affordable rent and the possible freedom of residing in a neighborhood where they are not accountable to a familiar social fabric.<sup>11</sup> Migrant workers from Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Egypt (among others) also reside in Geitawi, as well as some well-off migrants from Europe.

Despite its appearance as a middle-class area, the neighborhoods actually witnesses poverty on many levels. Data is scarce on the subject, but a look at Nation Station's beneficiaries (a neighborhood-based organization) shows that many Lebanese households in the neighborhoods have no source of income (Fig. 6). While some of them are owners of the apartment they dwell in, they are still deprived of a regular source of income and the economic security that comes with it. Migrant workers in the area are in an even more difficult situation, with a vast majority without an

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three overlapping regulations. These are: (i) rent control, (ii) heritage preservation laws, and (iii) building development regulations. For more information, refer to: Smith, N. (1987). Gentrification and the Rent Gap. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 77(3), 462-465. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2563279>.

<sup>11</sup> Fawaz, M., Salamé, D., & Oueishek, A. (2018). Inhabiting the City, Remaking its Quarters. In M. Fawaz, A. Gharbieh, M. Harb, & D. Salamé, *Refugees as City-Makers*, Social Justice and the City Program at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut, 110-117.

income and with unstable rental arrangements. While Nation Station's beneficiaries are not representative of the whole neighborhoods' population, their data shows the types of existing vulnerabilities in the neighborhood, related to migration and income status.

Even though not statistically significant, the Technical Assessment conducted by UNHCR's partner provides some additional elements of information concerning nationality in the neighborhoods, although because of their status and vulnerability, it is likely that non-Lebanese populations are under-reported.<sup>12</sup> According to the 501 respondents of Geitawi, 64 declared being non-Lebanese (of whom 22 Syrians and 42 other nationalities), while half preferred not responding to the question.

	Stable source of income	No stable source of income	Unknown	Total
Lebanese	297	417	57	771
Syrian	23	55	1	79
Bangladeshi	4	12	0	16
Armenian	2	7	0	9
Egyptian	6	2	1	9
Ethiopian	2	3	0	5
Sudanese	2	1	2	5
French	1	2	0	3
Indian	0	1	0	1
Iraqi	0	1	0	1
Palestinian	1	0	0	1
Sri Lankan	1	0	0	1
Unknown	2	3	1	6
Total	341	504	62	899

**Figure 6.** Nation Station beneficiaries in November 2020. Source: Nation Station, 2020.

In addition to these vulnerabilities, a large part of the population is aging and increasingly isolated. Due to their low mobility, and as reported in many conversations during field research, this growing population has difficulty accessing services they need, including food, medicine, and even basic hygiene. In some cases, households have a number of elderly and family members living with chronic illnesses and disabilities, who have also lost their source of income, making the weight of surviving even heavier.

## 5. Housing Conditions

Given that most of the neighborhoods' buildings were built before the 1980s (Map 6), Geitawi's housing stock is aging and increasingly deteriorating, in particular the stock built before the 1950s. With declining purchasing power and economic growth, one can predict that in the next years, very little preventative maintenance will be initiated by homeowners, and the quality of housing will deteriorate further.

In addition, as observed during field visits, pockets of low-quality affordable housing were created by building extensions in existing low-rise buildings. A common example is a bedroom and bathroom to which a plastic and metal extension is added on a terrace or balcony to form a kitchen. This type of housing is particularly vulnerable to water infiltration and is usually damp and not well-lit. Most often, they are built on the ground floor of unmaintained old buildings. They allow their owners to

<sup>12</sup> Anecdotal information has circulated since the Beirut Port Blast that indicates that vulnerable tenants were being evicted or under-reported as landlords sought to collect their rents. For more on the status of vulnerable populations, please refer to the body of work about Syrian refugees produced by the Legal Agenda at <https://english.legal-agenda.com/country/lebanon/>.

multiply the number of units they can rent, often at a barely discounted price. Most of these types of units in Geitawi are rented by migrant workers and refugees.

The neighborhood has recently seen a relatively low number of big luxurious new developments (Map 9), although many small-scale new buildings are scattered at its edges. While these developments bring new residents to the area, often with more financial means, the ownership market has also been activated in older buildings (Map 8). Many middle-class households who are eligible for subsidized loans to purchase homes have chosen the neighborhood for its relatively lower prices.<sup>13</sup> A number of long-time residents might also have had the chance to settle, as tenants who may have accessed loans and became owners of the unit they previously rented on old rent-control.

There are multiple forms of contractual agreements through which tenants access homes in the area including on “old rent-control contracts,” new contracts (post-1994), as well as informal oral arrangements. A recent study shows that a large majority of migrants rent their housing space without any written contract or receipts upon payment.<sup>14</sup> This lowers the ability of tenants to negotiate improvements to the dwelling and heightens the risk of eviction. Another typical form of shelter acquisition among migrant workers and refugees is secured through employment as building guardians (or concierge, in Lebanese parlance). Here, rooms or small apartments on buildings’ ground floors are occupied in exchange of services such as cleaning the building’s common areas, collecting waste, and keeping strangers away from the building. There are also rare instances of squatting in the neighborhood, especially after the Beirut Port explosion, which blasted the barricaded of closed-down buildings open and allowed for temporary squatting. These instances were rare, discreet, and are unlikely to extend into the long-term.

This is further confirmed by the September-November 2020 Technical Assessment conducted by UNHCR’s partner in Geitawi which covered 502 housing units on mode of occupancy. Although the assessment was not designed on the basis of probability sampling, it covered a high number of housing units and thus still provides a good informative analysis. A majority of those 502 housing unit entries were tenants (n=287), followed by a sizable group of owners (n=209), with six households under hosting arrangements. Assessed tenants are in majority on old contracts (n=183) and hence may bear a serious threat of eviction, while 104 are on new contracts.

## 6. Local Economy

As mentioned above, the declining activity on the main commercial artery is an important concern in the neighborhoods. Despite this, the neighborhood’s local businesses provide most of the residents’ day-to-day needs, including grocery stores, bakeries, hairdressers, beauty salons, hardware stores, as well as some cafés and snacks. As mentioned above, cafés and snacks are mostly located around the two hospitals.

Struggling businesses were strongly hit after the blast. According to Mercy Corps’ Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) Rapid Needs Assessment,<sup>15</sup> the number of commercial establishments with major or severe building damage is relatively low (3.6 to 5%). However, the percentage of establishments planning to close or with uncertain future plans is one of the highest in the city (8.7-19%). By mid-November 2020, BUL counted only four businesses that were doing major reparations to their shops (Fig. 7). Most others were either closed or had already re-opened.

Businesses in Geitawi report that they have been struggling for at least two years. In the past year, the combined effect of COVID-19 lockdown measures and the declining value of the Lebanese Pound hit them even harder, pushing some of them to close. More positively, a few rare businesses opened

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<sup>13</sup> La Sagesse-Geitaoui in ‘Dossier Immobilier’. *Le Commerce du Levant*, August 2015, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> Bekdache, N., Haidar, J., Trad, R., & Saksouk, A. (2020). *Between the right to housing and the economic crisis: Migrant workers and refugees threatened with eviction*. Beirut: Public Works Studio.

<sup>15</sup> ACTED, Action Against Hunger USA, CARE, Danish Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee, Mercy Corps, Oxfam & Save the Children. (2020, Sept 29). Beirut MSME Joint Rapid Needs Assessment. <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/beirut-msme-joint-rapid-needs-assessment-september-2020>

this year on the main commercial street. In addition, the Rmeil Syndicate of Business Owners cares about the liveliness of the street and has been intervening in negotiations between owners and tenants, acting as a mediator to support shops in remaining open.



**Figure 7.** Three shops on Geitawi main street: Dollar shop was being repaired at the time the photo was taken, L'igloo (shoes and bags) had already re-opened, and one shop next to it had been permanently closed for years. Source: Dounia Salamé, 2020.

## 7. Quality of Public Spaces

Geitawi has relatively good walkability. Most streets have sidewalks, although like in the rest of Beirut, some of them are blocked by infrastructure or other obstacles. However, since local shops are common, stairs offer shortcuts, and the two hospital megablocks are on the edges of the neighborhoods, one can relatively easily walk around. The notable exception is nighttime, when most lights are out, giving the neighborhood a sense of unsafety. This was already the case before the increased electricity cuts and was exacerbated by the economic crisis.

Stairs, improvised hang-out spaces on the sidewalk, and public parks form a network of public spaces connected to each other through the neighborhoods' streets. The neighborhood has a number of stairs linking its different areas, as well as to Mar Mikhael. It also has several smaller pockets of open spaces (Map 9), some of which are already used by residents and can be enhanced or strengthened in their current role. A section of the main commercial artery is also significantly wider than the rest of the street and could be integrated in re-thinking the connection between different public spaces and smaller collective ones.

An important landmark in the neighborhood is the Jesuits Garden, a meeting place for many of its inhabitants, mostly the elderly who meet on its benches, and families with young children (from all nationalities) who use the playground area. Given the growing population mixity in the neighborhood, with young and elderly residents, Christians and Muslims, Lebanese, migrants, and refugees, public spaces have been the site of tensions, as observed in research conducted by BUL prior to the blast. After the influx of Syrians to the country in the past decade, the Jesuits Garden in particular became a space of conflict: Some residents demanded that the municipality forbid entrance to the park, which the municipality applied for a while before reversing this decision following the outcry of other residents.

Previous research in the neighborhood<sup>16</sup> has shown that some Syrians established themselves in the neighborhood and positively contributed to its public life, by opening businesses, caring for its spaces, and bringing life to them. The presence of this network of public spaces in the neighborhoods can facilitate the continuous contact between different groups in the neighborhood, and mediate productively tensions between people. As an example, after the municipal decision about the Jesuits Garden, and after witnessing fights between children in the park, the public library located in the park (Assabil) organized activities for children and parents alike in mixed groups in order to address some of these tensions.

## 8. Infrastructure and Environment

As mentioned above, the neighborhoods is a relatively walkable one. However, pedestrian infrastructure is unequal: many sidewalks are too narrow, or full of obstructions. In addition, street lighting is poorly maintained. As a consequence, many women have reported feeling unsafe walking the streets at night.

The neighborhoods is unequally serviced by generators. Most buildings, because of their age and small size, do not have their own generator, but rely on the neighborhood's private generator provider. One provider is known to respect the law and installed a consumption meter, while others have refused to do so. This means that some residents have reported paying as much as five times their neighbors across the street.

Residents in buildings serviced by a guardian count on him to collect waste daily from the front doors. Many of those who do not have this service, pay for the services of an informal worker who does the same. There are two locations with very few small waste collection bins (that RAMCO workers collect): on the Hikmeh highway, at the edge of the neighborhoods, and near the Geitawi Hospital. Otherwise, there are very few street-level bins that pedestrians or passersby can use. When they are available, they can be found on main commercial streets.

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<sup>16</sup> Fawaz, M., Salamé, D., & Oueishek, A. (2018). Inhabiting the City, Remaking its Quarters. In M. Fawaz, A. Gharbieh, M. Harb, & D. Salamé, *Refugees as City-Makers* (pp. 110-117). Social Justice and the City Program at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut.

## II. STAKEHOLDERS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

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Geitawi developed through the establishment of Armenian and Lebanese Christian institutions, political parties, and churches. Today, these institutions are still active and have a strong presence in the neighborhoods, through public space presence and financial support to the neighborhoods.

Three spaces in particular have a permanent presence of men who spend time in between the street and the party headquarters they are affiliated to:

- a) Close to St. George Hospital, the **Kataeb** political party headquarters has a small open space adorned with plants. That whole corner street is marked by the presence of the Kataeb party. Facing it, a very small park seems to have been arranged by the party, with benches decorated with their logo. Just around the corner, a small grocery store also welcomes a group of men on its sidewalk, who seem to be affiliated to the Kataeb, albeit less directly.
- b) On the main street, the **Lebanese Forces** political party occupy a traditional three-arches house, and its members can be seen sitting on its front porch. Nearby, the municipal public park bears the name of William Hawi, commander of the Kataeb Military Council which later separated and joined the Lebanese forces.
- c) Nearby, the **Azadmard Club** has a more modest presence spatially, but similar to the other two, often has men sitting in front of it, occupying the sidewalk. According to Khayat (1996), the Azadmard Club was established in the 1930s in the neighborhood with the mission to manage the facing **Armenian Surp Hagop church** and is affiliated to the **Tachnag party**.

Additionally, as substantiated by field observations and interviews, three political actors are active in the neighborhood through their foundations: Nicolas Sahnaoui, affiliated to the **Free Patriotic Movement**, is active through the **Mona Bustros Foundation** (named after his mother). **Michel Pharaon**, affiliated to the Future Movement, is active through the **Live Achrafieh** association. And, the **Lebanese Forces**, represented by **May Chidiac**, have also been active and influential in the neighborhoods for a while, though more recently, after the Blast, through the **Ground Zero** NGO.<sup>17</sup> These three actors organize regularly development initiatives and social events in the neighborhood, since before the Blast. For example, an initiative by Member of Parliament and former Minister Nicolas Sehnaoui (Free Patriotic Movement) in 2019 repainted buildings to improve the appearance of the neighborhood. This year's installation of Christmas decorations was also the making of these three actors who formed a partnership to cover all of Achrafieh and Rmeil. The **Kataeb** party seems to have less impactful influence, although the Gemayel-affiliated **Achrafieh 2020** organizes street festivals regularly that are appreciated by the residents and business owners.<sup>18</sup>

The neighborhood has several existing community or collective spaces that are seeds of great collective assets that can be supported or partnered. As mentioned above, the Jesuits Garden is a meeting place for migrants, refugees, newcomers, and older local residents, mostly women who bring their children to the playground and the neighborhood's elderly who sit on its benches. In addition to **Assabil Public Library** located inside the Jesuits Garden, **Nation Station** offers a new form of community space in the neighborhood. In 2019 during the uprising, a **group of residents** organized themselves into a neighborhood group, which, although not currently active, can be mobilized for collective action. Also born after the uprising, the **GRO Beirut Collective** appropriated an empty lot and created the Laziza "public" Garden.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Political affiliations are public knowledge as evidenced by the websites and social media accounts of these foundations and associations. See: <https://mounabustros.org/the-foundation/>; <https://www.facebook.com/LiveAchrafieh/> (which often tags and thanks Michel Pharaon in its posts); <https://www.facebook.com/ground0.beirut/> (which often tags and thanks May Chidiac in its posts; May Chidiac also declares on her LinkedIn profile that she is the head of the Ground Zero initiative).

<sup>18</sup> See this post which clearly confirms the affiliation of Achrafieh 2020 with Nadim Gemayel, a Kataeb MP: <https://www.beirut.com/l/19071>

<sup>19</sup> The Laziza Garden is located between the Mar Mikhael and Geitawi neighborhoods and is used by residents in both neighborhoods. It has been covered in more detail in the Mar Mikhael neighborhood profile.

### III. RECOVERY STATUS

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#### 1. Damage Assessment

The blast unevenly damaged different areas of the neighborhood (Map 10). Areas closer to the blast were more affected, of course, but also, older and more fragile buildings were structurally affected, and some walls (interior or exterior) collapsed. Older sections of the neighborhoods were more affected structurally, in particular the area around the Vendôme stairs, as well as along Khazinein Street. It is worth noting too that St. George Hospital and Geitawi Hospital, two major hospitals serving the whole city, were severely damaged. Large schools were also severely damaged, in particular the Azarieh School, which is closest to the blast.

According to the Technical Assessment conducted by UNHCR's partner between September and November 2020 in Geitawi which covered a total of 1,001 housing units, the level of damage among assessed units is very high, with 446 of damaged assessed units being categorized as Level 1, 536 as Level 2, four as Level 3<sup>20 21</sup>. Of all damaged assessed units, half (49%) were reported to have been repaired, while the other half is not repaired yet (51%). From the 480 entries provided in the technical assessment concerning modes of repair, less than 20% report that these repairs are supported by a local NGO, while 77.5% report repairs were done at one own expense (the remaining 2.5% reported having resorting to debt and other modalities). Reasons for not repairing among remaining assessed respondents are primarily lack of financial means (n=467). Lastly, 135 mentioned having received partial repair assistance<sup>22</sup>.

#### 2. Actors Involved in the Recovery Response

As in other neighborhoods of Beirut affected by the blast, a number of organizations are simultaneously active in the Reconstruction process. According to the Army's **Forward Emergency Room (FER)** and observations on the ground, the most active NGOs in the neighborhoods are **MEDAIR**, **Nusaned**, and **Beit el Baraka**. In addition to these, a number of organizations were mentioned by residents as active in shelter or shelter-related repairs (doors, furniture, and appliances), such as **Makhzoumi Foundation**, **Arcenciel**, **Lions**, **Baytna Baytak**, **Beb w'Shebbek**, and the **Maronite Church**.

A number of NGOs were also present to support other aspects of residents' lives (cash assistance, food distribution, health kits distributions) such as the **Lebanese Red Cross**, **Solidarity** (a Maronite charity), and **UNDP**. In addition, some organizing efforts were led by a few organizations aiming to impact the neighborhoods in the longer term: **Legal Agenda** organized small neighborhood meetings with the aim of founding a Beirut Blast Victims' Association for accountability and representation in the rebuilding process. **Public Works Studio** distributed flyers and posters in the neighborhood encouraging people to call their Housing Hotline for support against eviction, and a group of young residents founded **Nation Station**, a neighborhood-based gathering space in an abandoned gas station with the aim of sustaining it in the long term. They conducted immediate relief work such as distribution of goods and plastic covers for windows, but also established two main programs: a communal kitchen distributing hot meals to residents who are stranded at home, and a solidarity network for local MSMEs.

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<sup>20</sup> Please note that there could be more Level 3; as indicated in the methodology section, the technical assessments conducted by UNHCR partners were led in the framework of the shelter intervention implementation. As such, they did not resort to any form of probability sampling nor were they meant to provide comprehensive neighborhood-level data.

<sup>21</sup> 15 units were not categorized, as per the assessment database.

<sup>22</sup> Out of 502 valid entries on the topic. No further analysis can be provided on other types of assistance housing units might have received, due to inconsistencies in the technical assessment data.

**The Lebanese Army's** role consisted of surveying damages and later distributing cash compensation to the residents, which happened in the first weeks of November. **The Beirut Municipality** did not appear to be involved in any of the recovery efforts. However, some residents reportedly called the municipality to collect rubble left on the sidewalk, and the rubble was progressively removed during the month of November 2020.

As in other neighborhoods, coordination between organizations took time to be established smoothly. Mainly, coordination between the two coordinating bodies, **OCHA** and the **Lebanese Army** was instrumental to this. Before they started coordinating, action and presence on the ground appeared unorganized. With time, local and international NGOs assigned neighborhoods and tasks more clearly.

This was reflected in the residents' impressions of the response. Especially in the beginning, they developed "survey fatigue" from the number of organizations knocking on their door and asking the same questions. They also had the impression that the aim of the survey was not clear: was it to assess damages only, or to start the repair process? As a consequence, many felt that they were promised repairs by several organizations, and none of them delivered. Many also expressed that they refused several offers for food or appliances distribution, insisting on their only need: to have their shelter repaired. Some organizations were conducting door to door needs assessments until the end of November.

### 3. Modalities of Reconstruction

In the neighborhoods, several modalities of reconstruction were observed through interviews and discussions with residents. The distinction across modalities of repair appears to be determined by a number of factors among which BUL notes: (i) tenure arrangements, and (ii) level of income of the resident. The modalities can be summarized as follows:

- **Self-repair**  
Self-repair was observed in mainly two profiles: (i) Owners who had the means to repair their homes themselves. This course of action was privileged because of its speed, and because the first weeks after the blast, it was not clear how widespread the response of NGOs would be, and who it would target. Rumors were also circulating about reimbursements that would be provided by the Lebanese Government. These residents found it easiest to repair their homes themselves. The second profile are (ii) tenants whose relationship with their landlord makes them vulnerable. Some of these residents are Syrian or have old rent contracts (from the old rent control law) or pay low rents and do not want to provoke discussions about it. These tenants preferred to bear the cost of the repairs themselves, sometimes bringing extra support from NGOs, repairing part of the damage and completing the repairs with loans or savings.
- **Repair by the owner, for tenants**  
This scenario was only observed in new rent contract units, where the owner took full charge of the logistics and cost of repairs. Surprisingly, this was also observed in a cluster of housing units inhabited by Syrian women living alone with their children. Although they live in dire housing conditions (small spaces, subdivided apartments, water infiltration), the women reported that in the week after the explosion, the landlord took all the broken windows and brought them back repairs quickly. In other cases, the repair prompted the landlord to ask for a rent increase, leading the tenant to be forced to leave the unit and the neighborhood.
- **Repair by citizen volunteers with donations**  
As in other neighborhoods, individual and small groups of citizens decided to gather funds and conduct repairs themselves for some affected residents.
- **Businesses and shops**  
Business owners often found themselves at a loss, being told repeatedly that NGOs are repairing shelters in priority. As a result, some of them depleted their savings or resorted to borrowing money to repair their shop. In addition, the Beirut Chamber of Commerce broke its announced promise to provide glass panels for shops in Beirut. Many business owners reportedly contacted them and asked for help with no result. One citizen initiative

reportedly repaired 39 shops in the area, with business owners referring each other to that initiative.

It is important to note that these modalities are not exclusive to each other, nor linear in time. It also does not mean that houses are completely repaired either. Some residents had part of their house repaired by one organization, and another part by another organization. Some residents repaired the most urgent elements themselves and waited for NGOs for the rest. Many people counted on solidarity networks across the neighborhood to secure the help they needed, especially to access information about what each organization is doing.

It is also important to note that, despite the fact that by December 2020, most windows were reportedly repaired, some apartments were still uninhabitable because of major damage inside the house, including broken paneling and destroyed furniture. These residents are still waiting for the second phase of repair, in particular those in the closest areas to the blast, on Khazinein Street and around Vendôme Stairs.

## IV. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POTENTIAL SITES FOR COMMUNITY-BASED PROJECTS

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In this section, BUL discusses recommendations of sites that could potentially be used for community-based projects. These recommendations derive from the present research's methodology, and thus have not been sufficiently validated by interviews and surveys with dwellers, business-owners and other stakeholders. Should actors be interested in implementing those, they should first seek to gain in-depth understanding of relevant dynamics to translated recommendations into action plans in close coordination with relevant stakeholders and residents. Any community-based project in the neighborhood should derive from a participatory planning process which requires genuine and prolonged engagement with concerned people, that materializes in community meetings and discussions that ultimately converge towards a consensus. Still, BUL's post-blast recovery recommendations build on the urban trends and dynamics that characterize the neighborhood, the preliminary actors' mapping that BUL undertook, the identification of vacant lots or public spaces where either some socio-spatial activity has started taking place or could potentially occur, and preliminary discussions with residents.

BUL begins by noting that Beirut's public and shared spaces are severely neglected realms. This is due to a confluence of factors that include the neglect of public agencies to these valuable assets, associations between public and danger that date back to the legacy of the civil war, and the poor conceptual policy approach with which such spaces have been approached as ornamental rather than communal.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the "Plan Vert de Beyrouth" study—commissioned by the Municipality of Beirut but never implemented—found that there was less than 1m<sup>2</sup> of open space per capita, well below the 10m<sup>2</sup> recommended by the World Health Organization.<sup>24</sup>

The absence of such spaces was often compensated by residents through ad-hoc appropriations, temporary occupations of vacant lots and sidewalks, as well as a heavy use of neighborhood scale commercial venues as sites of gathering.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Beirut is a city rich with socio-spatial practices, which are deeply rooted in its urban history, experienced through streets, markets, and multiple public and private open spaces that are more or less hidden, including alleyways, historical staircases, building entrances, vacant lots, and other appropriated sites, many of which are found in the neighborhoods affected by the Beirut Port Blast. Yet, much more needs to be done to provide more and better open, green public spaces to residents of the city. Over the past decade, an increasing number of collectives and NGOs have decried the closure and scarcity of open spaces and the direct negative effect on neighborhoods' public life and attachment to place, as well as the mental and physical health of residents.<sup>26</sup>

Activating open public spaces and vacant lots for socio-spatial practices matters for recovery. Indeed, aside from the physical damage caused by the explosion and the temporary forced displacement, the blast has caused the temporary and potential long-term displacement of

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<sup>23</sup> For case studies of public spaces and urban mobilization in Beirut, see *Practicing the Public*, Fawaz and Gharbieh (2016) at: <https://www.beiruturbanlab.com/en/Details/569/practicing-the-public>; Harb M. (2013), "Public Spaces and Spatial Practices: Claims from Beirut", *Jadaliyya*, and Harb M. (2018) "New Forms of Youth Activism in Contested Cities: The Case of Beirut." *International Spectator*, 53:2, 74-93. About the fear of public space in Beirut, see Nasreddine-Cheaitli, A. (2019) "Addressing Fear in Public Spaces: Design Solutions for the Ramlet El-Bayda Park", Unpublished Master's Thesis, MUPP Program, American University of Beirut, and, for everyday appropriation of spaces in Beirut, see Guadagnoli, G. (2016), "Tools for Tactical Neighborhood Planning and Design: Lessons from User-Led Small Scale Physical Interventions in Municipal Beirut Open Spaces," Unpublished Master's Thesis, MUPP Program, American University of Beirut.

<sup>24</sup> For more information about the Plan Vert de Beyrouth, see <http://idf-beyrouth.com/?q=content/espaces-verts-et-paysagers>.

<sup>25</sup> See Fawaz and Gharbieh, *op.cit.*

<sup>26</sup> See Harb (2018), *op.cit.* Also, see: Harb M. and Mazraani D., "Vacancy as Opportunity: Re-activating Public Life in Beirut." Beirut Urban Lab website, March 2020. <https://www.beiruturbanlab.com/en/Details/619/vacancy-as-opportunity-re-activating-public-life-in-beirut>

residents and may sever permanently their relation to the neighborhood if they are not provided with venues to gather. As argued elsewhere, shared spaces typically operate as sites of sociability and social interaction, where children play safely, the elderly socialize, women meet and converse, migrants, refugees and other vulnerable groups hang out and forge communities.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, such sites can foster what authors called “city-zenship,” a sense of inclusive urban belonging where “the right to the city [...] extends to all residents, regardless of origin, identity, or legality.”<sup>28</sup> In the aftermath of large-scale disasters, communal belonging is threatened and communities are scattered. Consequently, shared spaces gain an additional critical role not simply to recover a lost space, but rather to allow communities to perform two critical tasks: healing and exchanging information.<sup>29</sup> This role extends, it is noteworthy, to commercial social spaces that have been shown to provide in post-disaster recoveries the direly needed gathering social spaces where communities can share information and experiences that contribute to a better and faster recovery.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the horrendous blast, BUL noted during fieldwork that some of the everyday socio-spatial practices were resurfacing, performing an important role in keeping residents connected to their neighborhoods. For instance, fieldworkers observed dwellers placing chairs and congregating among the ruins of destroyed homes, in the alleyways, along the sidewalks. They also observed children playing football in empty lots.

As such, a participatory urban strategy that seeks to re-activate anchors of socio-spatial practices within neighborhoods, whether publicly held land, temporarily occupied private lots, public venues, or commercial stores that serve as sites of congregation, can play an important role in fostering recovery. These anchors could be a small garden, a street corner, a small store, a building entrance, a stairs landing, etc. Such sites play a key role in allowing communities to heal and even flourish, depending on an array of socio-economic and political conditions which need to be investigated beyond this report. Interventions on these sites need to be conceived according to participatory modalities that enable the co-imagining of how to activate them with programs that respond to the needs of specific communities and neighborhoods in relation to the post-blast trauma. Such activities can bring dwellers together to heal and recover collectively and to rebuild neighborhoods, including private homes and shared spaces.

In what follows, BUL identifies potential sites where such community-projects could occur in Geitawi. In some instance, these build on already existing practices. BUL also identify the potential NGOs and collectives that could be supportive of these projects—noting that BUL have not discussed these ideas with them, but BUL identified them as actors actively engaged in activating public spaces and collective life in the post-blast recovery of the city. Most of these actors have also been identified by the Area-Based Approaches (ABA) Temporary Technical Committee (TTC), in a study dated in February 2021 on Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) engaged in the Beirut Port explosion.

## Potential Interventions in Geitawi

### 1. Creating and Consolidating Spaces of Communal Life

#### A. Jesuits Garden Renovation

As discussed before, the Jesuits Garden is a meeting place for many of its inhabitants, mostly the elderly who meet on its benches, and families with young children (from all nationalities) who use the playground area (Fig. 8). Given the growing population mixity in the neighborhood, with young and elderly residents, Christians and Muslims, Lebanese, migrants, and refugees, this park has been the place where people from different backgrounds interact. While sometimes this results in

<sup>27</sup> See Mazraani D., Dayekh L., and Harb M., *Why Socio-Spatial Practices Matter to Urban Recovery?* *Public Source*, December 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Vrasti W. & Dayal S., (2016), *Cityzenship: Rightful Presence and the Urban Commons*, *Citizenship Studies*, 20:8, 994-1011.

<sup>29</sup> Brand D. & Nicholson H. (2016) *Public Space and Recovery: Learning from Post-Earthquake Christchurch*, *Journal of Urban Design*, 21:2, 159-176.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Haeffele, S. and Craig, A.W. (2020), "Commercial social spaces in the post-disaster context", *Journal of Entrepreneurship and Public Policy*, Vol. 9 No. 3, pp. 303-317.

tensions between children or adults, as mentioned above, the park is still the place where a form of common belonging to the neighborhood develops. Due to the scarcity of formal public spaces in Beirut, rarely do neighborhoods in Beirut witness such a clarity in public space utility.

Residents of the neighborhood, and especially mothers, have expressed that the play area is dangerous for children. The sand is dirty and contains broken glass, and some of the play structures are obsolete and rusted. In short, the play area in the park is in dire need of a renovation. A group of residents, who mobilized after the threat of the park's destruction by the municipality for the creation of a parking are active in defending it. This group, as well as most residents around the park would participate enthusiastically in specific ideas and steps for the renovation of the Garden. Given the affective involvement of residents in the future of the park, it is strongly recommended to organize at least one consultative meeting for them regarding its renovation and maintenance, and initiate a resident-led movement towards its protection, renovation and activation.



**Figure 8.** Children's play area section of the park. Source: Dounia Salamé, 2020.

## B. Supporting Key Associations

Two associations merit to be supported, given their essential role with vulnerable populations in the neighborhood: Zourouni who takes care of the elderly, and the Armenian Charity Association.

Zourouni was founded after the explosion by three psychometricians who, after volunteering to remove broken glass and rubble, noticed the high population of elderly in the neighborhood, their isolation, and their lack of access to resources. As a result, Zourouni conducts weekly home visits to around 60 isolated elderly and connects them logistically to the resources they need. They arrange a contact and coordination with association who repair homes, they distribute food boxes from associations who do not have access to a list of beneficiaries, and they connect them to medical, pharmaceutical and mental health professionals and resources. In addition, Zourouni currently organizes workshops for bodily and mental health, such as music workshops, Chi Qong, drawing, and meditation (Fig. 9). In addition to their obvious benefits, these workshops offer a welcome distraction and socialization space for isolated elderly in the neighborhood. They have been organizing these workshops in a borrowed space on Geitawi's main street and storing their food boxes in a storage space in Amchit, which is nearly 40 kilometers away. As a result, they are in dire need of a space to continue conducting their activities.

In parallel, the Armenian Charity Association owns two street-level commercial spaces on Geitawi's main street. It has been unable to cover the costs of renovation after the destruction and has left the spaces empty. Members are willing to discuss the option of having them renovated by an INGO in exchange for renting it for free to Zourouni for a period. This would not only benefit both associations (Zourouni and the Armenian Charity Association), but the main commercial street in general, as empty commercial spaces are detrimental to economic activity in them. Having a community center open in a currently empty space would bring needed life to the street.



**Figure 9.** Left: Zourouni music workshop for isolated residents (taken from Zourouni's Instagram page, Dec 15, 2020). Right: One of the two empty street-level commercial spaces owned by the Armenian Charity Association. Source: Dounia Salamé, 2020.

### C. Nation Station's Roof Garden

In response to the blast, Nation Station started distributing aid from an abandoned gas station in the neighborhood (Fig. 10). From the start, it positioned itself as a "solidarity" initiative, aiming to build a sustainable neighborhood-based community space. In addition to quickly gathering invaluable data on the neighborhood's most vulnerable and sharing them with any organization that needed it, they started two main initiatives: (i) a communal kitchen, with an oven, producing daily meals that are distributed to around 200 households in the neighborhood, and (ii) a networking initiative connecting people with different needs (example: people with blasted doors with the local carpenter, an unemployed school teacher with a family in need of a tutor). In the long term, they plan to create jobs by training residents in need to run and work in the kitchen.

Nation Station is currently planning to start a community gardening project on the "terrace," or open space on the ground floor, and roof of the former gas station, in order to directly feed the kitchen's needs, while also engaging the neighborhood's residents and local school children in the production of their own vegetables. One of their members is a farmer (who has been supplying the kitchen with his own production in the Bekaa) and consequently has the needed know-how to launch this project. In addition, Arc-en-ciel is currently active and engaged in urban agriculture and hydroponics and expressed interest in supporting an initiative of the sort in the city; they could be involved in a partnership.



**Figure 10.** Nation Station in the first days of its creation. Source: Nation Station Instagram page, 2020.

## D. Laziza Community Garden

The Laziza community garden is located at the border of Mar Mikhael and Geitawi, and serves residents from both neighborhoods. See Mar Mikhael neighborhood profile for more detail on this recommendation.

## 2. Placemaking Soft Interventions

Geitawi's main street is unequally wide. While most of the time it can only accommodate two cars, at the intersection with the Jesuits' Park street (Moscow Street), it becomes suddenly very wide, and almost becomes a plaza. This intersection offers the potential for a widening of pedestrian space, creating a connection between the Jesuits Garden and the commercial main street (where Nation Station is nearby). This could be achieved with the strategic placement of flowerpots and benches that would effectively widen the sidewalk (Fig. 11). The loss in parking spaces can easily be absorbed by the nearby parking. This would achieve multiple benefits: (i) create a space of socialization for residents, (ii) connect the commercial street to the park and intensify pedestrian use of the area, (iii) create a string of collective spaces connected to each other: Nation Station, the Park, and the commercial spaces in between, and (iv) test the potential of creating that connection in order to undertake a longer term reflection on the potential of different pockets of public spaces in the neighborhood (stairs, mini-open spaces, parks, and hang out spaces).



**Figure 11.** Proposed site of placemaking intervention. Source: Satellite photo: Google Maps, edited by Dounia Salamé, 2020.

### 3. Waste Management

#### A. Recycling and Composting Initiative

Residents of the neighborhood have collectively expressed their willingness to sort their waste, including organic waste for the production of compost. A partnership could be initiated with Live Love Recycle (LLR), which upscaled its operations in many neighborhoods in Beirut, including the ones affected by the blast and is collecting sorted waste from homes free of charge using a phone application. As communicated to BUL, they are also recruiting drivers and workers for their

sorting/recycling facility in Nabaa, and for their multiple collection sites across the city. In addition, Nation Station has installed sorting bins on their “terrace,” where residents bring their waste. They have also been experimenting with composting their kitchen’s waste and would be willing to expand the operation to include some residents’ organic waste.

In partnership with LLR, a number of sorting spaces could be identified in the area (including the three communal spaces identified above) to gather residents’ waste, and to produce compost on the spot for local public parks and Nation Station’s community garden.



**Figure 12.** Dumpsters facing Geitawi Hospital. Source: Dounia Salamé, 2020.

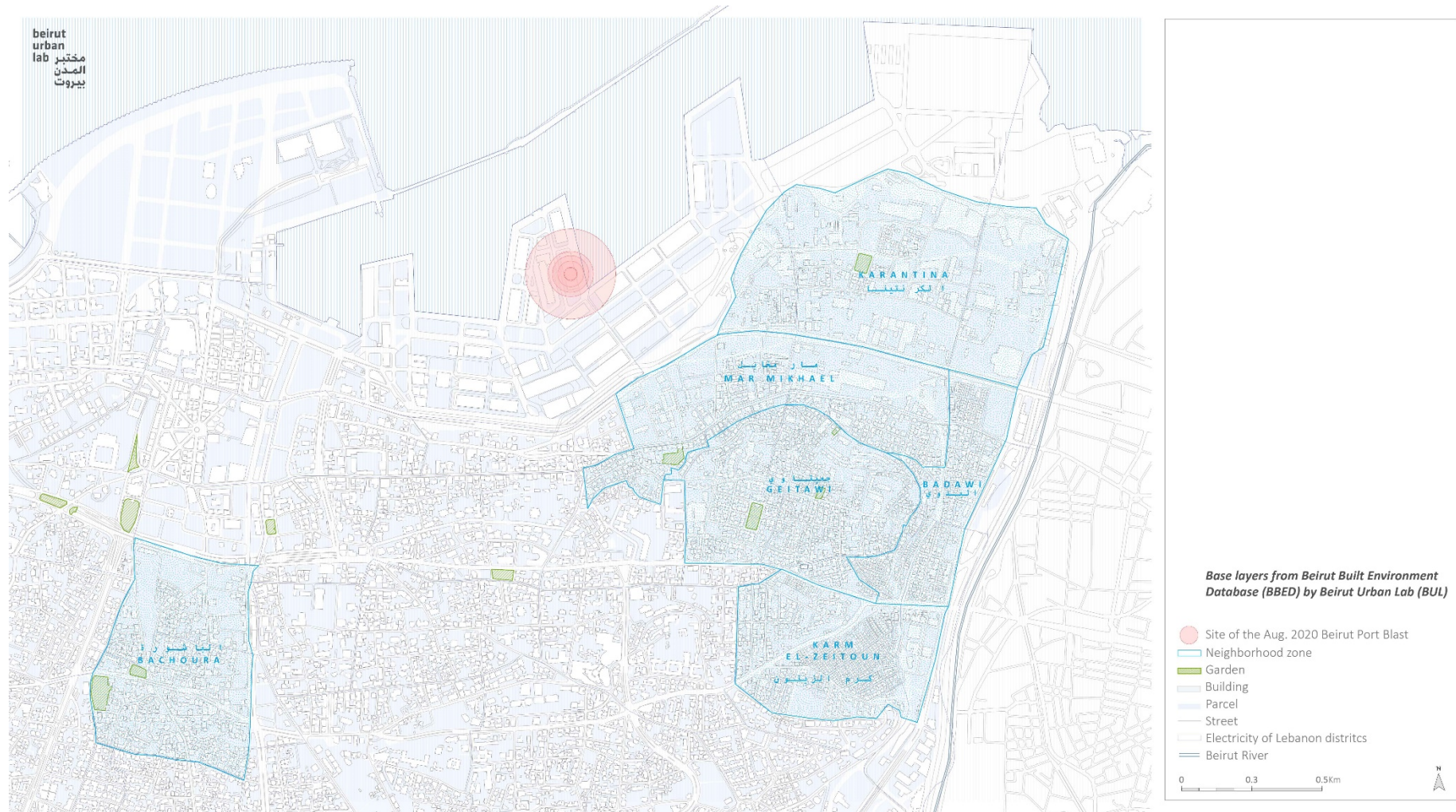
## B. Improving Cleanliness and Walkability around Waste Collection Bins

Most dumpsters in the neighborhoods are located on the edges of the neighborhood. However, facing the Geitawi Hospital, on the main commercial street, a few dumpsters interrupt pedestrian continuity and disconnect two sections of it (Fig. 12). The neighborhood would benefit from the re-organization of these bins and cleaning around them.

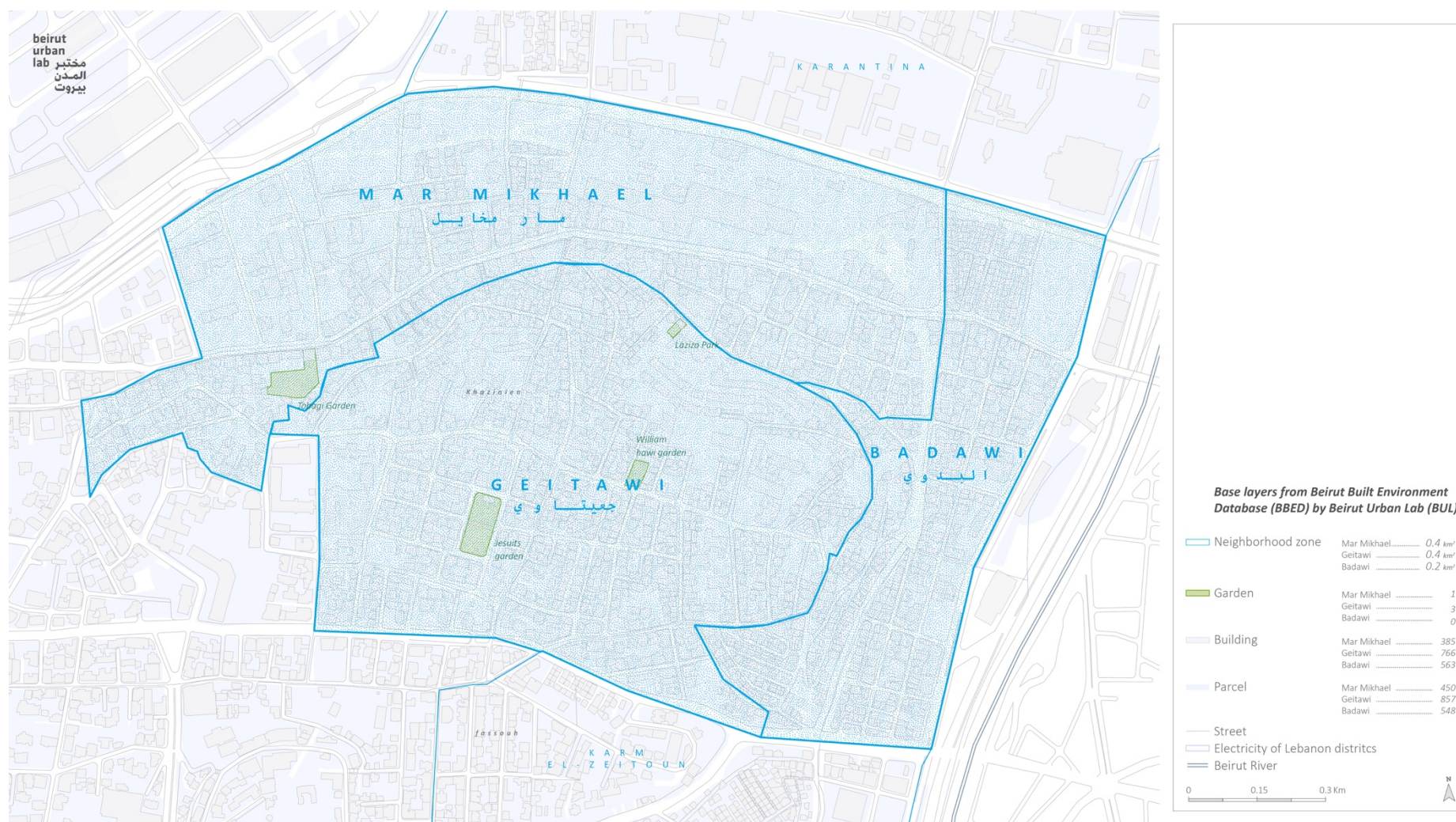
If this is done, at this intersection, a similar placemaking intervention as the one described above could be executed as many lots around this area are empty and the street is wider than needed: for instance, a small food court could attract pedestrians and clients from around.

\* \* \*

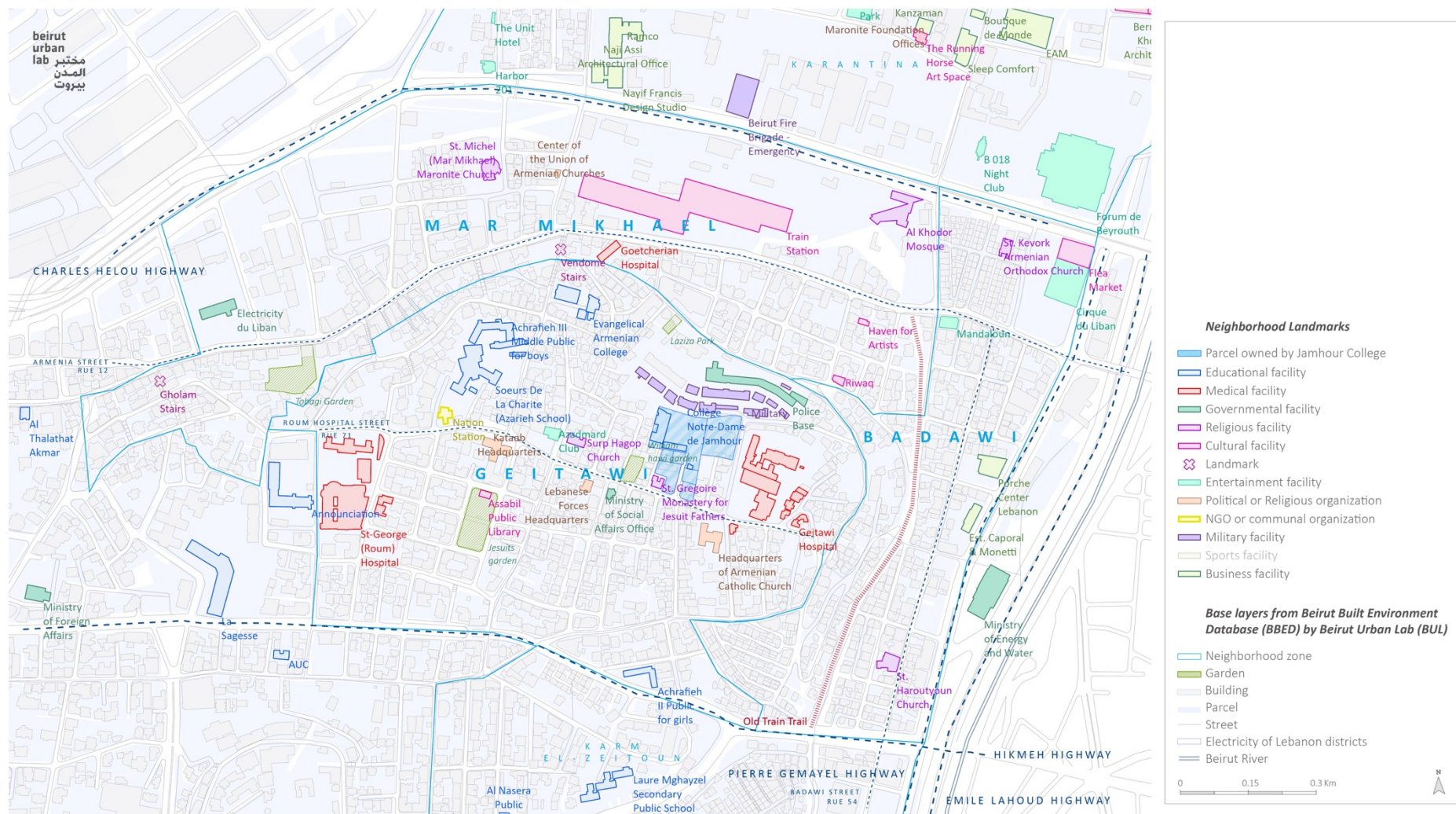
## V. ANNEX A



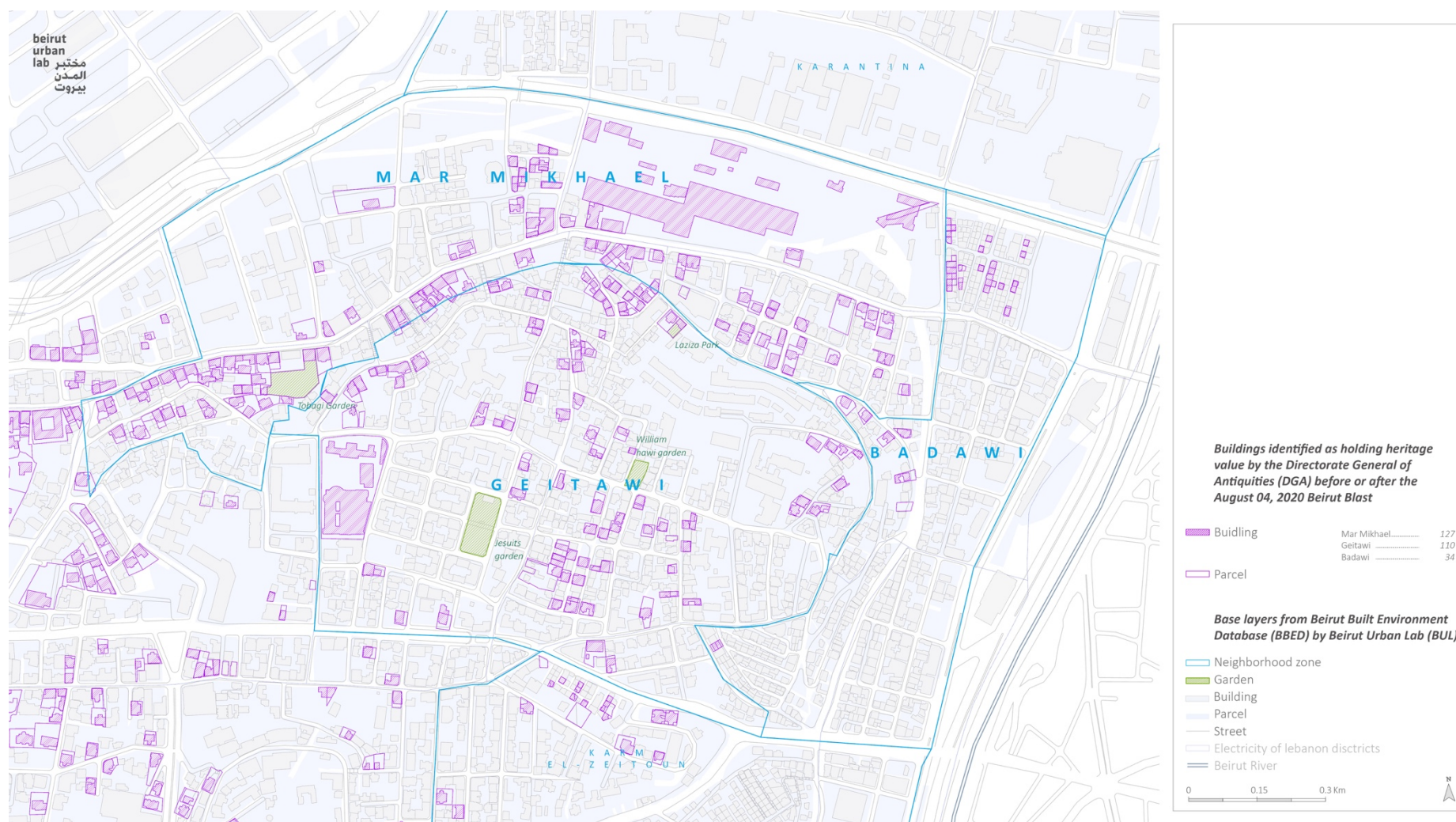
**Map 1:** Zone limits in all neighborhoods. Source: Beirut Urban Lab, 2020.



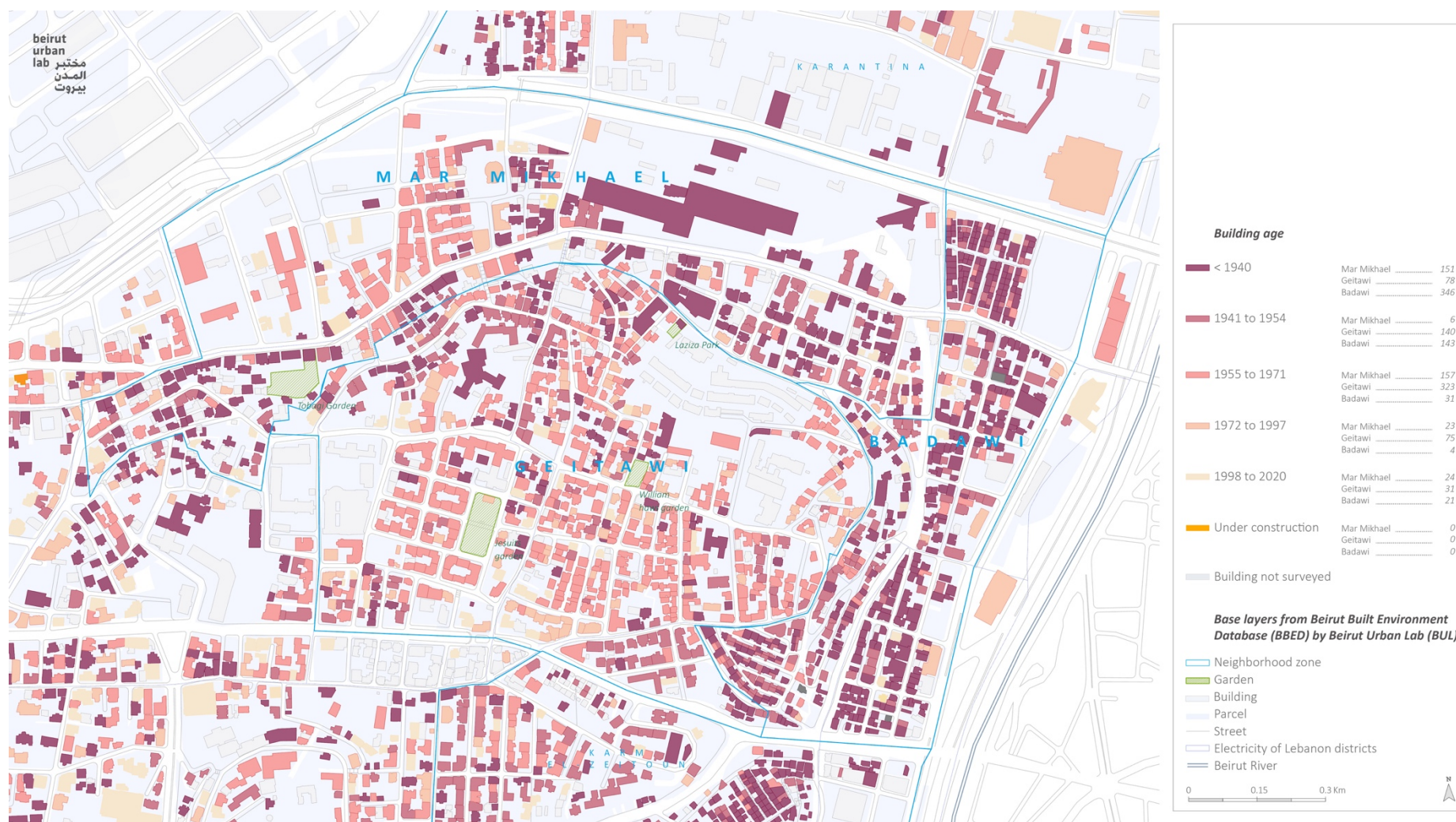
**Map 2:** Zone limits in Geitawi. Source: Beirut Urban Lab, 2020.



**Map 3:** Landmarks in Geitawi. Source: Beirut Urban Lab, 2020.



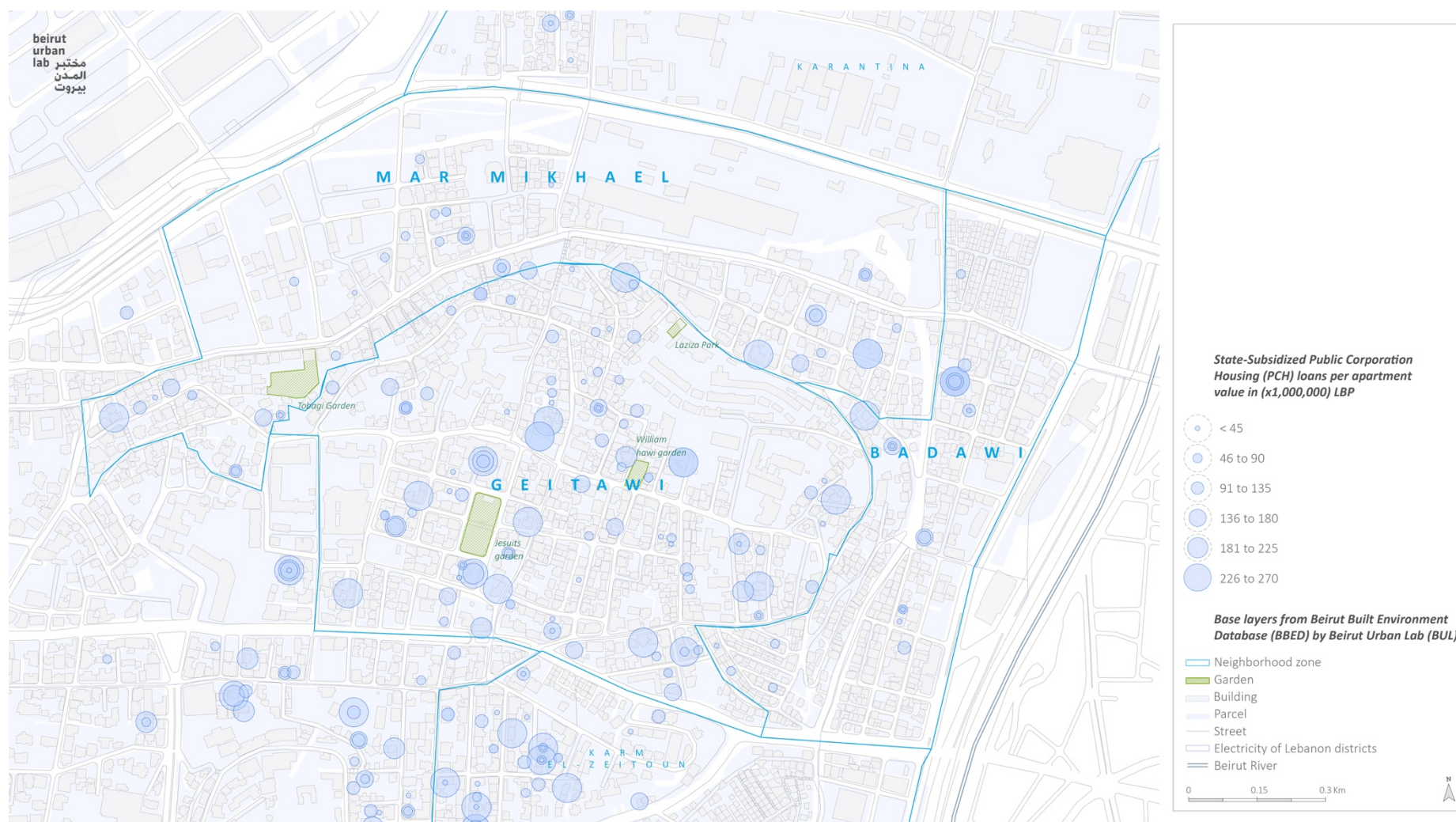
**Map 4:** Buildings identified as holding heritage value by the Directorate General of Antiquities (DGA) before or after the August 4, 2020 Beirut Blast.  
Source: Beirut Urban Lab, 2020.



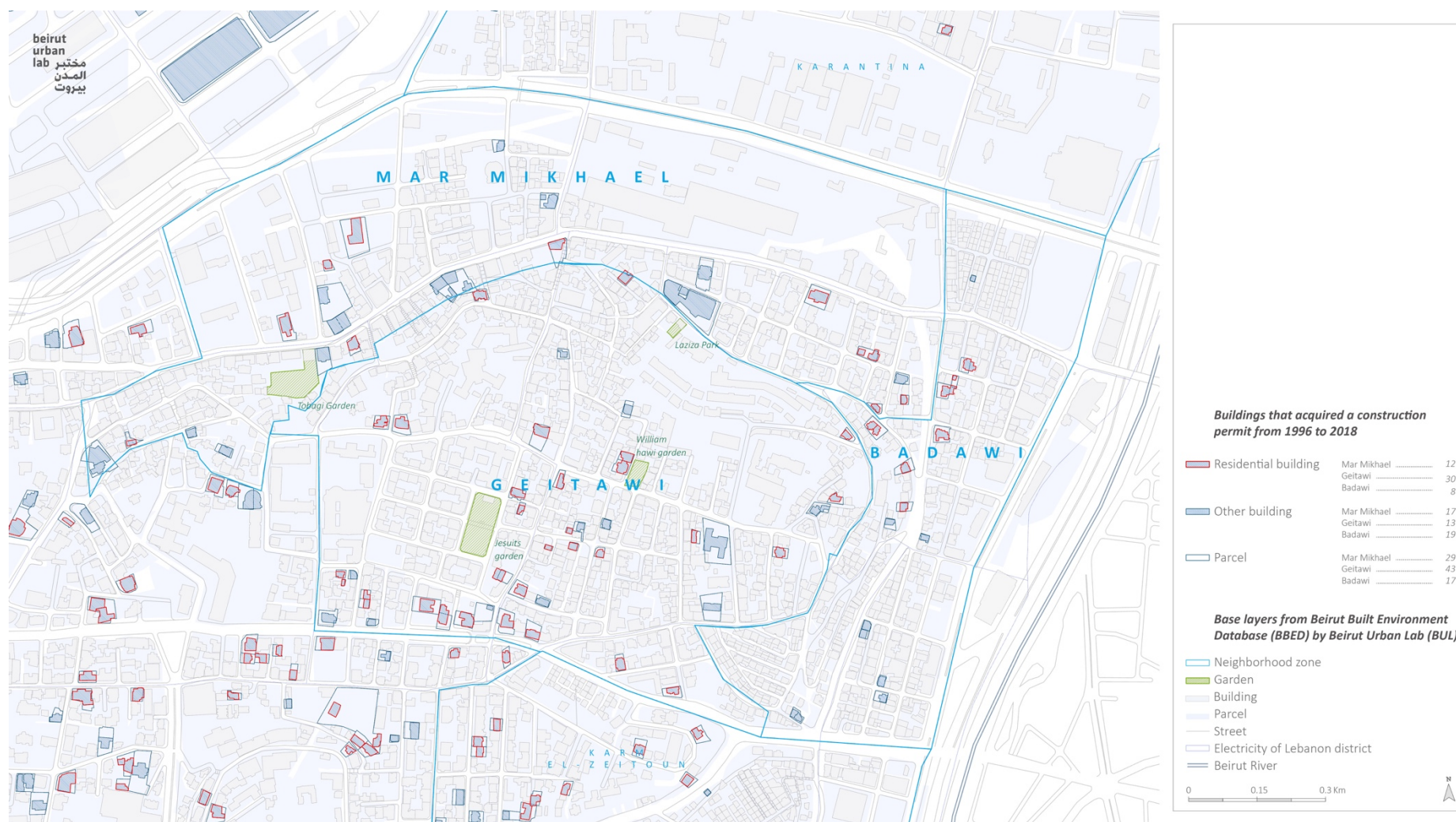
**Map 5:** Building Age in Geitawi. Source: Beirut Urban Lab, 2020.



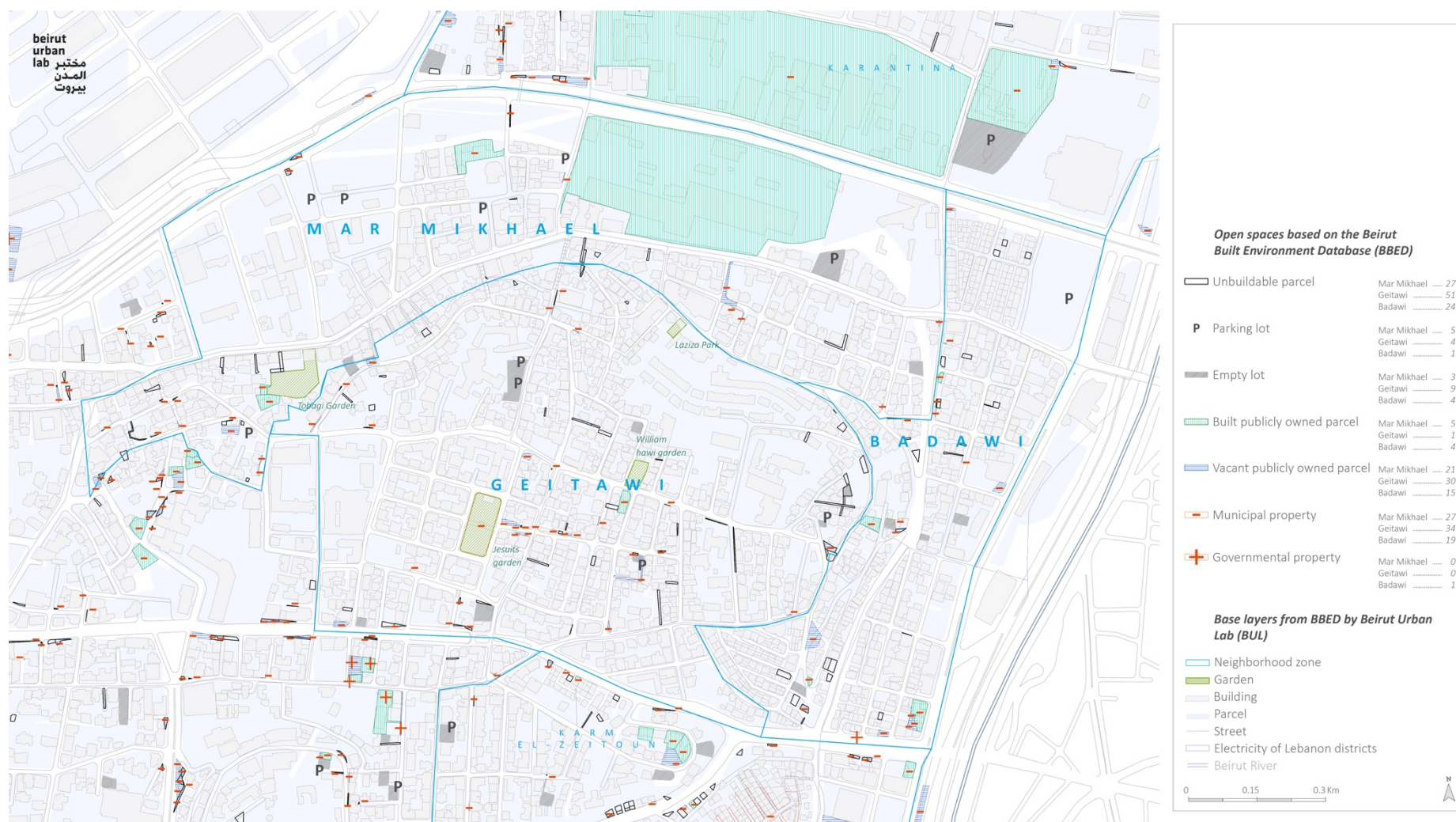
**Map 6:** Number of floors per building in Geitawi. Source: Beirut Urban Lab, 2020.



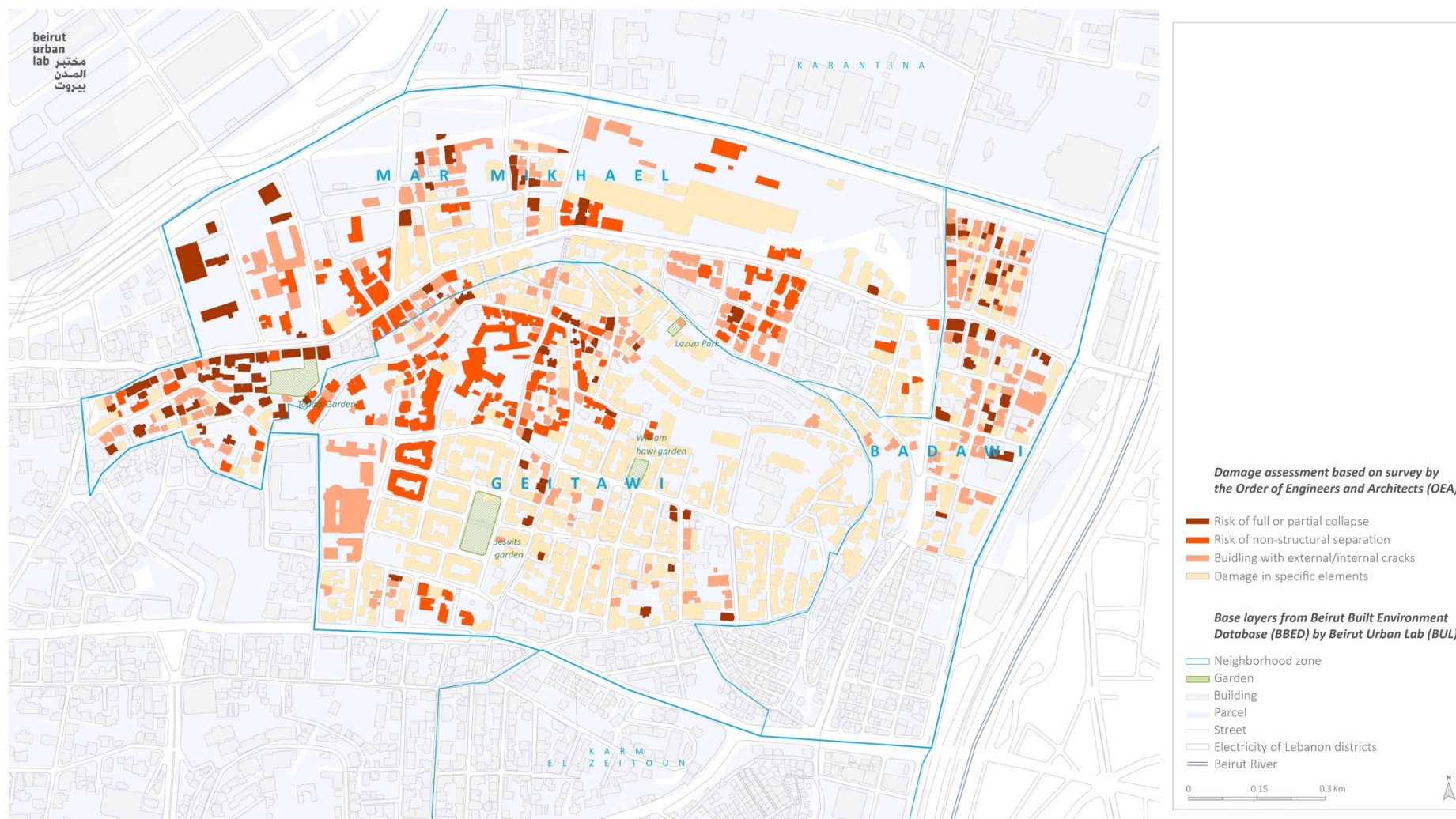
**Map 7:** State-subsidized Public Corporation of Housing (PCH) loans in Geitawi. Source: Beirut Urban Lab, 2020.



**Map 8:** Construction permits issued from 1996 to 2018 in Geitawi. Source: Beirut Urban Lab, 2020.



**Map 9:** Open spaces in Geitawi. Source: Beirut Urban Lab, 2020.



**Map 10:** Damage assessment in Geitawi based on OEA study. Source: Beirut Urban Lab, 2020.