

Research Article

Assemblages of Sensible Architecture: Syrian Displacement in Beirut's Vertical Informal Settlements

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Received: 20.11.2025, Accepted: 01.05.2026.

Keywords

Syrian Migrants,
Humanitarian
Architecture, Politics of
Visibility, Housing of
Displaced, Spatial
Adaptation.

Abstract This paper investigates how Syrian displaced households exercise spatial agency through the informal occupation and modification of an abandoned high-rise building in Beirut's Hamra district. Applying Jacques Rancière's concept of "the distribution of the sensible" as an analytical lens, the paper examines how spatial practices in vertical informal settlements constitute political interventions that challenge dominant narratives of urban habitability. This paper aims to document and analyse the spatial adaptation strategies employed by Syrian migrant households in the Wizarat Al Iqtissad building between August 2024 and January 2025, and to assess how these strategies challenge conventional architectural and humanitarian responses to displacement. Using a qualitative ethnographic methodology comprising semi-structured interviews (n=14), photo-elicitation, participant observation, and spatial documentation, the paper finds that households develop informal governance structures and produce cyclical mobility patterns within the building. These practices constitute what the paper terms "sensible architecture", spatial knowledge derived from lived social reality that makes marginal communities and their adaptive strategies visible. The findings suggest that informal spatial practices in vertical settlements represent underrecognised forms of architectural expertise that warrant engagement by professionals rather than replacement through purpose-built solutions.

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Cite this article;
Marinovic G.I. (2026). Assemblages of sensible architecture: Syrian displacement in Beirut's vertical informal settlements. *LivenARCH+ Journal*, 3(2): 145-161. DOI:10.65775/livenarch.1827057

1. Introduction

In 2022, global displacement reached unprecedented levels, with approximately 60.9 million people forcibly displaced, representing a 60% increase from the previous year (Clark, 2023). Of these, conflict accounted for 28.3 million displacements, whilst intensifying climate events displaced an additional 32.6 million (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre [IDMC], 2023). This crisis has exposed urban housing systems as numerous cities remain "unprepared for rapid influxes of migrants" as a result of already lacking adequate social services, infrastructure, and public safety for their growing populations (Nagle Alverio, Sowers, & Weinthal, 2025, p.2).

Lebanon exemplifies these urban displacement pressures, accelerated by ongoing armed conflicts in the region. Hosting over 1.5 million Syrian refugees since 2011, the country has witnessed significant strain on urban infrastructure, particularly in Beirut, where formal housing remains largely inaccessible to displaced populations due to legal restrictions and economic barriers (Kikano, Fauveaud, & Lizarralde, 2021). Syrian migrants face prohibitions on formal employment, restrictions on property ownership, and limited access to official housing assistance, forcing many into precarious informal settlements or overcrowded urban areas (Fouad, McCall, Ayoub, Abu-Raddad, & Mumtaz, 2021).

Rather than focusing on purpose-built refugee accommodation, this paper investigates the informal occupation and modification of abandoned buildings through what Jacques Rancière (2013) terms "the distribution of the sensible" (*partage du sensible*). This concept forms the foundation for what this research defines as *sensible architecture*, an analytical lens for understanding spatial practices derived from social reality that encompasses "the sensible order that parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world" (Rancière, 2013, p. 85). The French term *partage* signifies both the division of space into parts and the sharing of lived experience, rendering visible the transitions between the binaries of social order: visible and invisible, inclusive and exclusive, marginalised and incorporated within emerging urban communities.

This paper aims to document and analyse the spatial adaptation strategies employed by Syrian migrant households in a Beirut vertical informal settlement, and to assess how these strategies challenge conventional architectural and humanitarian approaches to housing the displaced. Three objectives support this aim: (1) to identify what spatial adaptation strategies Syrian migrants employ in vertical settlements; (2) to examine how these reinhabitation strategies challenge conventional architectural futurity; and (3) to explore how documented informal spatial practices might inform more responsive humanitarian and architectural interventions.

These sensible architectures manifest most clearly in what this paper terms vertical camps: multi-storey abandoned buildings spontaneously occupied by displaced populations and regulated through informal governance rather than humanitarian agencies or governmental oversight (Samhan & Boano, 2025). Such sites are conceptualised as reinhabitation: the transformation of "makeshift" homes (Jordan & Minca, 2023) and "transitional spaces" into permanent community places (Bakonyi & Chonka, 2023).

This paper examines the Wizarat Al Iqtissad building in Beirut's Hamra district, where migrant households have spontaneously occupied this abandoned 13-storey structure. The inhabitation occurs within "wider structural forms of violence, including patriarchy, racism, class exploitation, and, of course, deprivation of shelter" (Lancione, 2020, p. 3), making it a critical site for understanding how sensible architecture emerges from conditions of extreme marginalisation.

2. Literature Review: The Politics of Space and Visibility

Rancière's conceptualisation of politics as "the invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come" (2017, p. 12) provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how spatial practices by displaced populations challenge dominant urban orders. Central to his philosophy is the concept of "the distribution of the sensible", which determines what can be seen, heard, thought, and done within a given social order, transcending the boundaries between the visible and invisible, the included and excluded, thereby structuring possibilities for political participation. Applied to spatial analysis, these ideas reveal how seemingly mundane acts of occupation and modification can function as political interventions. Shaw (2015) argues that Rancière's aesthetic regime "seeks to change the sensible fabric of social relations rather than seizing institutional power" (p. 150), whilst Wenger (2020) demonstrates how spatial practices can introduce "new subjects and new objects in the common public space", rendering visible what was previously marginalised (p. 1). This paper uses "sensible architecture" as an analytical lens through which to read informal spatial practices, not as a prescriptive design model, but as a framework for examining how migrants' spatial modifications of abandoned structures challenge dominant narratives of appropriate urban habitation. Such challenges are urgently needed in the Lebanese context.

Lebanon's experience hosting over 1.5 million forcibly displaced Syrians since 2011 has exposed fundamental limitations in both humanitarian responses and urban housing systems (Nassar, 2025). With 75% of Syrian displaced households living in extreme poverty and inhabiting Beirut's informal urban areas and abandoned buildings (UN Inter-Agency Coordination Lebanon, 2024), and the country hosting the highest refugee per capita concentration worldwide (Brun & Maalouf, 2022) without affordable housing distribution, conventional accommodation approaches have proven inadequate. Syrian migrants face systemic exclusion from formal housing markets through legal restrictions, including prohibitions on formal employment, restrictions on property ownership, and limited access to official housing assistance (Burnham, 2024; Hanafi, 2022). As Crawford (2011) argues, insecure tenure represents "a pervasive manifestation of urban inequality". This exclusion is compounded by a striking structural paradox: Pietrostefani (2022) documents a substantial quantity of unlet and unsold apartment buildings in Beirut, whilst Mazzetto, El-Khoury, and Malkoun, (2024) indicate that up to 20% of built accommodation units across all neighbourhoods remain uninhabited. The housing crisis of the displaced is, therefore, not primarily one of scarcity, but of systems of access and exclusion.

Recent scholarship has moved beyond viewing informal settlements as merely a response to housing shortages, examining instead how displaced populations actively reshape urban

environments. Feng and Zhu (2022) observe that displacement "frequently creates opportunities for occupying abandoned buildings and spaces" involving "active spatial modification rather than passive accommodation", a perspective that challenges conventional framings of displaced populations as passive recipients of humanitarian assistance. The reinhabitation offers a more nuanced vocabulary for these practices: rather than temporary occupation, it involves what Boano and Astolfo (2020, p. 555) describe as "multiple incremental and transformative acts with the ultimate purpose to hold and resist marginalisation". Stoetzer's (2018) concept of "ruderal spaces", environments that emerge spontaneously in places considered hostile to life, provides further tools for understanding how abandoned buildings become sites of dwelling, developing through "edge effects and the juxtaposition of contrasting environments in one ecosystem" (2018, p. 297).

Despite the growing theoretical sophistication of displacement studies, the architectural profession's engagement with these realities has remained limited. Contemporary humanitarian architecture has emerged as a field concerned with emergency response and post-conflict reconstruction, yet its effectiveness in urban contexts marked by war and destruction is uncertain. Clarke and Darcy (2014) argue that humanitarian architects frequently ground their responses in "subjective and socially constructed interpretations of reality", necessitating greater attention to qualitative research evidence and lived experience. Sanyal (2022) identifies a more structural failure: whilst humanitarian architecture "predominantly focuses on urban communities", architectural practice has "largely failed to incorporate lessons from humanitarian actors or acknowledge its social accountability for housing migrants". Tassinari (2018) calls for "design for social innovation" rather than relinquishing spatial agency to politicians and economists (p. 255). What remains missing, however, is sufficient documentation of how displaced populations themselves engage in spatial innovation, the very practices that most directly address the conditions of their exclusion.

This paper addresses that gap. Whilst existing scholarship has examined humanitarian architecture (Siddiqi, 2024), informal settlements (Oksiutycz & Azionya, 2022), and spatial politics separately (Banki & Pasha, 2025), little research connects these domains through empirical analysis of specific displacement sites. Three contributions follow: first, demonstrating how Rancière's political philosophy can function as an analytical lens for architectural reading of spatial practices that challenge dominant narratives of habitability; second, documenting previously unexamined adaptation strategies within vertical settlements, revealing how displaced communities collectively reshape multi-storey structures for community living; and third, proposing a methodological approach for architects to learn from the spatial innovations of marginalised communities rather than imposing external solutions, addressing what Rakowitz (2013, p. 45) identifies as architecture's lost "political potential".

3. Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative methodology derived from engaged ethnography to examine Syrian migrants' spatial adaptation practices within the Wizarat Al Iqtissad building in Beirut (Yarris & Duncan, 2024). The researcher adopts an ethnographic approach that prioritises

interlocutors' lived experiences and spatial narratives as the primary source of data about informal settlement practices. Rancière's concept of "the distribution of the sensible" provides an analytical lens for interpreting how spatial modifications challenge dominant assumptions about legitimate urban inhabitation.

The research was conducted in the Wizarat Al Iqtissad building, a 13-storey abandoned housing block in Beirut's Hamra district that has been informally inhabited by Syrian migrant families since 2014. Interlocutors were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation across different periods of residence and household compositions (Holloway, 2024). The sample included 14 participants representing households with varying lengths of residence, from four months to approximately ten years, comprising both family units (n=9) and single male workers (n=5). Sample size was determined through theoretical saturation principles, with data collection ceasing when no new themes emerged regarding spatial adaptation practices across different household types and residence durations (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006).

Data collection took place between August 2024 and January 2025 using multiple qualitative methods. Semi-structured interviews explored interlocutors' experiences of spatial modification, community relationships, and daily life within the building. Interviews were conducted in Arabic by the researcher and bilingual research assistants, recorded with permission, transcribed, and back-translated to verify accuracy. Photo-elicitation sessions involved interlocutors photographing significant spaces within their apartments and common areas, followed by discussions about spatial meanings and the reasoning behind specific modifications. Questionnaires were designed to collect demographic and housing history data. Participant observation followed systematic protocols (Salmona & Kaczynski, 2024) involving twice-weekly visits over six months, with each visit lasting 1–2 hours at different times of the day to capture varying spatial uses. Observations were documented through detailed field notes focusing on spatial arrangements, modifications, social interactions, and daily routines.

Spatial modifications were documented through a combination of observational field notes, hand-drawn spatial diagrams, and photographic records. For each visited apartment, a structured spatial template was recorded: original room function versus current use; material modifications (added partitions, surface treatments, improvised fixtures); the spatial logic expressed by residents for each adaptation; and the estimated number of occupants per room. These templates were later coded using thematic categories derived inductively from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006): (1) functional reprogramming of rooms; (2) boundary-making and privacy creation; (3) improvised infrastructure (kitchen, sanitation, water storage); and (4) shared versus private space negotiation. Spatial diagrams were produced based on field sketches and photographs, translated into schematic floor plan representations to illustrate the range of modification strategies across different household types.

Beyond these material and spatial records, the research process itself required careful reflexive attention. As an international researcher with privileged legal status and economic position, the principal investigator acknowledges significant power imbalances with interlocutors experiencing legal precarity and economic hardship (Magagnoli, 2012). The researcher's position as an outsider to both Lebanese society and the Syrian refugee

experience required sensitivity to avoid extractive research practices (Hilaire, 2023). Regular reflection sessions with Arabic-speaking research assistants helped identify potential biases and cultural misinterpretations. All interlocutors provided informed consent in Arabic, with emphasis on voluntary participation and withdrawal rights.

The research took place during the 2024 Israeli bombing of Beirut, and this manuscript is being revised during the Iran–US war of 2026; circumstances that may have intensified both spatial constraints and adaptive strategies in ways that might not reflect practices under different conditions.

Given the single-building scope of this paper, its findings are proposed as theoretically generative rather than empirically generalisable. Future research should pursue comparative investigation across different urban contexts and building typologies in Lebanon and the MENA region; longitudinal tracking of spatial modifications over extended periods to assess the durability of incremental improvement strategies; and examination of perspectives from property owners, local authorities, and humanitarian organisations whose positions were necessarily absent from this paper's frame. Research that follows specific households across mobility cycles, rather than capturing a cross-sectional snapshot, would substantially deepen understanding of the relationship between temporal tenure and spatial investment.

4. Case Study: Ruderal Places in the High-Rise

The Wizarat Al Iqtissad building is situated in the Hamra district of West Beirut, approximately 500 metres from the American University of Beirut campus and within walking distance of the Corniche waterfront (Figure 1). Hamra functions as a mixed residential and commercial district characterised by mid-twentieth-century apartment blocks, ground-floor retail, and a high density of migrant and student populations. Its central location, combined with the relative tolerance of its street culture and the proximity of informal employment opportunities in hospitality and domestic work, renders it a logical destination for newly arrived Syrian households. The building's abandoned status within this dense urban fabric creates a paradoxical situation: structurally visible and architecturally prominent, yet socially invisible to authorities and neighbouring residents alike. The Corniche, Sanayeh Park, and several coffee shops documented in the research as sites of regular use by building residents are all within a 15-minute walk, a spatial relationship that enables a degree of urban participation and social normalcy despite residents' precarious legal status.



Figure 1. Location of the Wizarat Al Iqtissad building (orange) within the Hamra context, Corniche (green) and Sanayeh Public Garden (red) (Marinovic's Archive, 2026).

Constructed in the late 1950s during Lebanon's development boom, the Wizarat Al Iqtissad building emerged as a desirable address as Hamra became the new business centre of Beirut. Since the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), property records show contested ownership, with a Syrian retiree serving as caretaker, known among the families as "the de facto building owner" (Resident A, August 2024). Whilst few occupants are his relatives, most households secured apartments through word of mouth. All occupants paid a monthly rent of US\$300 to the building gatekeeper and reported fears of forceful eviction, with two building managers verbally dictating rental terms to tenants, including duration of stay, regardless of apartment conditions. The original design featured studios and one-bedroom apartments on the lower floors and larger two to three-bedroom units above. Following the building's abandonment and complete interior dismantling, including all doors, windows, flooring, kitchen, and bathroom facilities, households have progressively reinvested in specific functional elements, beginning with toilet facilities and improvised kitchens at the locations of original plumbing connections.

The spatial logic of reinhabitation becomes legible when read floor by floor, yet what emerges across the building is not fragmentation but a coherent, if uncoordinated, collective intelligence. The first two floors have been converted from their original studio configuration into shared dormitory rooms, typically housing 12 to 15 men per room (Figure 2). The Type 1 floor plan documents the conversion of stripped studio units into shared worker dormitories, revealing how the absence of fixed fittings has generated a consistent spatial logic of portable sleeping arrangements, improvised wall modifications, and plumbing reinstatement concentrated at original connection points (Figure 3). One construction worker who had lived in the building for three years described the arrangement: "We sleep in shifts sometimes. The mattresses stay on the floor, six, seven in a line. At night it looks like a camp, but in the

morning, we fold everything and it becomes our living room" (Resident B, October 2024). Another worker described carrying his mattress across Hamra from a previous apartment: "I carried it on my back for 20 minutes. That mattress is everything I own here" (Resident C, October 2024). The absence of kitchen facilities in the original stripped-out apartments has produced consistent spatial solutions across these rooms: cooking, food storing, and sleeping occupied balconies (Figure 4, central-right & right). Social norms are understood collectively, with residents describing mutual agreements about noise, visitors, cooking times, and prayer spaces operating without any formal enforcement mechanism.



Figure 2. Shared dormitory rooms on the 2nd floor for workers with pop-up mattresses (Marinovic's Archive, 2026).

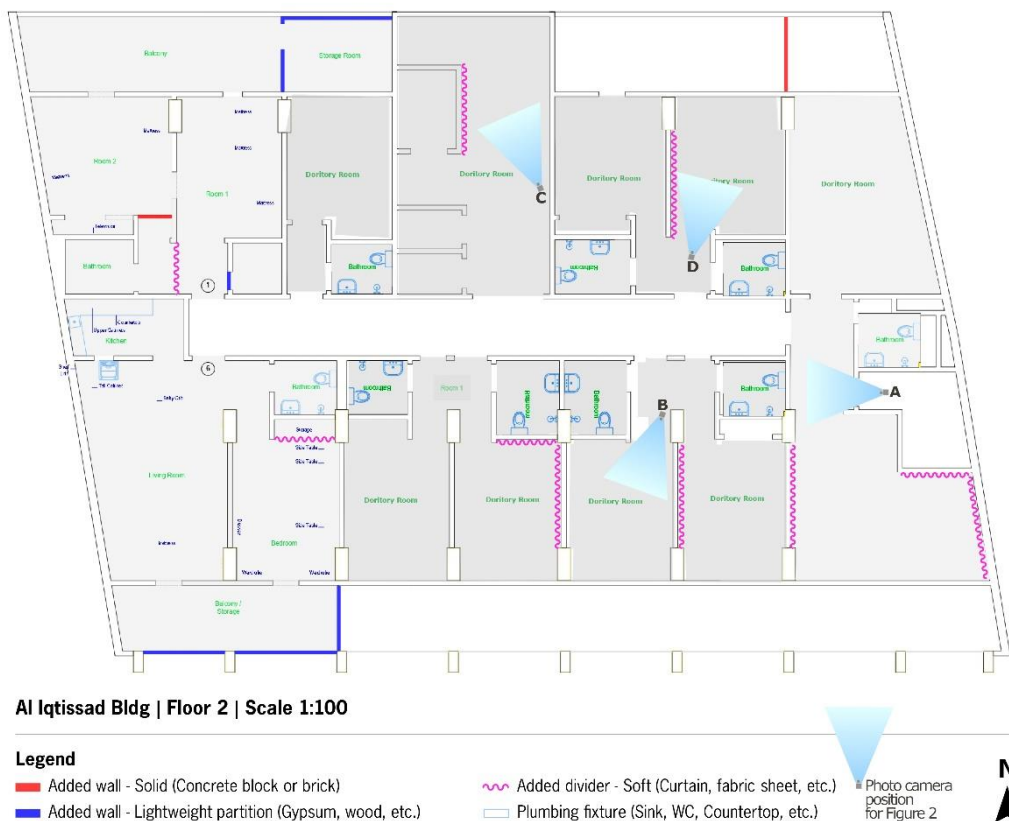


Figure 3. Type 1 floor plan unit showing empty apartments where workers modified walls and plumbing (Marinovic's Archive, 2026).

The middle and upper floors house extended families, sometimes two related nuclear families sharing two to three room units, whose longer tenure in the building distinguishes them materially and socially from the more transient households below. This Type 2 floor plan documents the adaptation of larger apartment units by extended families, revealing how a reversible curtain partition system mediates between sleeping and living zones, whilst cooking and food storage have migrated to balconies in response to the stripping of original kitchen infrastructure (Figure 4, left, central-left, and central & Figure 5).

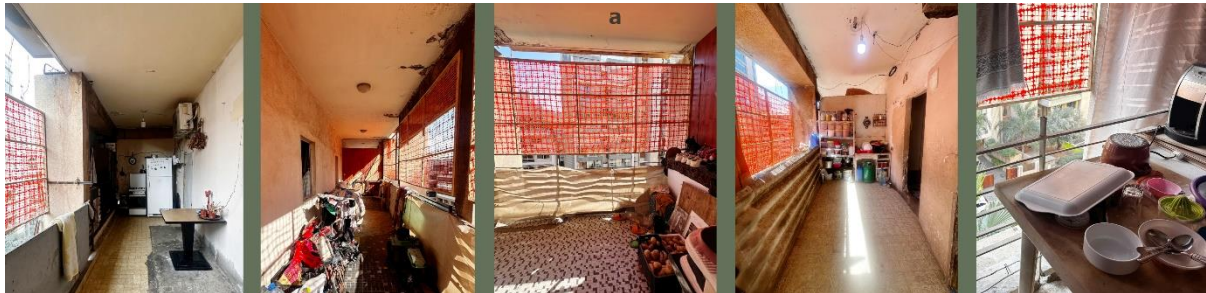
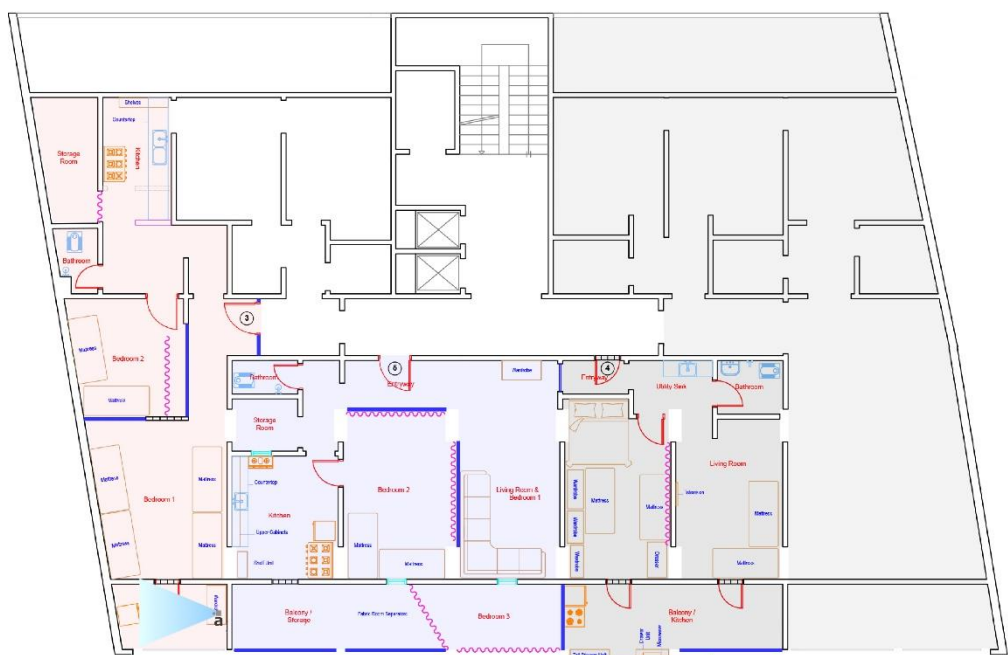


Figure 4. Balconies appropriated by migrants: 7th floor (left), 5th floor (central-left), 6th floor (central), 1st floor (central-right) and 2nd floor (right) (Marinovic's Archive, 2026).



Al Iqtissad Bldg | Floor 6 | Scale 1:100

Legend

- Added wall - Lightweight partition (Gypsum, wood, etc.)
- ~ Added divider - Soft (Curtain, fabric sheet, etc.)
- Removed wall (original wall demolished)
- Window modification

- ⤵ Door added by residents
- Furniture (Beds, tables, shelves, etc.)
- Appliances (Fridge, stove, washing machine, etc.)
- Plumbing fixture (Sink, WC, Countertop, etc.)



Photo camera position for Figure 4

Figure 5. Type 2 apartment showing curtain partition system, sleeping/living zone flexibility, improvised kitchen and food storage on balconies (Marinovic's Archive, 2026).

These interlocutors had been resident for three years or more, and their spatial adaptations reflect accumulated domestic knowledge rather than emergency improvisation. One woman

who had lived in the building for five years with her husband, four children, and her husband's brother's family described the principal spatial challenge: "The children need to sleep, the men need to eat, and there is only one room that is not broken. So, we made a curtain from a bedsheet to separate the sleeping area from the kitchen area. In the daytime, it comes down, and it becomes one space again" (Resident D, November 2024). This curtain strategy recurred across multiple middle-floor households, representing a reversible material modification that creates privacy and functional separation without structural intervention. Crucially, its reversibility is not simply a practical constraint but an expression of a particular temporal condition: families settled enough to have developed deliberate spatial routines, yet without the tenure security or accumulated resources that would justify permanent structural change. In several apartments, residents had added a wooden frame to support the curtain, a small but telling escalation that mirrors the incremental improvement logic visible throughout the building.

The walls of these apartments register this incrementalism most vividly (Figures 3 and 5). Layers of foil insulation applied over exposed concrete, patches of paint in different colours corresponding to different households, and hand-drawn decorations at child height together form a material archive of sequential habitation, with each family's interventions deposited over those of the last. As one mother observed: "We painted over the drawings of the family before us. My daughter painted the sun. If we leave, the next family will paint over it" (Resident E, November 2024). This statement captures something essential about the temporal condition of these households: they are conscious of their own position within a longer succession of occupants, and they modify space with an awareness that their interventions are neither the first nor the last. However, unlike the more transient households on the lower floors, they have stayed long enough to leave a legible mark and, in a meaningful sense, to have made the space provisionally their own. Taken together, these layered modifications, from the folded mattress to the curtained partition to the painted wall, constitute not a series of isolated acts of survival but a cumulative spatial practice whose coherence emerges precisely from its informality.

5. Sensible Architecture as Analytical Lens

The four spatial adaptation strategies identified across all household types in the Wizarat Al Iqtissad building are most legible when read in direct relation to the spatial modifications. Functional reprogramming was universal: every household had reassigned at least one room from its original purpose, a pattern whose logic is inseparable from the building's stripped interior. Because all plumbing, flooring, doors, and kitchen fittings had been removed before occupation, households were not adapting functioning spaces but rebuilding them from scratch within existing shells. Balconies were converted to cooking areas precisely because interior plumbing connections, where they survived, were prioritised for toilet reinstatement, while balconies became food storage zones or prayer spaces (Figure 5). The curtain partitions observed on the middle and upper floors, and the wooden frames that longer-settled families added to stabilise them, represent a boundary-making logic that responds directly to the oversized room configurations left by the building's original two to three-bedroom layout, now shared by households whose size and composition the original design never anticipated.

The improvised infrastructure sequencing that emerged across all household types reveals a consistent hierarchy of investment: toilet facilities first, followed by water storage, cooking arrangements, and only subsequently flooring or wall finishes. This sequence is not arbitrary but reflects both the material starting point of each apartment, stripped to bare concrete, and a considered prioritisation of dignified living conditions under extreme material resource constraint. On the lower floors, where male worker dormitories occupy the former studio units, this sequencing produced the shared water storage containers and balcony cooking stations (Figure 4). On the middle and upper floors, the same logic played out over longer timescales, accumulating in the layered wall surfaces: the foil insulation over concrete, and the successive coats of paint that register each household's incremental investment. Collective resource management operated as a fourth consistent strategy across all floors, with water storage, electricity connections from the building's informal supplier, and cooking gas canisters shared through informally negotiated arrangements whose terms shifted as households moved, multiplied, or departed.

The most significant empirical finding, and one that the floor-by-floor spatial analysis makes particularly visible, concerns the cyclical mobility pattern within the building itself. Housing histories across all interviewees revealed that families typically moved between apartments every two to three years, driven by changing household size, disputes over resource sharing, and the arrival of new inhabitants requiring accommodation. The movement is not random but directional: male workers initially occupy the first two floors and subsequently arrange for family members to join them in upper apartments, a trajectory whose spatial logic mirrors the vertical organisation of household types in the building. What appears, viewed statically, as a fixed population distributed across floors is, when viewed dynamically, a continuously circulating community whose internal migrations follow legible social and spatial patterns.

These adaptation strategies can be read through Rancière's (2013) "distribution of the sensible" as spatial practices that render previously invisible communities and their spatial knowledge visible within urban discourse. The systematic reconfiguration of abandoned apartments, converting balconies into cooking areas (Figure 4), constructing block-wall partitions, and layering insulation over exposed concrete, constitutes what Rancière would identify as interventions into the sensible fabric of social life, introducing new spatial possibilities into Beirut's housing landscape and challenging settled assumptions about which bodies belong in which spaces. The presence of Syrian families in the building and their use of adjacent public spaces represents a disruption of established spatial order operating on two registers simultaneously: the physical fact of occupation, and the social discomfort that presence produces among segments of the Lebanese population.

In spaces such as the Corniche and Sanayeh Public Garden², Syrian families occupy benches, gather in groups, and allow children to play in areas historically associated with

² **The Corniche** (from *Corniche el-Manara* to *Ain el-Mreisseh*) is Beirut's seaside promenade and one of the city's few genuinely open public spaces, historically drawing a cross-section of residents, including working-class families, migrant workers, and youth groups.

Sanayeh Garden (Sanayeh Public Garden, Hamra) is an Ottoman-era Park that similarly functions as one of Beirut's most accessible neighbourhood green spaces. Both sites have been subject to contestation: municipal policies have at times sought

middle-class Lebanese leisure (Figure 1). Negative sentiment toward this visibility is frequently articulated through the language of hygiene, noise, and overcrowding, framings that displace economic anxiety and political resentment onto the bodies and behaviours of migrants themselves, reflecting a broader pattern of scapegoating that intensified alongside Lebanon's economic collapse. However, the presence of these families in nominally public spaces constitutes an implicit claim to urban belonging that the surrounding social environment actively contests, rendering such spaces sites where the contradictions of Lebanon's refugee politics are most legibly inscribed.

Moving beyond what the data directly demonstrate, three interpretive propositions extend the empirical findings into broader implications for practice. The spatial sequencing observed across all household types, from toilet reinstatement through water storage and cooking to floor and wall finishes, suggests a possible architecture of minimal-intervention support strategies, which might be termed "infrastructural pinpoint activation". This sequence implies that targeted, phased investments in basic infrastructure nodes can catalyse broader dwelling consolidation without requiring comprehensive top-down redevelopment. Further research is needed, however, to verify whether this sequencing holds across different settlement typologies and to identify the governance mechanisms through which such support might be delivered to migrant households equitably. The informal governance structures observed, whilst enabling collective inhabitation, also operate through exclusionary mechanisms: access to preferred apartments depends on social networks, economic resources, and length of residence, creating internal hierarchies that complicate idealistic framings of informal settlement as egalitarian. Finally, the ruderal quality of the building, its function as a transitional platform rather than a permanent home, challenges conventional distinctions between temporary and permanent housing, suggesting that architectural interventions into such sites might productively work with, rather than against, this transitional logic.

6. Conclusion: Sensible Politics of Inhabitation

This engaged ethnographic investigation of Syrian migrants' occupation of the Wizarat Al Iqtissad building in Beirut contributes to scholarship on displacement and urban informality by demonstrating how spatial practices function as political interventions that challenge dominant urban orders. The paper advances understanding of informal settlement beyond survival strategies, revealing how displaced populations exercise spatial agency through modification, informal governance, and cyclical mobility, practices that constitute *sensible*: spatial knowledge made visible and politically legible through the act of inhabitation itself.

Three analytical insights emerge from applying the assemblages of sensible architecture. First, the framework reveals how everyday spatial modifications, such as curtains suspended from wooden frames, partitions built from salvaged concrete blocks, tiled bathroom floors laid incrementally over the years, constitute political acts that disrupt established hierarchies of urban belonging. These are not merely adaptive responses to material scarcity; they are claims to permanence, dignity, and spatial citizenship made through the accumulated logic of

to privatise or redevelop Sanayeh, while elites have explicitly objected to lower-income populations using central public spaces, revealing the exclusionary logic underpinning urban governance in Beirut. See Karim & Afify, 2021.

building. Second, the cyclical mobility patterns observed challenge static conceptualisations of informal settlement, demonstrating sophisticated spatial navigation strategies that complicate humanitarian and policy frameworks premised on fixed residential categories. Third, the emergence of informal governance structures, kitchen schedules negotiated between co-resident families, collective maintenance arrangements, and implicit hierarchies of tenure, illustrates how spatial practices generate alternative forms of urban community organisation that remain invisible to formal authorities precisely because they operate through embodied knowledge rather than documented agreement.

These findings extend Boano and Astolfo's (2020, p.559) conceptualisation of inhabitation by documenting the specific material mechanisms through which "incremental and transformative acts" accumulate in vertical informal settlements. They also complicate Stoetzer's (2018) notion of ruderal spaces by showing how abandoned buildings function not merely as marginal or residual environments but as sites of sophisticated community formation, where spatial knowledge is produced, transmitted, and refined across successive waves of occupation. Critically, this paper proposes that the spatial practices documented here constitute the assemblages of sensible architecture. Elaine Scarry's (2020, pp. 324-326) observation that even the most minimal human shelter "transforms its human occupant from a subjugated creature to one who is free" resonates with direct force in the Wizarat Al Iqtissad context: the modifications recorded here, however improvised and however materially precarious they are, enact precisely these assemblages. They are architectural practices under conditions of extreme constraint, and they carry within them a logic of spatial problem-solving that architectural and urban planning should embrace for future open-ended housing models.

This finding proposes implications that cut across architectural practice, policy, and humanitarian response, implications grounded in what was observed, not extrapolated beyond it. For architectural practice, the spatial strategies documented in this building, reversible partitioning, incremental infrastructural upgrading, and the temporal programming of shared space, represent solutions to problems of density, privacy, and multi-family cohabitation that current incremental architectural projects have rarely resolved with the aim of social equality. Collaborative learning processes between architectural researchers and displaced communities represent a sensible methodological and epistemological reorientation.

For humanitarian organisations, the paper criticised the paradigm of constructing new facilities in response to displacement, which systematically undervalues and frequently ignores the spatial capital that residents have already produced. The incremental improvements documented across longer-term spatial alterations represent years of material investment, social negotiation, and accumulated domestic knowledge. Directing resources toward supporting and stabilising such improvements within existing informal settlements, rather than treating them as temporary conditions to be superseded, represents a meaningful shift in humanitarian spatial logic. This is not a recommendation derived from this case alone; it is consistent with a broader body of scholarship on incremental housing that this research corroborates and extends into the specific context of Lebanese urban informality.

For urban policy, the research contributes to an emerging theoretical argument for temporary use, legal instruments that recognise occupation of abandoned structures without conferring

permanent property rights, as mechanisms for reducing the contradiction between informal spatial investment and legal precarity. The findings do not suggest that the assemblages of sensible architecture are straightforwardly achievable within Lebanon's current legal and political context, given the complexity of property law, refugee policy, and municipal governance strategies. What they do suggest is that informal occupation of this kind produces measurable social value, and that this value warrants serious engagement from policy instruments capable of recognising and supporting incremental housing practices.

Declaration of Ethical Standards

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the American University of Beirut Institutional Review Board (IRB Protocol No. SBS-2024-0388). Given the legal precarity and economic vulnerability of interlocutors as Syrian displaced persons in Lebanon, the research prioritised their protection through voluntary informed consent provided in Arabic; explicit assurance of anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence; and careful management of all identifying information. All interview recordings and personal data were stored securely and accessible only to the principal researcher. Interlocutors were not compensated monetarily to avoid coercive incentives.

Conflict of Interest

There was no conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions

Author contributed alone to the article.

Declarations

This paper was supported by the University Research Board (URB) under Award 104632; Project 28046. The author declares no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Acknowledgment

I thank the households of the Wizarat Al Iqtissad building for their generosity and engagement during the fieldwork.

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Notes

This study is evaluated under the double-blind peer review system.

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