

# Emergency Urbanism and Architectures of Precarity in Sabra, Beirut.

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by  
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**SINCE** the mid-1980s, generations of displaced people have sought refuge in the ramshackle buildings that were once the Gaza-Ramallah Hospital, a multi-story hospital complex built by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Damaged during the civil war, today the buildings blend in with the run-down Sabra-Shatila neighbourhood in Beirut's "misery belt." The multi-story buildings are examples of emergency urbanism whereby displaced people seek refuge in cities, and their story can be read as a vertical migration history of people escaping conflict, displacement, and destitution. In this article Are John Knudsen examines the buildings as archives of spatial and political histories, providing a genealogy of displacement and emplacement that can inform the study of emergency urbanism and point to solutions in cities for refugees lacking access to affordable housing.



Gaza hospital, c. 1980, undated picture © courtesy of the PLO

The hospital complex comprised four buildings with specialized wards and local staff working alongside foreign doctors and nurses as volunteers during the civil war (1975–90). The main hospital building's sophisticated construction included floors dedicated to obstetrics and gynaecology as well an underground operation theatre.

## Introduction

In the late 1970s the Gaza-Ramallah Hospital ("Gaza buildings") in Beirut was the Palestinian Liberation Organization's (PLO) prestige project and premier installation. Built in 1978 and opened a year later, the hospital was from 1982 run by the Palestinian Red Crescent Society. Damaged during the civil war (1975–90), the buildings started to fill up with Palestinian refugees fleeing ruined camps and neighbourhoods and have since remained emergency shelters for the homeless and destitute. Today nothing about these decaying buildings gives away the former role and grandeur of the Gaza hospital complex. The Gaza hospital epitomised the heyday and decline of the PLO's power in Lebanon and is an example of emergency urbanism whereby displaced people seek refuge in cities.

The Gaza buildings' history is an especially interesting one due to the way it caters to both the wartime and post-war displaced and due to the ways the buildings' form and function have changed to accommodate them. This means not only analysing the buildings as symbols or markers of historical epochs or periods, but as archives of spatial and political histories. The multi-story buildings can be read as a vertical migration history where gener-

ations of refugees and migrants have escaped conflict, displacement, and destitution. Examining the buildings' transformation provides a genealogy of displacement and emplacement that can inform the study of emergency urbanism and can help identify solutions in cities for refugees lacking access to affordable housing.

The buildings differ both in their size, internal management and clientele (Figure 1). In 2007, about 275 families lived in the four buildings; ten years later the number had almost doubled (505 families), the majority Syrians (44%), followed by Palestinians (32%), Bangladeshi (8%), other, mainly Africans and Asians (6,5%), Palestinians from Syria (5%), and impoverished Lebanese (4%). The boom in the unregulated property market after the 2011 Syrian refugee crisis increased the demand for private accommodation and inflated rents. In the Gaza buildings, Syrian lodgers were accommodated by adding new basement and roof top flats and subdividing and subletting two and three-room flats. Additionally, many of the original Palestinian owners have sublet their properties to incoming Syrians and either moved to Shatila or Sunni-majority suburbs nearby. In this way the buildings have also





Beirut © Bjørnar Haveland



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changed character, they are no longer Palestinian, but rather increasingly multi-ethnic, with some buildings having a majority of Syrians.

In the Middle East and North Africa region, 80–90 per cent of the refugees live in towns and cities, mainly in substandard accommodation alongside other urban poor. However, there are no effective policies in place for refugees in urban areas, and the capacity to cater for refugees is often weak or lacking. In Lebanon, the large majority of the about one million Syrian refugees live under threat of eviction in overcrowded residential buildings and apartments. Since the Syrian revolt in 2011, the Sabra-Shatila area experienced a rapid influx of refugees from Syria. The Gaza buildings' tenants epitomise this process of urban encampment, and despite emergency rehabilitation of the buildings (Figure 2), this cannot offset the structural problems, such as lack of ventilation, and dampness that cause chronic health problems for residents.

#### Housing informality

Throughout the Middle East, housing informality and emergency urbanism co-exist amidst a rampant neo-liberalism. The historical transformation of urban Beirut is likewise reflected in the Gaza buildings' change from hospital to squatted war relic with vertical stratification and clientele typical of the periods of civil war and post-civil war displacement (Figure 3). These histories of change could therefore be considered examples of urban architectures of displacement and the creation of emergency shelter. Emergency urbanism is an avenue for urban survival for many, and a route to prosperity for the few who have been able to take advantage of the economic opportunities offered by informality, new displacement crises, and foreign migrants. The provision of adequate, low-cost housing would reduce both income differentials and profit margins and safeguard the rights to housing for the urban displaced.

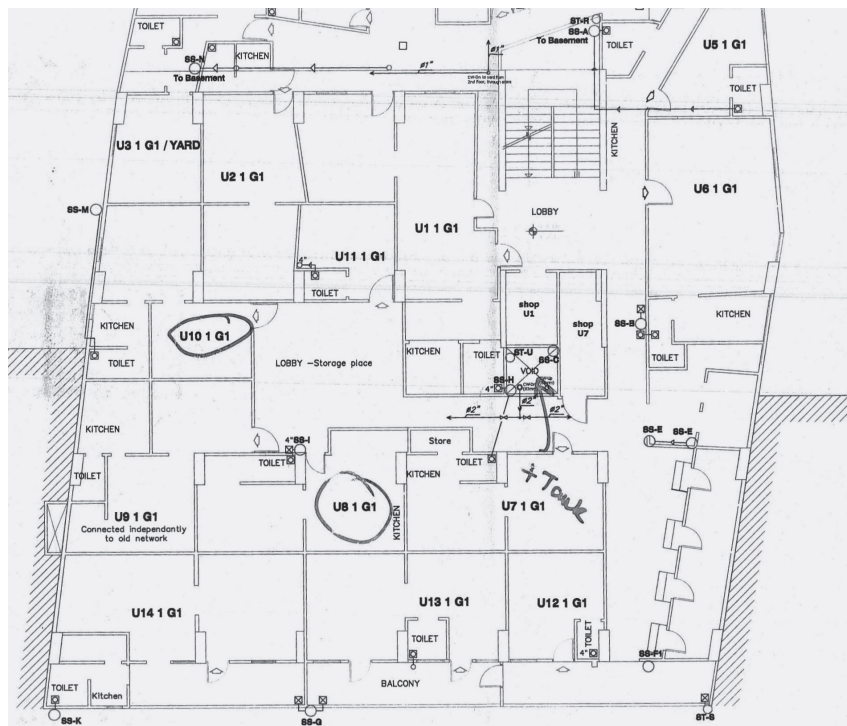
The obvious need for such a change also points towards the need to reshape the policy debate on refugees from service provision and temporary shelter towards affordable housing and tenure security in urban areas. Most of the world's refugees live in cities and urban areas, and even more so in the Middle East where outdated policies, lack of money and political will engender emergency urbanism and destitution for the urban poor and displaced alike. This article has been a contribution towards understanding the causes and consequences of emergency urbanism by attending to the archival qualities of buildings and shelters. Analysing the buildings as archives of spatial and political histories can inform the study of emergency urbanism and further the shift towards inclusive cities, a new urban agenda, and the provision of adequate housing for refugees and urban poor alike.





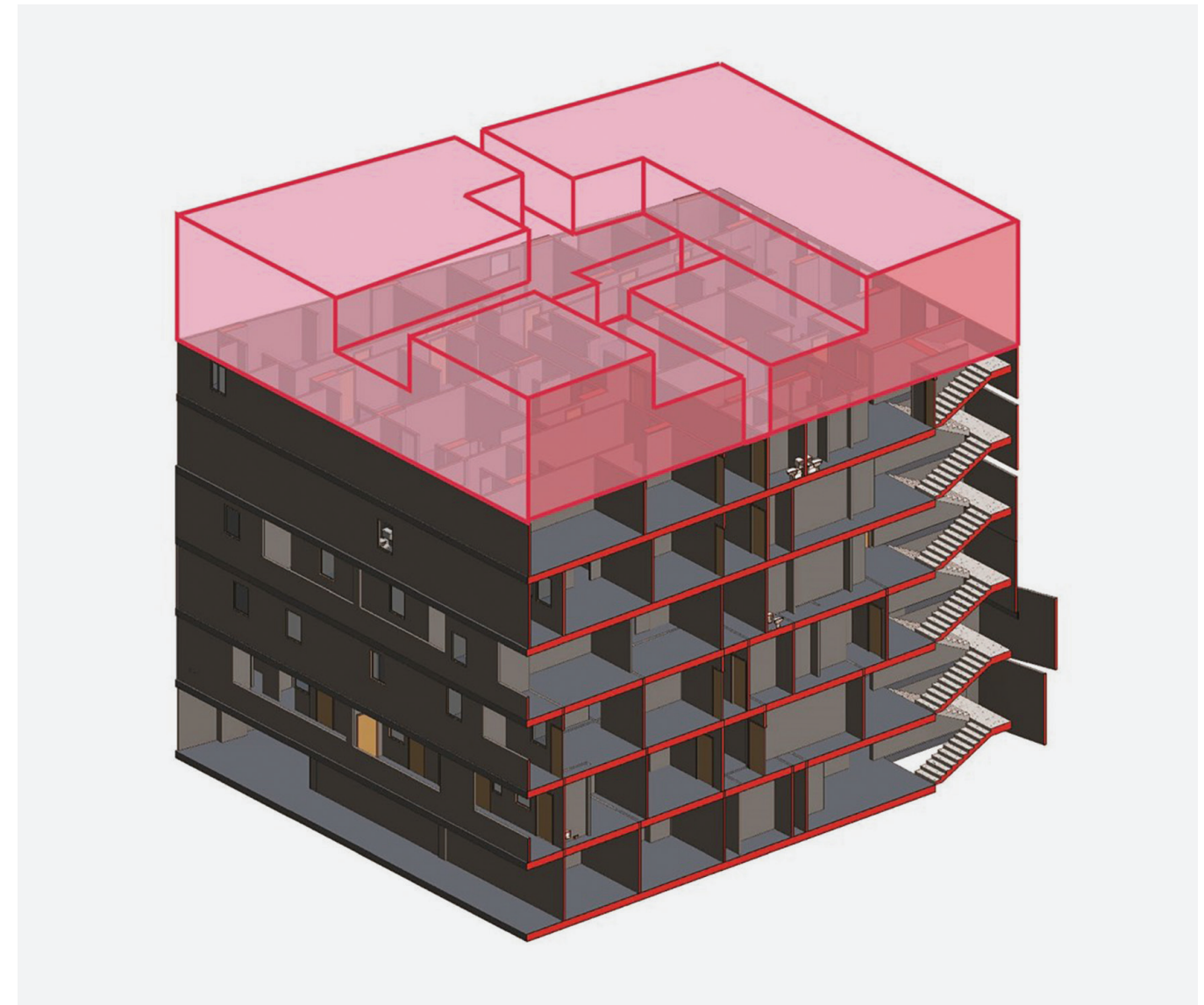
Gaza buildings (G 1–4), aerial view (Google map, overlaid by new floor plans)  
 @ Image courtesy of Bjørnar Haveland

Figure 1: About 300 meters north of the Shatila refugee camp, along the west main Sabra road, the Gaza hospital complex originally comprised a nursing school, administration block, hospital, and maternity unit, locally referred to as Gaza 1–4 (Figure 2). The Gaza buildings' borderline location is at the juncture between the Hizbollah-controlled banlieues (Southern Suburbs) and metropolitan Beirut, which is at the same time a transition zone between Sunni- and Shia majority communities that divides the city and forms part of a contested frontier zone. Located near the major highway connecting Beirut with the South and surrounded by low-income neighbourhoods at the edge of the city's so-called "misery belt," the Gaza buildings lie within a legal, administrative and geographical twilight zone.



G1 building, 1st floor rehabilitation plan @ document courtesy of the NRC

Figure 2: From 2007 to 2009, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) with funding from the European Agency for Humanitarian Action (ECHO) completed an emergency rehabilitation of the Gaza 1 and 3 buildings (Figure 3). The new plumbing, toilets, and sewage facilities as well as access to piped water could not, however, offset the structural problems, lack of ventilation, and dampness that cause chronic health problems for residents.



Gaza 1, floor plan (1-6), with outline of new top floors (7-8).  
 @ 3D image courtesy of Bjørnar Haveland

Figure 3: The first refugees moved in during 1985 when the damaged and looted buildings were still burnt-out shells, and within one year those buildings had been filled with Palestinian squatters. Despite the structural problems, overcrowding and dampness, needy families are drawn to the Gaza buildings in search for affordable housing, in-kind support, and as a last resort in the struggle for urban survival. Filled almost beyond capacity, the lodgers have exploited every nook and cranny of the dilapidated buildings – corridors, elevator shafts, roofs and basements – to extend living and storage space. Moving through the congested floors in the Gaza buildings resembles a vertical migration history, with residents escaping repeated conflict, displacement and destitution emblematic of Lebanon's chequered civil war and post-civil war period.