

For Immediate Release



## **City Debates 2015 examines gentrification of Beirut and other regional cities**

Beirut, Lebanon- 05/03/2015 - Beirut in times of peace has been more disfigured than in times of war, according to local activists who protest urban development trends in the city, said participants at an AUB conference on urban planning, policy and design.

In its 14<sup>th</sup> edition, the 2015 City Debates took for theme gentrification as an aspect of urban change, attracting local and international scholars who convened in AUB from 4 to 6 March, for a three-day conference and debate.

The conference, whose aim was to highlight the processes of urban and social change associated with gentrification, with a focus on Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cities, was organized by the AUB Faculty of Engineering and Architecture Graduate Programs in Urban Planning, Policy and Design, in collaboration with the AUB Neighborhood Initiative, and sponsored by the Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies (CAMES), the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Abdulaziz Al Saud Center for the American Studies and Research (CASAR), the Issam Fares Institute for Policy and International Affairs (IFI), the Ford Foundation, the Institut Francais pour le Proche Orient (IFPO) and the British Council.

“In recent years, global capital flows, coupled with new building regulations that promote higher built-up densities, have tremendously valorized certain parts of Beirut turning them into massive destruction and reconstruction sites,” said Mona Khechen, senior lecturer at the AUB Department of Landscape Design and Ecosystem Management and co-organizer of the event. “In Ras Beirut’s case there is the presence of intricate social and spatial mobilities that are not captured by western-centric gentrification paradigms.”

Gentrification is a common and widespread controversial topic and term in urban planning that leads to the displacement of the existing demographic of a region and refers to the shifts in an urban community lifestyle and the increasing occupation of wealthier residents, or businesses, amid increasing property values.

“These mobilities, in the case of Ras Beirut, and their ensuing socio-spatial divisions and inequalities, largely stem from a country context fraught with social insecurities and highly susceptible to political manipulations and rivalries,” said Khechen.

Marieke Krunen, a PhD student at the Department of Conflict and Development studies at Ghent University, Belgium, sketched the process driving gentrification in Beirut by illustrating it with two case studies: Mar Mikhael quarter where existing shops have been replaced by pubs, restaurants and designer boutiques with older buildings giving way to new real estate

projects; and Zokak El Blat where new buildings are replacing older ones but where cultural and commercial changes have not materialized.

“These case studies point towards specific aspects of gentrification processes in Beirut, such as the lenient legal framework afforded to developers wishing to evict residents and demolish their buildings,” said Krunen. “Other aspects include the Lebanese diaspora that is an investor in and buyer of real estate, a major rent gap caused by rent controls, the high exploitation ratios and the role of conflict in processes of displacement and speculation.”

“These specifically Lebanese aspects are not always covered by gentrification theory produced in the West,” she added.

According to Krunen, the case of Beirut also shows just how much gentrification processes can diverge within a single city, with different networks of capital formation and visions of the urban future reflecting Lebanon’s history of confessional conflict and the various ways in which neighborhoods and social groups are linked to regional and global circuits of capital.

“Notwithstanding Lebanese specificities, the case studies demonstrate that the driving forces and results of gentrification in Beirut are the same as elsewhere,” she said. “The logic of the market is to provide housing for the privileged, and lower-and-middle-income groups are displaced and excluded from the city.”

Hisham Ashkar, architect, urban planner, cartographer and investigative researcher, currently a PhD candidate in urbanism at HafenCity Universität-Hamburg, Germany, talked about the laws and regulations that sustain and support gentrification, such as the Law of Construction, Law on Antiquities and the Law on rent.

Ashkar argued that the 1992 rent law imposed rent controls that pushed building owners to sell their properties in search of more lucrative investments. This in turn contributed to gentrification.

More recently, the 2004 construction law allowed developers to exploit a plot by an extra 30 percent, and to raise the height of buildings by an additional 25 percent, creating a huge gap between old buildings and new ones in a single day.

“Usually the developers in Lebanon expect a 400 percent profit margin and many abstain from realizing a project if that figure is not attained,” he said. The result is high-end buildings that are not accessible to the middle class population, hence leading to further gentrification of an area.

ENDS

**Photo1: scholars discuss gentrification at the 2015 City Debates**

**Photo 2: Mona Khesheh**

**For more information please contact:**

Maha Al-Azar, Director of News and Information, [ma110@aub.edu.lb](mailto:ma110@aub.edu.lb),  
01-75 96 85

Note to Editors

## **About AUB**

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 700 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,000 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420-bed hospital.

**Stay up to date on AUB news and events. Follow us on:**

Website: [www.aub.edu.lb](http://www.aub.edu.lb)

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/aub.edu.lb>

Twitter: [http://twitter.com/AUB\\_Lebanon](http://twitter.com/AUB_Lebanon)