RE-ACT IN II
Rethinking Arts for Cohesion, Trust and Inclusion II

Italy, France, Lebanon, Jordan

ARCS - ARCI CULTURE SOLIDALI APS, Italy

Hayat, HAYAT ONLUS, Italy

E.F.S. - EUROMED FEDERATION OF SOCIO-CULTURAL AND NEIGHBORHOOD CENTERS, France

NAHNOO, Lebanon

Tyro - TIRO ASSOCIATION FOR ARTS, Lebanon

Shams - Maisam abu sharar and Mahmoud Ali's Company, Jordan

Prepared by: Amanie Majed, NAHNOO
Claudia Fratini, HAYAT

Table of Contents

List of figures

Acronyms

BRT	Bus Rapid Transit
CAS	Central Administration of Statistics
CAV	Centro Anni Verdi
CEP	Continuing Education Program
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
ECB	European Central Bank
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
EURES	European Employment Services
EUROMED	Euro-Mediterranean Partnership
FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
GAM	Greater Amman Municipality
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
ILO	International Labour Organization
ISTAT	Istituto Nazionale di Statistica
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NEET	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
NEO	National Employment Office
NGOs	Non-governmental organizations
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OIS	Observatoire de l'Immigration et de la Sécurité
ONLUS	Organizzazione Non Lucrativa di Utilità Sociale
PPS	Project for Public Spaces
PROCOL	Prosperity Co-Laboratory for Lebanon
TEJ	Tarik El Jdideh
TIRO	Tiro Association for Arts
UN-Habitat	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WHO	World Health Organization

This study highlights the important and complex role public spaces play in the lives of young people across Lebanon, Jordan, and Italy. "From the space of Horsh Beirut to the community-driven approach at Shams in Amman and the cooperative governance model of Bologna's Treno center, youth consistently seek spaces where they can feel safe, included, and empowered. While physical access is often restricted by political fragmentation, cultural norms, or design limitations, youth across contexts are reshaping public space through resilience, creativity, and informal ownership. The findings stress that true inclusion requires more than open gates, it demands shared governance, trust, and policy frameworks that recognize young people as co-creators of their spaces. Public space, when made inclusive and participatory, becomes not just a location but a catalyst for social cohesion, and civic platform.

1. Introduction

Public spaces are central to the health and vitality of urban life. They offer sites for social interaction, cultural exchange, and civic expression; what Jan Gehl[1] calls "the life between buildings." In line with anthropologist Marc Augè[2]'s theory of non-places (1995), public spaces are defined precisely by their negation. If a non-place is in fact a space of transit, of crossing and of not belonging, the place-space is an identity-historical space because relations and encounters are solicited and an integral part of the place itself. They are spaces where people can stop and get to know one another.

For this reason, a public space, understood in the possibility of being enjoyed, crossed, co-designed and used for gathering, entertaining and organizing, is a strong indicator of the political health of a place, nationally and locally. The shrinking of political and civic freedoms is always followed by the shrinking of open spaces, accessible and usable by all. Looking at how and from whom it is used, tells us a lot about gender rights and equity and tells us how much room a society gives to young people.

"*People create "public life" when they connect with each other in public spaces-streets, plazas, parks, and city spaces between buildings. Public life is about the everyday activities that people take part in when they spend time with each other outside of their homes, workplaces, and cars.* "Jan Gehl,(Project for Public Spaces [PPS], n.d.)

Successful public spaces meet the needs of people of various social classes, ethnicities, and backgrounds in general. As young people become more independent, they look for sites where they feel safe and that can fulfill their needs for social interaction, self-expression, and retreat. Safe public spaces, such as civic spaces, enable youth to engage in governance issues; public spaces afford youth the opportunity to participate in sports and other leisure activities in the community; and well-planned physical spaces can help accommodate the needs of diverse youth, especially those vulnerable to marginalization or violence. Yet public space is formed and transformed by multiple factors, including economic, social, cultural, political, and conceptual. Researchers argue that the dimensions of a public space consist of several attributes that make a public space successful and contribute to enhancing the quality of public life. 1. uses and activities; 2. accessibility and linkages; 3. comfort and image; and 4. sociability. These indicators, according to PPS' diagram "What Makes a Great Place" refer to: how easy and convenient it is to access the space; considering issues such as walkability, connections, and proximity, the perception of users in matters of safety, cleanness, and greenery, the purpose of use, and the social interactions taking place considering matters of diversity, cooperation, interaction or welcoming… (Jan Gehl, Project for Public Spaces [PPS], n.d.

[1] Jan Gehl is a practicing Urban Design Consultant and Professor of Urban Design at the School of Architecture in Copenhagen, Denmark. He has extensively researched the form and use of public spaces and put his findings to practice in multiple locations througout the world.

[2] Marc Augè was a French anthropologist who coined the phrase "non-place" in an essay and book of the same title, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity (1995).*

Figure 1 What makes a successful place
Source: Project for Public Spaces [PPS]

The study presents a contextual study on public spaces and youth in three countries, Italy, Lebanon and Jordan. The study focuses on exploring the nature of space in target countries as a concept which is closely linked to social practice: space is always used as a means to achieve a certain objective. It aims to promote participation, ownership and involvement in political and cultural spaces, giving the opportunity to youngsters and to civic society organizations to act their ownership and agency in their world, it enhances cohesion, equality and peace.

Lebanon and Jordan undoubtedly witness the lack of free and public gathering spaces for youth. Moreover, substantial challenges arise in limitations on freedoms and rights, especially for the Syrian diaspora, of whom the two countries covered by the action are among the main recipients. The interviews and conversations conducted in the field research of the first phase - ended up in the publication of Guidelines revealed four main aspects which limit and hamper social cohesion and youth engagement: High level of youth unemployment, Lack of public spaces of aggregation, traditions, lifestyle and gender-based discrimination, and lack of support and limited access to culture.

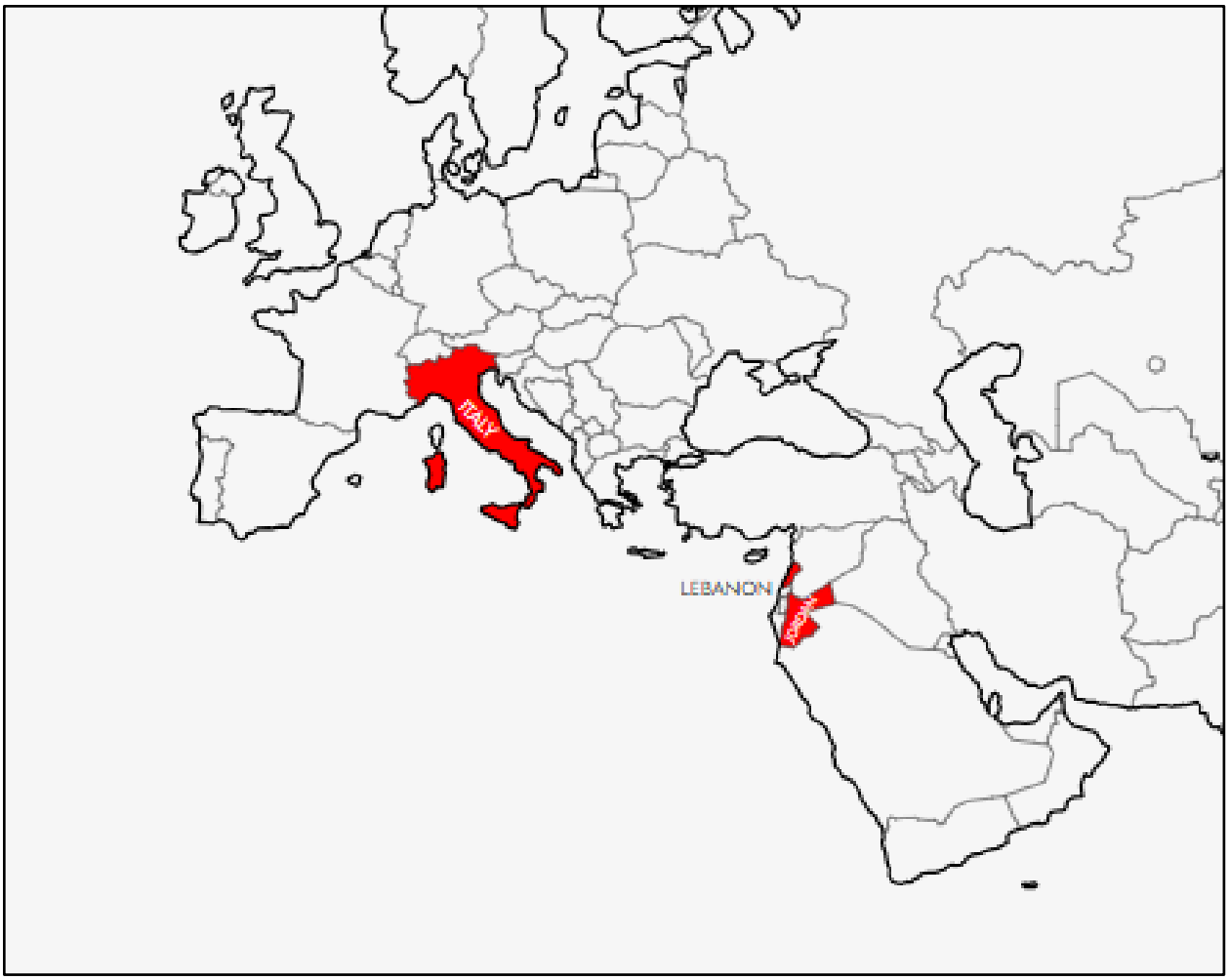

Figure 2: A map showing the three countries: Lebanon, Italy, and Jordan

Lebanon; Beirut

In Lebanon, social connections are essential to everyday life, yet the places where people meet are largely private; homes, restaurants, malls, and beach resorts. This is largely due to a critical shortage of public spaces, driven by decades of unregulated urban expansion, a lack of urban planning, and limited awareness around the right to the city and the value of shared spaces. In cities like Beirut, where land is expensive and highly contested, real estate development has been prioritized over the creation of inclusive public areas.

Lebanon's cities have witnessed a reckless process of urbanization in recent decades, which has come at the expense of both green public spaces and urban areas designed for pedestrians. In Greater Beirut, the proportion of public space has been rapidly shrinking. The real estate boom, combined with the absence of effective public regulations, has pushed green areas to the margins—often confined to vacant, neglected lots with no clear public function.

Since the late 1990s, malls have begun to fill this gap, emerging as substitutes for traditional public spaces. With their food courts, cinemas, and controlled environments, malls have become the de facto downtown for segments of the population, offering both entertainment and a sense of safety.

The decline in accessible green space is especially stark. By 2015, green areas in Lebanon had decreased to less than 13% of total land. In Beirut, green space per capita is just 0.8 square meters—far below the World Health Organization's recommendation of 9 square meters per person (UN-Habitat, 2016).

In Lebanon; five interviews, three FGDs, and several site visits were conducted in Lebanon and Beirut to get youth perception toward public spaces.

Jordan; Amman

Amman, where 41% of Jordan's youth reside, is a city shaped by waves of displacement, socio-economic contrasts, and uneven urban development. Originally a small town, Amman's rapid growth began in the wake of regional conflicts, particularly following the 1948 Nakba and 1967 war, which brought hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees. This expansion was largely unplanned, resulting in a divided urban landscape. East Amman developed as a dense, working-class area surrounding refugee camps, while West Amman became more affluent, with organized infrastructure and access to resources. Today, the city suffers from a severe shortage of public spaces, including green areas, cultural venues, and pedestrian-friendly streets. Although some initiatives have emerged to bridge the social and spatial divide—like the open theater built in 2005 on the slopes of Jabal Amman; such efforts often face challenges from both bureaucratic systems and conservative social norms. Youth in Amman are left navigating these complex dynamics, seeking spaces that support expression, dialogue, and a sense of belonging in a city that remains socially and spatially fragmented.

In this study, in Amman, Nine interviews, One FGD, and several site visits were conducted in Jordan and Amman to get youth perception toward public spaces.

Italy; Bologna

Also in Bologna, social connections like in Lebanon and in Jordan, are essential to everyday life even if the contradictions and the lack of public spaces continue to be a problem for the city. .In the post-war period and until the 1980s, Bologna was considered, compared to other Italian cities, a model of progressive urban government, often cited as an example of "municipal socialism". The city was administered by left-wing juntas that placed public planning and a solidaristic vision of urban space at the centre. This phase is also remembered for a very advanced management of urban welfare, in which schools, libraries, social and health spaces were thought of as an integrated part of the city's design. With the end of the First Republic and the crisis of the Italian Communist Party, Bologna also changed. The administrations remained formally "left-wing", but shifted to more centrist positions, influenced by

liberalism and market logic. Currently, Bologna is still administered by a centre-left coalition, but its urban policy oscillates between promoting citizen participation and neoliberal governance - with the promotion of private investment, luxury student halls of residence, Airbnb and urban tourism, often to the detriment of territorial equity and initiating processes of gentrification that have led to rising prices and the progressive exclusion of the younger and less affluent segments of the population. The city has thus turned into a “shop window”, in which many public places are commercialised or privatised, a city in which the apparent attention to environmental sustainability (cycle lanes, 30 zones, urban greenery), is less than social sustainability: housing is less and less accessible, and public spaces are subject to rigid rules, “anti-degradation” and security management, controls and “urban decorum”, often experienced as instruments of exclusion, especially by the youngest.

In this study, in Bologna, Seven interviews, One FGD, and several site visits were conducted in Italy, Bologna to get youth perception toward public spaces.

2. Methodology

A mixed-methods approach:

1. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with Local Organizations: Semi-structured interviews will be conducted to help us understand the organizations' strategies, experiences, and challenges in activating public spaces and engaging youth.

To explore the perspectives of organizations that work on public spaces and youth engagement across Lebanon.

2. Case Study: Horsh Beirut in Lebanon, Shams in Jordan and Treno della Barca in Bologna

To conduct an in-depth exploration of the spaces, their history, uses, and the dynamics surrounding youth engagement.

- Historical and cultural significance of spaces.
- Patterns of use by youth and other community members.
- Challenges related to access, inclusivity, and safety.
- Role of the space during crises (e.g., as a shelter or meeting point).

A detailed case study analysis will synthesize data from KIIs, FGDs, and observations.

a- KIIs with Organizations Working on these spaces: To gather expert insights from organizations directly involved in the planning, maintenance, or activation of these spaces

b- Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with Locals: FGDs with Youths Using these spaces: To capture the experiences, needs, and perceptions of youth who actively use them.

(Youth participants will be recruited from diverse backgrounds to reflect the variety of users.) Discussions will explore their motivations for using space, activities they participate in, and the social, cultural, or recreational role these spaces play in their lives.

3. Observation and participants observation: To document how these spaces are used by different demographic groups and during various times of the day/week. (Data will include patterns of usage (e.g., peak times, types of activities), diversity of users (age, gender, socioeconomic background), and interactions between users.)

4. Field diary: The field diary is the researcher's personal diary for writing feelings, emotions, capturing first impressions of what she sees. It is an intimate tool with which we interpret reality that helps to move away from the scientific and academic concept of neutrality. Each researcher has her own look and methodology for keeping a field diary. It can include isolated sentences that strike us said by someone, a description of a significant room detail, the smell in the air, the sounds, the atmosphere we breathe, gestures, actions, movements, non-verbal manifestations of those we observe, everything that does not fit

in and does not record the verbal interview. The field diary is a tool of the researcher to describe the interviewee(s) that complement the interviews, adding meaning to the general description. Only later are the observations of the field diary reworked with reference theory, articles, books etc. to arrive at conclusions. We can use the field diary during a focus group, a workshop offered by organizations, and during an interview to capture details of those we interview, to describe a space we visit.

Annexed are the tools of the field visit in Lebanon, Bologna and Jordan.

Research Limitation

Some limitations must be considered when evaluating the findings of this study. This is inevitable in any prospectively conducted research project. These difficulties required us to be flexible in our approach and derive innovative solutions.

- The methodology of this study relied primarily on qualitative data collection. One of the key strengths of qualitative research lies in its open-ended nature, which allows participants greater control over the content and direction of the data shared. However, this openness also poses certain limitations, particularly regarding the objective verification of respondents' accounts. The subjective nature of qualitative responses means that the researcher cannot always cross-check statements against fixed or observable scenarios. Nevertheless, efforts were made to enhance the reliability of the data by triangulating information whenever possible.

- War on Gaza and South Lebanon: The escalation of the war in Lebanon affected the whole process and had major impacts that led to postponing many meetings and activities. Escalating airstrikes, displacements, and reports of massacres have created an environment of instability, forcing the cancellation of scheduled meetings and focus group discussions. Many residents, faced with imminent danger, have been displaced from their homes, seeking refuge in safer areas like public spaces. This has disrupted the objectives of the study, making it nearly impossible to engage locals and youths in the study in the way previously planned. The crisis has not only limited the physical gatherings and meetings but has also hindered the whole process, adjusting the tools of the study in Lebanon. Consequently, efforts to proceed with workshops and meetings after the ceasefire have been implemented through adding the war component / factor to the study.

- The time factor and the challenging circumstances in Lebanon, including the war, the economic crisis and imposed restrictions, had a notable impact on the data collection phase. The engagement of youth in work and education further complicated the scheduling process, requiring flexibility to accommodate their availability. This necessitated rescheduling some focus group discussions (FGDs) to meet their availability to ensure that the information gathered would be effective and representative of the youth's perspectives. In addition, due to delays in implementation in Lebanon

and security concerns that prevented the team from traveling, the field visits to both Bologna and Amman were postponed by three months. As a result, the timeframe for data analysis and finalizing the findings has become significantly compressed, posing challenges for in-depth reflection and synthesis.

- The duration of the field visits in both Bologna and Jordan was limited, allowing for only a brief engagement with a small sample of youth organizations and public spaces concentrated in specific areas. As such, the findings cannot be considered fully representative of the broader youth experience across each country. Moreover, the organizations interviewed during these visits tended to share similar objectives, methods of working, and target communities. This homogeneity highlights a clear gap in the research: the need to engage with organizations operating in more diverse contexts, particularly in neighborhoods with lower-income or more marginalized populations. In the current fieldwork, such outreach was limited to organizations like Treno Barca in Bologna and Shams in Amman.

- The field work was done in January and February; winter season. Cold weather, and rain, often keep people indoors, which means parks, squares, and streets may seem empty or less lively than usual. This can give a false impression that the space isn't used or valued. It also makes it harder for us to observe daily life or talk to people in space; the Roman theatre square in Amman is an example.

3. Public spaces in Lebanon, Jordan and Italy

3.1 Youth and public spaces in Lebanon

Lebanon's Migration Dynamics and Structural Challenges

Lebanon represents an example of a society structured along communal lines, a characteristic deeply interconnected with its dual migratory trends: high levels of both emigration and immigration. These phenomena are not separate; communalism shapes both patterns. Since 2012, Lebanon has witnessed the large-scale arrival and settlement of Syrian refugees, supported by extensive humanitarian aid. At the same time, the country has faced a severe economic collapse since 2019, triggering a significant wave of emigration, especially among the young and educated. These emigrants contribute substantial remittances, which temporarily sustain the economy but also reinforce a model that has weakened state institutions and long-term economic resilience. This was followed by another wave during the most recent war, which began in 2023 and escalated in 2024, with its effects still ongoing in 2025. This situation, according to Nahas (2023), risks exacerbating national instability, which is only intensified by populist rhetoric and political denial.

In his analysis of demographic movement, Nahas estimates that Lebanon is experiencing an annual net emigration of approximately 78,000 people between 2018 and 2023. The crisis is not only accelerating pre-existing trends of young professionals leaving the country but also expanding emigration across all age groups. This was followed by another wave during the most recent war, which began in 2023 and escalated in 2024, with its effects still ongoing in 2025. These developments are already changing Lebanon's demographic fabric. While Lebanese citizens made up 80% of the resident population in 2004, this figure has declined to between 65–69% today. Future projections, depending on factors like economic reform, regional stability, and geopolitical shifts, suggest this number could fall as low as 52% by 2038. Notably, these estimates predate the outbreak and escalation of war in Lebanon in 2024, which is likely to worsen the situation further. (Nahas, 2023)

"Given the current situation and the systematic inaction of complicit leaders, a drastic change in the demographic fabric of Lebanon, along with all the economic and social repercussions it could have, is already underway," (Charbel Nahass) [3]

Even before the Syrian crisis, nearly 50% of emigrants were highly educated, and 28% of the overall population held higher education degrees. This loss of skilled labor has intensified with the ongoing financial collapse. The average loss of 550,000 people between 1997 and 2018 has increased after the crisis to nearly 80,000 annually, posing long-term challenges to national growth and institutional stability.

[3] Charbel Nahas is a Lebanese politician, economist and engineer who is the General Secretary of Citizens in a State, a political party that was established in 2016 and that has as its goal to create "a civil, democratic, fair and capable state.

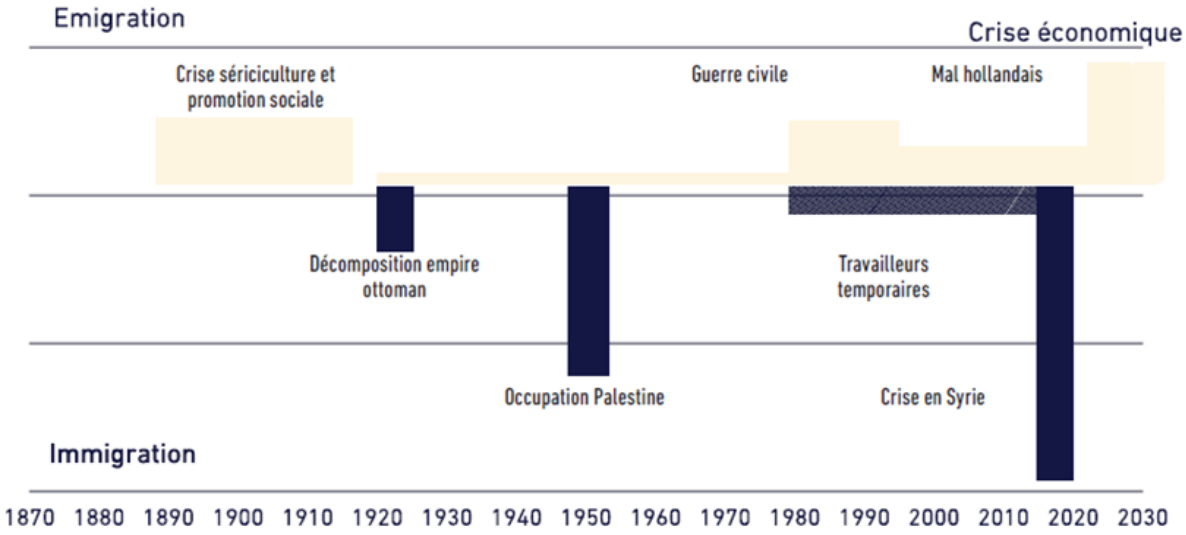

Figure 3: Demographic movement (1870-2020)
Source Nahas 2023

Labor Market Pressures and Economic Decline

Lebanon's labor market reflects deep-rooted structural issues. The economy is primarily service based, encompassing sectors such as hospitality, health, education, and finance. Despite this, the labor force suffers from low participation and high unemployment, especially among women and youth. The problem is compounded by a persistent mismatch between available jobs and the qualifications of the labor force. Many young, educated individuals are underemployed or working in jobs unrelated to their skills. The informal labor sector remains extensive. According to CAS (2022), informality accounts for a significant portion of the workforce, with over 66% of employees not contributing to any social security system. Informality spans various roles, from agriculture to high-level self-employment. (ILO 2024)

Unemployment figures in Lebanon are highly contested. While the World Bank estimated unemployment at 11% in 2012, other governmental bodies like the Ministry of Labour and NEO placed it at 20–25%. The most recent CAS statistics from 2022 report a labor force participation rate of just 49.2%, with a stark gender gap; 66.2% for men and only 22.2% for women. The 2021 Gallup poll highlighted the economic toll on daily life: 85% of respondents reported financial difficulty, and 62% described their situation as "very difficult." By 2022, nearly 28% of the jobs that existed in 2019 had been lost. (ILO 2024)

Cultural and Religious Complexities Shaping Lebanese Youth

Lebanese youth represent a complex social landscape shaped by cultural and religious divisions. Families often position young people as a generation open to modern ideas and foreign languages while still bound by communal traditions. When asked about identity, youth in Lebanon prioritize family affiliation,

followed closely by national belonging. This places them at the intersection of three often competing sources of identity: religious community, national identity, and broader affiliations (whether Islamic, Arab, or Western). Such dynamics leave little room for individual political identity or personal differentiation. Youth often follow the communal logic that dominates Lebanese society, which influences how they relate to others and imagine their future.

Religion plays a nuanced but influential role. While traditional religious practices among youth may be limited, religious affiliation remains deeply linked to social and political identities. The use of language; Arabic, French, and English; further reinforces sectarian and social divisions. These patterns mirror the broader cultural affiliations that shape youth experience. Lebanon's long history of political instability, marked in recent years by the 2019 economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 Beirut port explosion, and the 2023–2024 war, has affected the younger generation. These crises have affected education, employment, financial security, and broader life trajectories. Many young people report a deteriorating sense of their ability to lead a balanced life.

Although most youth express lack of interest in formal politics, often associating it directly with "corruption" and "problems"; many are increasingly mobilizing to demand their civic rights. Despite not having voting rights before the age of 21, young people have voiced strong criticism of Lebanon's political, economic, and social systems.

Public Spaces in Lebanon

In Lebanon, public spaces vary widely, including both traditional and contemporary settings that serve different functions in communities. These spaces play crucial social, cultural, economic, and political roles. Below are some types of public spaces in Lebanon:

- Parks and Gardens: Horsh Beirut (the largest public park in Beirut), Sanayeh Garden, and Sioufi Garden...
- Beaches and Waterfronts: Corniche, Ramlet El Bayda Beach in Beirut, Tyre Beach, and the Batroun and Byblos coastal areas...that serve as recreational spaces, particularly popular in the summer, and are often the venues for social gatherings and cultural festivals.
- Squares and Plazas: Martyrs' Square in downtown Beirut, Riad El Solh Square, and Sassine Square in Achrafieh…that serves for public demonstrations, political events, and cultural festivals.
- Souks and Traditional Markets: Beirut Souks, Tripoli's Old Souks, Saida's Sea Castle Souks…
- Cultural and Recreational Spaces and Urban Public Stairs and streets: Beirut Art Center, Hamra Street, Badaro street as a cultural and nightlife hub, and Mar Mikhael stairs and street for arts and social activities, Bachoura Public Library…
- Historical and Archaeological Sites: Byblos Citadel, Baalbek Ruins, and Beiteddine Palace…

- Community Sports Facilities: Beirut Hippodrome, local sports fields and courts in Tariq el Jdideh and Saida Sports City...

In Lebanon, where approximately 89% of the population lives in urban areas, the demand for such spaces is pressing. Yet Beirut, the country's capital and most densely populated city, suffers from a lack of accessible green areas. The total green space from these places amounts to less than 1 m2 per resident, while the WHO recommendation is a minimum of 9 m2, thus, Beirut ranks among the lowest globally.

In addition to the shrinking availability of urban public spaces, "In Lebanon, most urban public spaces have been invaded by sectarian struggles, ideological slogans, and religious symbols" (El Khoury, 2016).

Historically, public spaces in Lebanon evolved through Ottoman and French mandates. The French period, in particular, introduced urban plans focusing on open spaces and connectivity. However, these priorities were later dominated by car-oriented planning. The civil war (1975–1990) further fragmented Beirut's public landscape, dividing the city along sectarian lines and reducing shared spaces to fragments. Post-war reconstruction efforts, while promising, rarely translated into meaningful reinvestment in public infrastructure. As Madi (2014) notes, Beirut's public spaces have become distorted, no longer serving as inclusive platforms but instead reflecting the divisions of the city. Temporary and informal adaptations have emerged as communities attempt to meet their need for open space, but these are neither stable nor equitable solutions. This issue is due to both historical and systemic factors. Urban expansion since the 1960s, particularly in Beirut, has prioritized road infrastructure and private development over open public spaces. Green areas have either been transformed into managed landscapes or left as neglected, informal lots. Real estate speculation since 2009 has further reduced green spaces, leaving the city with fewer than 50 public parks and squares and a fragmented waterfront often encroached upon by private interests.

Political Context and Fragmented Urban Public Life

Beirut's urban landscape is shaped by three connected dichotomies. The first issue comes from how people see belonging in the city. Some are viewed as "true" Beirutis because their families have lived there for generations;(noting that there is an active union of Beirutis families in some spaces such as Horsh Beirut); while most others come from families who moved from rural areas. This sense of who belongs and who doesn't often show up in how people are treated in public spaces, with some groups feeling left out or pushed to the margins. The second divide is along sectarian lines. People often experience Beirut not as one whole city, but as a mix of separate areas tied to different political or religious groups. These divisions are shaped by roads, buildings, or social boundaries. Even though the civil war theoretically ended in 1990, its effects are still felt today; many public spaces have become "off-limits" in practice, taken over or marked in ways that make certain groups feel unwelcome. (Karizat, 2019). The third dichotomy lies in governance. Municipal management is divided between formal and informal systems, complicated by political interference. Moreover, the local electoral system divides residents into those who can and cannot vote, limiting the ability of many to influence decisions affecting their urban life. (Mermier, 2015).

Local Governance, Public Space Management, and Community Engagement.

While Lebanon's municipalities have broad legal authority to manage local public affairs (Decree-Law No. 118, 1977), their ability to do so is often undermined by limited resources, political paralysis, and weak technical capacity. The Municipality of Beirut, for instance, has failed to prioritize public space, as seen in the prolonged closure of Horsh Beirut after the war and ongoing neglect of gardens and waterfronts.

Since 2005, Lebanon's public institutions have confronted overwhelming political crises that resulted in lack of action at the central government level. At the local level, however, citizens have an opportunity to restore and improve what has been lost with the central government. Currently, there are more than 1,000 municipalities in Lebanon. They are governed by an elected municipal (decisional authority) council presided by an elected mayor (head of the executive authority). In the municipality of Beirut, the executive authority is headed by the governor (appointed by the Council of Ministers).(NAHNOO,2015)

The municipality is responsible for managing all local affairs within their jurisdiction. Given the wide array of authorities given to Lebanese municipalities, it is clear that the latter can become the main active partners of the citizens, especially if they are turned as public platforms from which citizens and CSOs regularly express themselves. Despite their authorities, Lebanese municipalities face several challenges in effectively managing public spaces: limited resources, lack of technical expertise, political interference, and encroachment and Informal Use.

The municipalities policies regarding public spaces are somehow aligned with the national policy. In Beirut, public spaces are not fulfilling their intended role in fostering social cohesion and unifying communities. This issue is evident in the condition and management of several key public spaces within the city, including Horsh Beirut, Ramlet el Bayda Beach, and various public gardens. Moreover, local authorities' strategies regarding public spaces often reflect discriminatory practices based on nationality and sect. This has been especially evident following the influx of Syrian refugees to Lebanon. Many municipalities across the country have adopted policies that explicitly prohibit Syrian refugees from accessing public gardens. These decisions are often linked to the political context and affiliations within each town or neighborhood. For example, in Beirut, Sanayeh Garden has remained open to all nationalities, allowing inclusive access. However, just a few kilometers away, Geitaoui Garden, which falls under the same municipal jurisdiction; has implemented restrictions that prevent Syrian refugees from entering. This discrepancy underscores how local politics and affiliations shape policies and access to public spaces, perpetuating divisions within the community rather than promoting inclusivity and cohesion.

Community involvement in the management of public spaces in Lebanon remains an important yet unpopular approach. While many Lebanese communities advocate for access to and improvements in public spaces, actual participation in managing these areas is limited mainly due to bureaucratic structures and political affiliations. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as NAHNOO, have worked to bridge this gap, engaging residents in campaigns to protect and reopen spaces like Horsh Beirut. These

efforts show that community involvement is essential for not only keeping public spaces clean and well-maintained but also making them meaningful and inclusive for everyone. Through participatory workshops, campaigns, and collaborations with local authorities, community groups aim to transform public spaces into vibrant, accessible areas. However, ongoing challenges; including political interference, lack of funding, and insufficient legal frameworks; highlight the need for more structured policies that empower communities to actively contribute in the management of these spaces.

3.2 Youth and public spaces in Jordan

Jordan's Migration Dynamics and Structural Challenges

Jordan's youth represent a significant portion of its population, with the country being home to one of the youngest populations globally. Approximately 60% of the total Jordanian population is under the age of 30 (UNICEF, 2021). At the end of 2022, an estimated one-fifth of the population in Jordan, or approximately 2.246 million individuals out of a total population of 11.302 million, fell into the youth category, defined by the United Nations as those aged 15-24 years. This group is further divided into "adolescent youth" (15-19 years), who comprise the majority of the youth population, and "adult youth" (20-24 years). The gender ratio within this demographic is notable, with 116.1 males per 100 females.

Moreover, Jordan hosts one of the highest per capita shares of refugees in the world, primarily due to an influx of Syrian refugees. In early 2024, Jordan hosted 710,000 refugees of different nationalities registered with UNHCR. They come predominantly from Syria (90 %), while there are also large groups from Iraq (7.2%), Yemen (1.8%), Sudan (0.7%), and Somalia (0.1%). Some 82 % of them live outside of refugee camps and close to 50 per cent are children.[1] Approximately 1.3 million Syrian refugees, accounting for 12% of Jordan's population, currently reside in the country.

Labor Market Pressures and Economic Decline

More than one in three youth in Jordan is unemployed. Jordan has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the MENA region, among young women. Youth unemployment levels in Jordan were never below 25% in the past three decades (OECD, 2018) and has increased to 50% in the fourth quarter of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, up from an already high share of 37% in 2019 (51% for young women) (World Bank, 2021).[3] In 2023, the youth unemployment rate in the age group of 15-24 years was reported at 46.1 per cent for the total population, with 42.1 per cent for males and 64.1 per cent for females. The unemployment rate varied according to educational level and gender, with the male unemployment rate for individuals holding a bachelor's degree or higher at 26.7 %, against 79.5 per cent for females.

Jordan was the first country in the MENA region to introduce a multi-year youth strategy (2005-2009), designed to coordinate and unify various youth initiatives. Despite these advances, young people in Jordan continue to encounter substantial challenges in achieving independent lives and transitioning into adulthood.

Several factors contribute to these economic challenges at the national level. The first one is the mismatch between education and market demand. There is a significant gap between the skills young people acquire through education and the actual demands of the labor market (Arab Barometer, 2019). As a result, many young job seekers resort to informal, low-paying jobs that often do not align with their qualifications. This affects their ability to reach critical milestones such as financial independence and marriage, delaying their transition to adult life (USAID, 2015). Another factor is the prevalence of Wasta. The “Wasta” or using personal connections to secure jobs, is prevalent in Jordanian society and this makes it challenging for youth without these connections to secure stable, quality employment, further delaying their path to independence. The last factor is the economic policies and austerity measures: Internal economic policies, including austerity measures, have strained job growth and created fewer opportunities for young people. Despite all these reasons, there are also international level factors which have contributed to the Jordan economic difficult situation like The COVID-19 pandemic and external pressures, such as the prolonged Syrian refugee crisis and a reduction in international aid.

Lifestyle and traditions of Jordan youth

In Jordan, traditional lifestyles are deeply rooted in conservative values shaped by religious and cultural norms, especially prevalent in rural areas and among older generations. Islam and longstanding social customs govern daily interactions, routines, and public space design, prioritizing family cohesion, respect for authority, and adherence to societal expectations. Adolescents are generally encouraged to spend time at home rather than in public spaces, leading to fewer opportunities for them to explore lifestyles that diverge from family-centered norms. For women and girls, these limitations are especially restrictive, as cultural expectations discourage them from spending time in mixed-gender spaces, especially after dark.

The concept of family in Jordan is central, with many young people living with their parents until marriage, often into their 20s or 30s. This close-knit family structure fosters a strong sense of communal support but can reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations, particularly around marriage. The influence of conservative thought, or “Muhafaza,” plays a crucial role in these societal dynamics. Derived from Arabic and roughly translated to "preservation," Muhafaza emphasizes the importance of maintaining family structures and values as a protective measure against rapid social change. For Jordanians adhering to these principles, the family is the fundamental unit of society, and safeguarding its integrity is essential to preserving the community's cultural heritage.

Public spaces in Jordan

When examining public spaces in Jordan, it is essential to consider the Amman’s population which has been shaped by continuous migration and displacement, especially of Syrians and Palestinians, leading to a city structure influenced by varied socio-economic conditions rather than a cohesive urban plan. After being designated the capital of Jordan in 1928, its growth remained slow due to economic limitations and

challenging terrain, with the population reaching only 56,000 by 1945. The 1948 NAKBA (Catastrophe) brought an influx of 100,000 Palestinian refugees, driving rapid urban expansion. The 1967 Israeli-Palestinian War prompted a further wave of 150,000 Palestinian refugees, which accelerated the spread of informal settlements, particularly in East Amman (Ababsa, 2010; Pilder, 2011). Amman's spatial organization reflects its diverse socio-economic and cultural influences. East Amman, the older section, includes densely populated residential areas on hillsides and traditional commercial zones along the valleys. In contrast, West Amman is more affluent and less densely populated, housing key economic districts. A distinct divide exists between these areas, with informal housing clustered around Palestinian camps in East Amman and family-owned buildings, villas, and office blocks in the west.

Indeed, Amman incredibly lacks public spaces, not only artistic and cultural spaces but also parks, squares and pedestrian streets. Most importantly, it is fair to mention that initiatives promoting inclusivity and social gathering spaces often face obstacles from both social and governmental constraints. This contrast between traditional and contemporary values reflects the broader tension many Jordanian youth experience as they navigate between upholding cultural heritage and exploring more modern, globally influenced identities. Moreover, during the COVID-19, with the closure of youth centers and youth clubs due to sanitary reasons, spaces for social interaction and non-formal learning largely shifted to online platforms.

With rapid urbanization and population growth in cities, the role and nature of public spaces have evolved, making the concept itself "multifaceted and conceptually slippery" (Weintraub, 1995, p. 281). Public spaces are now defined in various ways, reflecting different contexts. In Jordan, the scarcity of formal public spaces has led communities to adopt informal spaces as alternatives. In Amman, where parks, city markets, and pedestrian-friendly streets are limited, residents have creatively transformed areas such as the stairs, Talet Abu Nsair (Abu Nsair Road) and the sides of Airport Road into informal gathering spots for social and recreational activities. These locations now serve as essential spaces for open-air gatherings, demonstrating the community's resourcefulness in adapting available spaces to fulfill their social needs. A significant portion of Amman's community views the roadside areas as accessible public spaces, using them for various social activities. During the summer, for instance, families and friends frequently gather on the sides of the road for barbeques and casual meetings, seeking a quieter, open environment away from the city's crowded and often commercialized zones. This adaptation speaks to a broader trend in Amman, where informal spaces fulfill essential social and recreational functions in response to the city's limited availability of official public amenities.

Another interesting point related to public spaces in Amman is link to the cultural and artistic centers born in the city, especially in historic neighborhoods like Jabal Amman, downtown Amman, and Jabal Weibdeh. These areas became lively hubs for creative expression, hosting art galleries, start-ups, and cultural events that celebrated local artists, musicians, and performers. This cultural renaissance seemed to promise a modern Amman with a unique artistic identity, comparable to regional centers like Damascus and Beirut. However, this creative growth is now under threat due to rapid gentrification and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. With businesses and established chains moving into these culturally rich

areas to capitalize on their appeal, the original community-oriented spaces are being replaced by commercial enterprises. In Jabal Weibdeh, for example, rents have soared, displacing grassroots venues and making it difficult for cultural spaces to survive. This shift prioritizes consumption over creativity, endangering the unique artistic character that had flourished in these neighborhoods.

Local governance and public spaces management

The majority of the public spaces in Amman are managed by the GAM - Greater Amman, Municipality (Street Regeneration, parks), Government bodies - The Ministry of Culture, Private developers(Malls). Very few spaces are left to the local communities. The Royal Cultural Center, affiliated with government institutions and directly managed by the Ministry of Culture, is a good example of organization of cultural events and activities through specialized teams, offering diverse programs including performing arts, art exhibitions, and cultural conferences. Other examples of different governance systems are Al-Hussein Cultural Center. However, it is worth noting that the "cultural offerings" promoted in these governmental public spaces largely align with traditional cultural themes, leading to a limited diversity in the artistic content available, especially in the "mainstream" Jordanian art scene.

Community and youth participation

Youth political participation in Jordan has experienced fluctuations over the past decade due to regional instability, economic challenges, and societal changes. Generally, youth engagement in formal political processes remains limited because of various systemic, social, and economic barriers. In the early 2010s, during the Arab Spring, many young Jordanians were inspired by regional calls for democratic reforms. Unlike in Tunisia or Egypt, where large-scale youth-led movements developed, Jordan's youth responded mainly through demonstrations demanding economic reforms and anti-corruption measures rather than direct political mobilization. This period led to incremental political reforms by the monarchy, aimed at decentralizing power and enhancing local governance autonomy. However, many young Jordanians perceived these changes as insufficient, reinforcing disillusionment with formal politics and driving youth preference toward informal activism and grassroots initiatives.

Economic concerns soon became a dominant issue, with high youth unemployment creating significant barriers to political engagement. Many young Jordanians voiced frustration over limited job prospects and a perceived lack of governmental responsiveness, which dampened enthusiasm for formal political participation. Many young people chose NGOs, community service projects, and social advocacy as alternative avenues for effecting change outside formal political structures. In recent years, renewed interest in political participation among Jordanian youth has emerged, partly due to government-led initiatives like "Jordan Youth Vision 2030." This program aims to empower young people through political education, skill-building, and civic engagement opportunities. Although these initiatives are limited in scope, they reflect a growing government acknowledgment of the need to engage youth in governance. Despite progress, youth participation in formal politics, such as voting or candidacy, remains

relatively low, with many young people viewing the political system as rigid and dominated by an entrenched elite, which limits opportunities for real influence.

Critical issues surrounding youth political participation in Jordan stem largely from distrust in political institutions, societal norms, economic hardships, and systemic barriers within political parties.

3.3 Youth and public spaces in Italy

Italy's youth population Dynamics and Structural Challenges

In Italy the "demographic issue" represents a topic at the centre of public debate. Denatality is linked to a progressive aging of the population. In a population, such as that of Italy where the average age is approaching 46 years, the number of elderly people (65+ years), is twice as high as the number of younger people (0-14 years), and the incidence of the under-35s tends to be steadily decreasing. It is also necessary to consider the complex nature of the problem of denatality, on which numerous cultural, value and material factors intervene, such as first and foremost the late acquisition of autonomy and economic self-sufficiency, which leads young Italians to leave the maternal/paternal home on average almost four years later than their European peers (at age 30 against a European average of 26.4 years). According to ISTAT data, again for 2022, 71.5 percent of 18-34 year olds still live with their parents, a figure that is, moreover, growing strongly (Giovani 2024, the balance of a generation: 21-22).
This decline is particularly evident in the South, a land of migration and economic imbalance, where the reduction in the youth population was 28.6%, compared to 19.3% in the Center-North. Another very important element is also the new generations of young Italians, children of families with a migrant background, who are becoming an increasingly significant component of Italian society. According to Istat data, in 2023 the resident population in Italy was approximately 60.4 million people, of which approximately 5.6 million were "foreigners", equal to 9.3% of the total.

Young children of people with a migrant background, often defined as "second generation" or "new generations of Italians", represent a significant part of the youth population. The new Italian generations are increasingly multicultural. In 2024, "foreign" youth between 11 and 19 years old will represent 9.7% of this age group, a percentage higher than the national average of foreigners in the total population.

Labor Market Pressures and Economic Decline

Amongst the most worrying data about young Italian people are those of unemployment. In fact, the 2023 data from Eurostat show how Italy ranks last among the main European countries in relation to the youth employment rate (15- 29 years old), with an index of 34.7 percent against the EU average of 49.7 percent, making the Italian value lower even than that of Greece (35 percent). Connected to unemployment is the phenomenon of NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training), that is, young people not involved in either work or education/training. In this regard, data from Eurostat sources show how, in 2023, the incidence of the phenomenon averages 11.2 percent in Europe, while in Italy the value reaches 16.1 percent, that is, the highest result among the major European countries considered. NEETs in Italy in the

15-34 age group total more than 3 million, with a female predominance of 1.7 million. Looking also at the data by age group, it is possible to observe that in the school age group (15-19 years) Italian NEETs are 75 percent more than the European average; in the university age group (20-24 years) Italian NEETs are 70 percent more than the European average; the percentage does not change for the post-university age group (25-34 years). With reference to the gender dimension, as is the case in other European countries, there is a marked difference in Italy to the detriment of women. While there are many factors that can cause young people to remain in NEET status, what are generally referred to as the main risk factors are: having a low level of educational achievement; living in a low-income household; coming from a family where one parent has experienced periods of unemployment; growing up with only one parent; being born in a country outside the EU; living in a rural area; and having a disability. A variety of reasons characterise the complex national NEET phenomenon. Among these, the first concerns the difficulties of access to the labor market and the poor utilisation of human capital in the Italian production system (Rosina, 2020). The second one, not to be underestimated, concerns the impact of COVID19 on adolescents' lives. The COVID19 pandemic has of course taken a great toll on the lives of young people, whose working and professional opportunities have been highly impacted and where the precariousness of certain jobs has shown severe consequences. A complex predicament, then, which prompted then ECB President Mario Draghi back in 2016 to speak of a "lost generation" to define a socio-economic phenomenon that requires strong policy intervention.

Another important phenomena related to the difficulties of young people in the world of work is that of the emigration of many of them to foreign countries. Focusing on the data compiled by ISTAT, there are 78,550 "young people" deleted from the civil register in 2021, a decrease of 3.2 percent compared to 2020 and as much as 16.8 percent compared to 2019, the year with the highest value in the last five years. The strong growth in the migration of Italian college graduates abroad has affected the country across the board, taking, however, the highest values among young people in the South (+402.1 percent, rising from 1,025 in 2011 to 5,147 in 2021), compared with a value in line with the national average in the Center (+283.2 percent) and slightly lower for the northern regions (+237.4 percent) (Youth 2024: the balance of a generation: 34-36). Despite this, the lowest social classes remain excluded from the highest educational qualifications. It seems interesting to note that over the past 10 years the percentage of graduates from the lowest social class has decreased significantly, while the percentage of those from a high or middle social class has increased (Report of a Generation 2024: 53).

Lifestyle and traditions of Italian youth

In Italy, like in Lebanon and in Jordan, young people's life is generally structured around the family, serving as an all-solving institution, compensating for functions that in other contexts are absorbed by the welfare state."We do not deny the importance that the family role plays elsewhere.[…] Whilst young people throughout the rest of Europe are said to become adults by leaving their parents' home, in Italy their transition to adulthood occurs most often within the family, that is, while still living within the parents' home" . According to this interpretation, therefore, the issue is not that they do not become adults, as it may seem, but that they become adults through their own modalities and following their own paths.

This is obviously a point in which both cultural aspects of the transition and more structural ones converge in determining what is normally referred to as 'the delay of the transition'. This prolongation or postponing of adulthood and the conditions through which it has changed over time have been studied in abundance through quantitative methods (Cuzzocrea et al 2020: 3). Family - also considering the importance of the Catholic Church in Italy maintains a relevant role in all the different fields, particularly during childhood, but it seems more efficient in the transmission of general cultural sensibilities than in reproducing specific behavioral models. Covid 19 also impeded the practice of sports, undoubtedly important in understanding the condition of youth today. Indeed, during the two years of pandemic (and social distancing), young people increasingly took refuge in the virtual world, unable, or unable to meet, confront and interact with their peers in "real life," with measurable negative effects in terms of an increase in various forms of distress (social withdrawal, pathological addictions, substance use, learning disorders, panic, depression, self-harm, somatization...). Exacerbating the mental and physical health status of young people has certainly contributed, after the most restrictive lockdown period, to the prolonged closure of gyms and sports centers for amateur activity (Youth Report 2024: 113). In the face of this and more, attention to the issue of mental health has progressively increased in recent years, in view of the fact that psychological distress has affected growing shares of the population, registering especially among younger people, according to numerous empirical studies, a sharp increase in anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, panic.... As early as 2015, the Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry reported that worldwide more than 1 in 10 young people (13.4 percent of the total) suffer from at least one neuropsychiatric disorder (Youth Report 2024: 126). Regarding the proximity of young people to the religion, if the majority of young people continue to declare their adherence to the Catholic religion, nearly half of the population declare different positions, and this represents a strong decrease compared with recent decades. Transition through a Catholic milieu during childhood and/or adolescence is still very common (although progressively declining), but this transition is not always connected either with the retention of a Catholic identity or in particular with subsequent active religious involvement. But beyond declarations of belonging, main traditional forms of religious participation are able to engage only a narrow sector of Italian youth. This does not mean that youth is substantially unconnected with religion. In fact, only a minority of young people declare that religion is not relevant in their life, while a considerable number express explicit interest in the spiritual dimension of life (Genova 2018: 83).

Public spaces in Italy, Bologna

In Italy, young people's access to quality public spaces is highly uneven, with significant disparities between north and south, between urban and peripheral areas, and between central and peripheral districts.

In general, there are many opportunities denied to young people in the most important and bigger Italian metropolitan Cities where about 2.6 million students live. There are two benchmarks to take into account: there is a lack of a gym in 3 out of 5 schools, a common social space in more than one out of three for half of the underage students of all grades.

In this precarious general condition, young people need public spaces to get to know each other and take an interest in the individual and political life of their country. Specifically Bologna, although there is still a lot of work to be done, among all Italian cities is a particularly focused city on the issue.
In Bologna there are a great variety of public spaces. From public indoor spaces like social centers, clubs and association spaces (places of collaboration, interculturality, intergenerationally), CAVs (youth centers that are youth 'semi-autonomous' spaces), neighborhood libraries (cultural, aggregative and educational role), oratories and parishes (important for inter-religious dialogue and the promotion of cultural exchange, especially with the Islamic world), neighborhood markets (important for consumption choices) , schools and school gardens, museums, old villas, historical and political monuments, cultural foundations, health houses, counselling centers; to outdoor public spaces such as parks and gardens, shared vegetable gardens, hillside paths (areas of 'decompression' from urban life), skating rinks and bowling alleys, bike paths, sidewalks, and roads. Despite efforts to create inclusive spaces, some critical issues emerge. Some young people report the lack of dedicated cultural spaces, especially for girls, and the need for greater involvement in the design of public spaces. The urban policy oscillates between promoting citizen participation and neoliberal governance - with the promotion of private investment, luxury student halls of residence, Airbnb and urban tourism, often to the detriment of territorial equity and initiating processes of gentrification that have led to rising prices and the progressive exclusion of the younger and less affluent segments of the population. The city has thus turned into a "shop window", in which many public places are commercialized or privatized, a city in which the apparent attention to environmental sustainability (cycle lanes, 30 zones, urban greenery), is less than social sustainability: housing is less and less accessible, and public spaces are subject to rigid rules, "anti-degradation" and security management, controls and "urban decorum", often experienced as instruments of exclusion, especially by the youngest.

Local governance and public spaces management

Most public spaces in Bologna are managed by the policies of the municipality, with the exception of the spaces occupied and managed by grassroots movements. Since 2017, the Municipality of Bologna has been managing public spaces through a policy model called shared administration. This model is based on the idea of community and collective management of the city, which is not only of the institutions but also of the citizens. To put this policy into practice, Bologna has chosen the proximity approach. Proximity does not simply mean being close to people, but working with the realities of the territory, with communities close to people and therefore with neighborhoods, associations, informal groups, civic networks. What is the final goal? Co identification of priority and needs, trying to understand what people want for the place where they live, what they need for their everyday life. To do this, to map needs, shared administration has several tools like network offices, neighborhood houses, citizens' assemblies, collaboration agreements, neighborhood workshops and participatory budgeting. The Participatory Budget is a direct democracy tool that allows citizens to report, design and vote on proposals for improvements to the public spaces of their neighborhood and area of reference. In essence, though neighborhood laboratories in which citizens put together and compare needs, a project can be drawn up on their own idea and proposal, presented and finally sent to the vote (Iperbole 2023). What needs to be taken into account in these policies is the focus on an overall space. Interventions in public spaces,

however functional, must still connect with the surrounding area, not be small regenerated areas that do not dialogue with the surrounding space. In this case there is a risk of fragmenting participation. Participation not to move ideas to a dead end but to enhance and protect the spontaneity that comes from society. As many as 54 proposals have been funded so far, 24 of which through the Participatory Budget resources and 29 thanks to other resources and tools made available by the Administration for the validity of the projects. The last edition in 2023 registered 19,327 voters, the highest number ever in the four editions held so far with six projects that have win. Bologna is a municipality of 391 191 inhabitants (Iperbole, Bilancio partecipativo 2023).

Community and youth participation

Among the most relevant aspects to emphasize when talking about young people in Italy is their low political participation. "Politics and participation are not among the core interests of Italian young people, few of whom assign these topics much importance in their scale of values. This is similarly the case in other European countries. All recent surveys show that very few young people in Italy believe that politics is important in their life, and equally few claim that they are personally involved in politics. On the one hand, most young people have a 'noble' image of what politics should be and understand politics mainly as action designed to put into effect individual and social values. On the other hand, the majority of youth have a strongly institutional image of 'doing politics', principally considering it as fulfilling elective political roles, being involved in a party, voting or perhaps participating in demonstrations. Consequently, even if most young people say they are interested in politics, keep themselves informed about it and talk about it, the majority keep politics at a 'safe distance' and do not join institutional organizations or non-institutional political groups or movements" (Genova 2018: 82). However, the distance of young people from "traditional" politics (so-called party politics), perceived as distant from the real needs of the new generations, turns out to be accompanied by a widespread civic and social activism, which increasingly feeds on social media and digital agoras, landing on non-institutionalized forms of participation, such as the Fridays for Future against global warming or civil rights movements, and affecting the youngest in particular. In fact, it is precisely the group of young people between the ages of 14 and 24 who, according to ISTAT, participate most actively (14 percent), particularly through participation in marches, through which they make their voices heard.

4. Case Studies

These case studies analyse the vibrant experiences of youth as they engage with selected public spaces in three distinct cities: Beirut in Lebanon, Amman in Jordan, and Bologna in Italy. Each of these spaces tells its own story, shaped by unique governance styles, cultural narratives, and socio-political contexts. The main objective is to answer this question: how do young people experience, and reimagine these public spaces? The selected case studies reflect diverse interpretations of what "public space" means in each setting, revealing not just methodological differences but also deep-seated cultural beliefs and practical realities surrounding accessibility and belonging.

In Lebanon, we focus on Horsh Beirut, the city's largest green park. This park stands out as one of the few significant green spaces in a densely populated city. For many young people, Horsh is more than just a park; it is a place where they can relax, create memories, and even challenge the "status quo". However, access to this space has often been an issue, influenced by political tensions and security concerns. The recent events of the 2024 war have transformed Horsh into a powerful symbol of safety and resilience for nearby residents, offering a psychological refuge amid chaos. Through their engagement with Horsh Beirut, youth reveal how public spaces in Lebanon are often governed by informal rules, and caught in a delicate balance between presence and exclusion.

On the other hand, Jordan's case study is Shams, a youth-led center organization in Amman. Unlike the open and green expanse of Horsh, Shams is a structured, indoor environment specifically designed to foster youth participation and empowerment. This reflects a broader reality in Jordan, where open and inclusive public spaces are limited, prompting civil society and NGOs to step in and create functional alternatives. While Shams may not fit the traditional image of a public space, it plays a vital public role by offering programs, encouraging dialogue, and building community among youth from diverse backgrounds. Its inclusion in this study highlights how young people adapt and create a sense of publicness, even within more confined or private settings.

Bologna presents a third, yet similar model. Il *Treno della Barca*, a repurposed building turned youth cultural center, reflects a European tradition of transforming underutilized infrastructure into spaces for civic life. In Bologna, public space is strongly associated with active citizenship and participatory governance. Treno is the product of collaboration between youth, local government, and civil society actors. It represents how public spaces can be co-designed and co-managed, with youth engagement into the very structure of the space itself. Its dynamic programming exemplifies how youth can be both users and creators of public culture when institutions are supportive.

At first glance, these choices may seem incompatible. However, these three case studies, while differing in form and function, share a common purpose: they serve as platforms for youth engagement, social interaction, and self-expression. The differences among them enrich the analysis, demonstrating that public spaces are not rigid structures but rather relational environments shaped by the social fabric of each community.

The divergence in case types also reflects broader public perceptions and political realities of "public space" in each country. In Lebanon, public green spaces are scarce and often contested, making *Horsh Beirut* both symbolically and practically significant. In Jordan, limited access to inclusive outdoor public spaces has led youth to gravitate toward semi-public, NGO-supported environments like *Shams*. In contrast, Bologna's tradition of civic participation and cultural investment has fostered a more expansive interpretation of public space; seen in how *Treno* functions as a hybrid between public platform and community institution.

In each city, the youth perspective brings to light how these spaces can be activated, reimagined, or even replaced in response to infrastructural gaps, security challenges, or institutional limitations.

Finally, this comparative framework emphasizes that public space is not just about physical access; it includes symbolic inclusion, safety, and a voice for the youth. Whether it's a park in Beirut, a vibrant center in Amman, or a cultural landmark in Bologna, these spaces reflect how young people connect with their cities and imagine their futures.

4.1 Horsh Beirut (Lebanon)

> *"We arrive at Horsh Beirut, but at first, we're not even sure if we're in the right place. The entrance is hidden, tucked behind some walls, and there's no sign to guide us. We stand for a moment, looking around, unsure. Even if you have been there before, you seem unsure of the way. People usually remember a lively park, but today it feels quiet, almost like it's been forgotten by the city. After a little searching, we find a small gap in the fence, and we finally make our way inside. The park is peaceful, with only a few people around, and the sound of the city seems far away. We walk down an uneven path, past overgrown areas, but soon we reach a little spot where some young people are gathered, chatting and children playing around. It feels like the park is coming back to life, even if it's a bit hidden. Despite the quiet, there's a warmth here, a sense of community that makes you feel welcome. It's not perfect, but it's real." (From diary camp, Beirut 15/01/2025)"*

Location: Horsh Beirut is a "triangle" bordered on the west by the Qasqas/ Tarik El Jdideh (TEJ) neighborhood (Sunnite majority) and Palestinian camp, to the north-east by the "La Résidence des Pins" (residence of the French ambassador), Badaro (Christian majority) and, in the South-East, by Chiah (Shiite majority). Its location is peripheral, at the edge of the municipal boundary of Beirut, and alongside the old demarcation line. A high fence surrounds the park which has three main entrances, one from each neighborhood. Qasqas and Badaro entrances are open, and Chiah entrance gate has been closed to the public since the end of the civil war for security reasons according to the municipality.

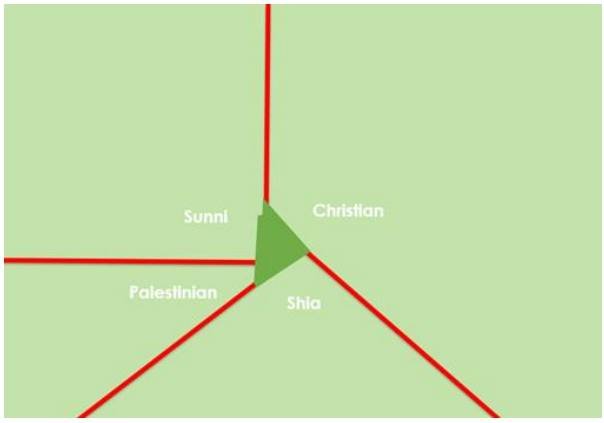

Figure 4: Horsh Beirut context
Source: NAHNOO

Historical context: Beirut's urban park, Horsh Beirut, is located in the southern edge of municipal Beirut, in TEJ neighborhood[4] (Sunni neighborhood), occupying the rest of historical pine forests. This public property, spanning 330,000 square meters (about 1.8% of the city's area), has been continuously shrinking since the 20th century, it has been owned by Beirut municipality since 1878 and officially designated as an urban park in the early 1960s. The park was devastated during the israeli invasion of 1982 and the subsequent 15-year civil war (1975-1990). It was renovated with French funding in the 1990s as part of post-war Beirut's reconstruction efforts and with the aim of fostering communal reconciliation. (Shayya, 2016) More Than ten years after the end of the civil war, and yet the park remained closed to the public, and became only accessible to those who requested a special permit from the governor. The municipality of Beirut, argued that the closure of the park was due to security concerns and to prevent any sectarian or political conflict taking place in the park. Other concerns included prevention of abusive behavior and protection of the park from deterioration. These reasons seemed to contradict the meaning of public space and reflect the policies of the state, and this was the main argument used by civil society who worked together to reclaim the park and open it to the public. In addition to the closure of Horsh, the violations that are presented in the below map and pictures affect the park in the last years.

Figure 5: Violations on Horsh Beirut
Source: NAHNOO

Throughout its history, Horsh Beirut faced numerous forms of encroachment, including by religious groups, political figures, security forces, and educational institutions. Some justified these actions as occurring in the absence of a formal state, such as during the French mandate or civil war.. Nonetheless, many of these interventions involved unlawful land transfers and privatization of public property. Despite destruction during wars and repeated fires, efforts were made to restore the park, maintaining its symbolic

[4] Tariq el Jdideh (TEJ) neighborhood is among the densest in the city, with a high rate of poverty and a vulnerable population. Despite its clear physical delimitations by heavy road infrastructure, its urban fabric is segregated into sub-neighborhoods of varying social status and commercial streets and hubs.

value as the “city’s green lung” and a venue for traditional celebrations; earning it the nickname *Horsh al-Eid* (the Park of the Festival).

While Horsh Beirut is currently open to the public, various challenges still limit full access. These include physical barriers such as fencing and surrounding roads that isolate the park from adjacent neighborhoods. Social and psychological barriers also exist, resulting from inconsistent entry policies by guards and the perception that the park is more socially accessible to wealthier areas, despite being adjacent to historically linked, lower-income communities. A lack of information online; especially across platforms used by youth; further reduces visibility and engagement. Moreover, practices in controlling access have been reported, with certain groups, such as Syrian nationals, sometimes facing unjustified exclusion.

Furthermore, have significantly enhanced accessibility within the neighborhood. However, this development has not come without its challenges. Gentrification, a growing concern, is slowly transforming the neighborhoods around Horsh Beirut character. Rising property values are forcing long-time residents to seek refuge elsewhere, and the influx of new commercial establishments is gradually eroding the area's traditional social fabric. Despite these pressures, the area remains a unique charm, showcasing a slower pace of urban sprawl compared to other parts of the city.

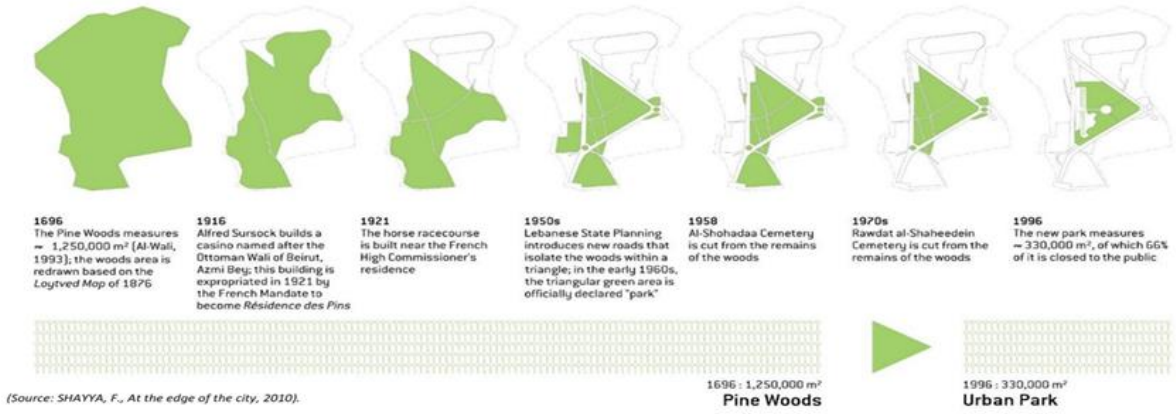

Figure 6: Historical evolution of Horsh Beirut
Source: NAHNOO

Youth perception to public spaces and Horsh Beirut in TEJ

For many Beirutis, especially youth, nature represents the only escape from urban density, contributing to their psychological, social, and physical well-being.

Horsh Beirut is often described as the “soul of the city.” A city without inclusive public spaces, it is said, is a city without spirit. (Interviewee)

In one of the studies conducted by NAHNOO[5], in 2023 in Horsh Beirut surrounding. Safety was the most important reason encouraging interviewees to use a public space. When asked to define further "the safety" that encourages them to be in a public space, most of the answers were framed in a social and cultural reading of the city in which a safe place is a place "I am attached to," "a place I'm used to," a place within "our neighborhood" and belongs to "our" social and cultural identity."

In 2024, during a street interview conducted, a youth female said: *"I no longer visit Horsh Beirut I do however have my morning walks on its peripheries; enjoying the greenery it provides; I used to go when I was younger to play with my siblings; currently I do not feel I want to enter the park, I am not comfortable to be there and I do not feel safe."*

Others defined safety in terms of physical measures such as lighting or a place where kids can play. According to participants, when it comes to the most used public space in the Horsh Beirut area, it is by far the sidewalk. For the interviewees, it is a polyvalent space par excellence. It is *"our daily place to meet,"* "*the extension of my business," "the place where I can have spatial control" or simply the place where I play all the time.*" In other words, sidewalks are the core of daily life in the area. According to the residents in TEJ Horsh Beirut is not considered their favorite public space which reflects the disconnection between residents and the space as a result of the consecutive decisions made by the municipality of Beirut.

"When I was a child, I used to visit Horsh Beirut more often than I do now. I used to play on the tennis courts, basketball courts, or even on the pedestrian sidewalk, playing with my cousin, riding a bicycle, playing hide-and-seek; there were numerous games we used to play. However, now it's very rare for me to go to Horsh Beirut, even though it's in front of my house. When I do go, I usually go for a walk with my friends or a picnic". Youth interviewee

Youth around Horsh Beirut linked their level of satisfaction with local public spaces to several factors. Primarily all youth regardless their age range, gender or background evaluated factors such as aesthetic characteristics, which are mostly related to the amenities and surroundings, including hygiene, facilities, accessibility, and safety, while deciding whether to utilize the space or not.

"When I was young and wanted to go to Horsh Beirut, I used to go all the way to the bridge to cross the highway, making it like a 5-8 minute walk instead of a 2-3 minute walk, because it was dangerous for me as a kid to cross the highway." youth interviewee

Usually, young females, especially in the city context, consider safety as the main need in any space. Non-Lebanese youth prioritize safety; depending on the context, feeling safe and accepted by the locals would motivate them to use public spaces more comfortably. However, some interviewees prefer to go outside TEJ, seeking places with perceived "social standing" to escape "the image of the neighborhood".

[5] A study conducted by NAHNOO on Horsh Beirut and surroundings included KIIs, FGDs and street surveys.

Therefore, the choice to use or not use a public space is not always a needs-based decision. It is highly correlated to more complicated social dynamics like existing sociopolitical segregation and social and urban stigmatization (Fuccaro, 2016).

"I think I have a mixed feeling, like 50/50, about being comfortable in Horsh Beirut. Personally, I have never encountered a dangerous situation there; however, I do believe it's unsafe everywhere, not just Horsh Beirut specifically." Youth female interviewee

The map of Tarik Jdideh drafted by the participants and users of the park reflects the richness of public spaces in the area. These spaces provide a range of opportunities for social interaction, relaxation, and entertainment, catering to the diverse needs and preferences of the community. Youth also mentioned the cafes in Tarik Jdideh as popular meeting places for youth and elderly alike, providing a space for people to gather, converse, and socialize.

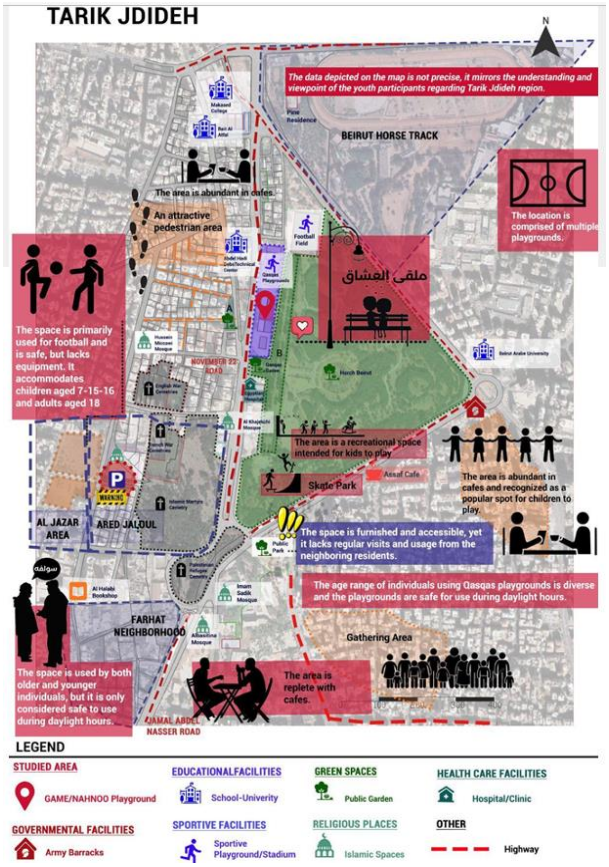

Figure 7: Youth perception of public spaces in Tarik Jdideh
Source: FGD conducted with youth during a previous study in 2023

Governance and Community Involvement

In theory, the park is managed by the municipality's Parks department in coordination with the city guard and those overseeing its sports facilities. In practice, several local organizations contribute to its maintenance and activation. These include NAHNOO, *Cedars for Care*, *March Lebanon*, *arc en ciel* (which manages the skatepark), and the *Association of the People of Beirut*,[6] especially in connection to *Horsh al-Eid* events. Their collaboration shows the importance of the growing role of civil society in preserving and activating public space.

Multiple initiatives have sought to activate the space, including the annual *Spring Festival* and recurring cultural, social, and sports activities coordinated by local NGOs. Weekly events organized by *Nahnoo* in partnership with the local community have also contributed to increasing public engagement.

One of the most successful interventions was the Open Horsh Beirut campaign by Nahnoo, which led a five-year advocacy effort that eventually opened the park to all residents. Similarly, Assabil's spring festivals have played a key role in bringing diverse groups into the park. However, while these events have drawn attention to the space, they are not substitutes for a sustainable, long-term management plan.

Figure 8: Some pictures from activities organized by NAHNOO in Horsh Beirut
Source: NAHNOO

[6] Association of the People of Beirut is a Lebanese civil organization aimed at strengthening social and cultural ties among the residents of Beirut. It works to serve the local community through a variety of activities and events.

Role During Crises

Horsh Beirut has repeatedly served as a refuge during times of crisis. During Lebanon's civil war, it became a frontline and was heavily bombarded. Despite this, it remained a shelter for displaced people during events such as the 2006 July War and, more recently, the 2024 war.

When asking residents around Horsh about the role during the last war in 2024 some of them considered the Horsh as a physical barrier that protected them from bombing:

"*Personally, to me, it played a massive role, since it is a barrier between Kaskas-Tariq Jdide and Ghbeireh, which was a targeted area during the 2024 war. " Youth interviewee*

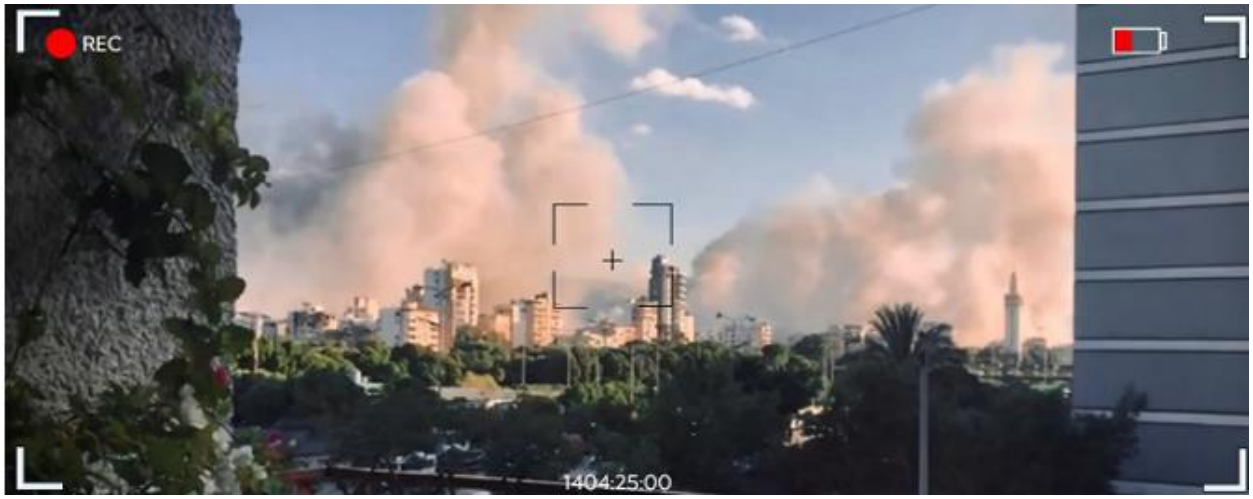

Figure 9: Photo of Horsh Beirut during war from nearby resident
Source: Haya El Natour, Youth resident in Qasqas; participant in one of the FGD

"KasKas, specifically during the 2024 war, assumed a unique position. As I stood on my balcony, overlooking the targeted Dahye region (the closest area to KasKas is Ghobeiry), the open green space of Horsh Beirut provided a front-row seat to the unfolding tragedy, serving as both a visual and physical buffer between the tranquility of my neighborhood and the horrors unfolding before my eyes. This experience resonates with the concept of "imageability" as defined by Kevin Lynch, where the visual and spatial characteristics of the urban environment significantly influence our perception and experience of the city." a participant in a FGD reside in Qasqas/ Architect student

The war, with its continuous attack of airstrikes and the ever-present threat of death, introduced a sense of "delirium" into the everyday life of the neighborhood; a disorienting, surreal state that echoes, in a very different context, Rem Koolhaas's description of the "delirious" nature of New York City. While Koolhaas referred to a kind of chaotic vitality born from capitalist excess and architectural fantasy, here the delirium stems from trauma: the constant fear and anxiety, the disruption of daily routines, and the forced displacement of residents all contributed to a warped sense of a fragmented perception of space and time.

This experience was further intensified by the stark contrast between the relative tranquility of KasKas and the devastation of Dahye (Southern suburb of Beirut); a juxtaposition that underscored the fragility of urban life and the profound vulnerability of civilians caught in war.

Yet in the middle of this fear, Horsh Beirut emerged as a quiet, stabilizing site; not just as a geographical boundary, but as a source of emotional refuge. While destruction closed in from the Dahye side, the park stood firm on the KasKas edge, its green expanse offering stillness instead of chaos, and life instead of collapse. For many residents, its presence served as a physical buffer, but also deeply psychological. Even when the sky thundered and buildings fell within a few hundred meters, the park's trees remained, absorbing some of the terror with their silence.

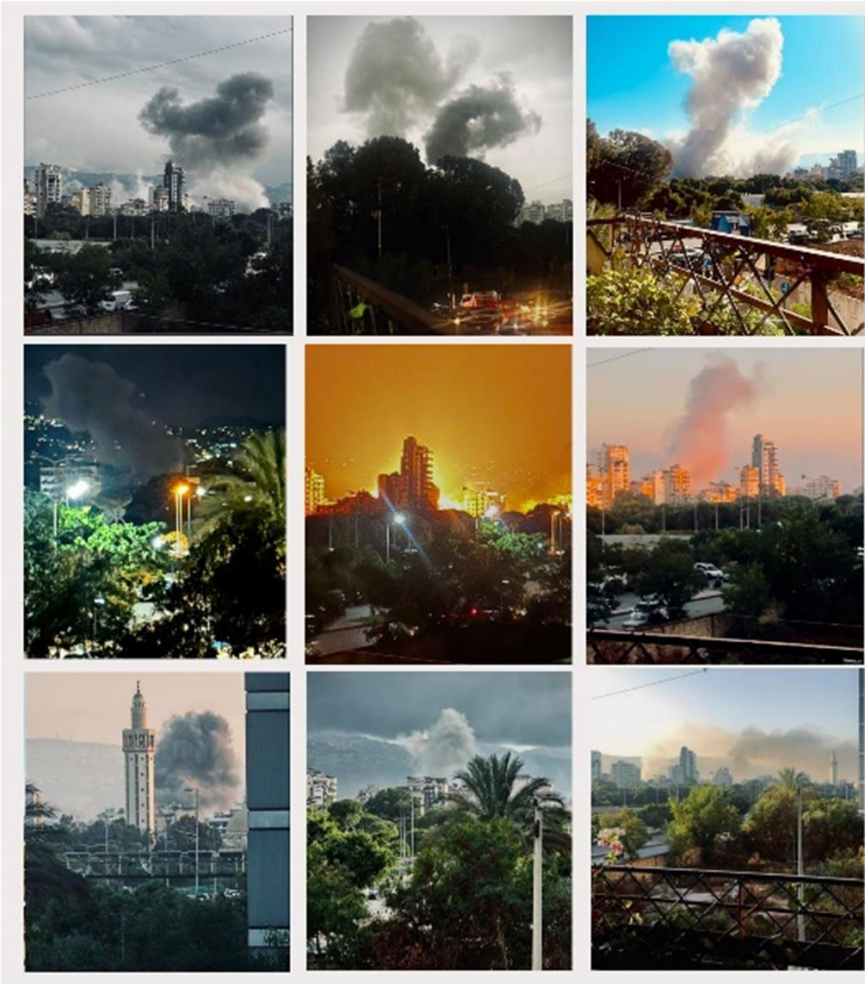

Figure 10: Pictures taken from participants in FGD living near Horsh Beirut during the 2024 war
Source: Haya EL Natour

Previously, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the park functioned as a vital, low-risk outdoor space where residents could safely spend time away from crowded urban environments.

"I believe that after COVID-19 and the increase in digitalization, people fell into two categories: those who longed for more outdoor time after facing the routine of staying indoors, and those who adapted to working remotely and even came up with innovative ways to deal with the isolation that COVID-19 brought. I, for one, am in the category that yearned for fresh air even during the pandemic. I find it difficult to spend a lot of time indoors and prefer to work on my laptop in open, outdoor settings." Interviewee

"Covid-19 and the continuing growth of digital entertainment such as Instagram and TikTok have significantly reduced our attendance in public spaces since the lockdown period pushed many of us to rely on online platforms for socializing and leisure which is a continuous habit that has continued post-pandemic due to its convenience." Interviewee

Vision for the Future

Sustainable management of Horsh Beirut depends on a formal governance structure led by the municipality in partnership with local experts and community groups. A long-term vision should include inclusive programming that reflects the needs of different age and social groups. Establishing recurring traditions, such as reviving the *Horsh al-Eid*, could help reestablish the park as a key site for collective urban life.

While NGOs have played an essential role in filling gaps left by the authorities. Especially during emergencies, they cannot replace formal public governance. A sustainable strategy must involve a clear division of responsibilities between the state and civil society, ensuring that the park remains an accessible, inclusive, and vibrant space for all.

Future plans for Horsh Beirut must prioritize youth inclusion through well-structured programs that cater to their diverse interests, sports, arts, music, and social initiatives. The development of such programs requires not only physical upgrades to the park but also institutional commitment to fairness, transparency, and community input. Importantly, reintegrating the park into the fabric of the surrounding neighborhoods, both physically and socially, is essential. Past efforts even included an urban design competition aimed at achieving this goal.

4.2 Shams (Jordan)

> *"Uber drops us off at the side of an intersection in one of Amman's many hilly areas. Disoriented, Amanie, Margherita and I don't quite understand where to go. We have an appointment with Shams, the first association we have to meet for the field visit, but we cannot find any indication of the place anywhere. No sign, no signpost to show us where it is. From the road it looks like a non-place. Margherita has been here before but has confused memories. She remembers a decadent building where we started to enter. Apparently, the place is here. Third floor, Maisam writes to us. I think that if you don't already know this place or have no contacts, it is practically impossible to come here and it already seems to me to be a first architectural and urbanistic barrier to access. The third floor is full of flats, but it is a dark, gloomy place with very low ceilings. Maisam picks us up and ushers us into a cosy room, very brightly furnished. It feels like a private flat.The room is full of photos of shows the guys have performed over the years and of awards and prizes received by the association over the years. There is also a dog which all the guys seem to know very well. He is Maisam's dog but seems to be everyone's dog. Right from the start, too, the atmosphere is very intimate and familiar. Everyone moves in very small spaces but with the familiarity and fluidity of someone who knows a space well and therefore knows how to move. That is why even though there are so many of us, we manage well. The guys are about fifteen of them, all very young. They are very welcoming; they immediately offer us coffee with fruit juice. I recognise that such a welcome, almost as if we were hosts, we would not have received it anywhere else. While Amanie continues the interview in Arabic, I notice that there is no window in the room, no light comes in anywhere". (From diary camp, Amman 05/02/2025)*

Location and historical context: *Wahj Alshams for Theater and Folklore Arts* is a non- profit organization which works on theater by involving the local community in defining, analyzing, and discussing community issues. As well they capacitate the young vulnerable youth by providing artistic, technical and development training programs to be able to deliver and highlight community issues through theater, which will lead to change their behavior and contribute to raising community awareness. In addition, *Wahj Alshams* provides GBV protection services to reach social well- being. Their vision is also to empower individuals before to empower the community (especially young vulnerable youth) and contribute to changing the individual vision of society through art.

Figure 11: Picture taken from researcher during the Jordan field visit, 05/02/2025
Source: Research team

The founder is Maisam Naser, a social activist, entrepreneur and theatre actress. The living conditions of young people in her home country of Jordan inspired her to found “Wahj Al Shams” (Sunshine) in 2016.

Figure 12: Picture taken from researcher during the Jordan field visit, 05/02/2025
Source: Research team

Governance and Community Involvement

In Jordan, civil society associations play a key role in promoting community participation and strengthening local governance. Although there has been significant progress, challenges related to

governance and inclusion persist. Specifically, the problems are obvious and complex for all associations working in artistic fields.

"*Art has a bad reputation in Jordan. Few people understand and appreciate art and its power to bring about positive social change, people here believe that art and artists have their own agendas, far from our culture and values. Artists are wrongly perceived as rebellious hippies with precarious incomes. Many young artists fear that they will not have enough income and will not be able to provide for their families. Generally, here in the city those who have done arts studies hardly find work considering that the arts in Jordan are not considered. They all go away to other countries usually. Jordanian society in general is not used to the arts, they prefer shopping centers usually." Maisam interviewee*

This is the reason why, especially non-profit organizations in Jordan that deal with social issues by offering artistic activities, have to provide autonomous governance in managing their finances. When we ask how the management of the Shams organization works, we are told:

"All the support comes from other funding; it is not money directly paid for the artistic things we do. You have to make do with what you have. In the past we also tried to do street theatre but by law you cannot. That's why we only do theatre classes to date. In this country it is impossible to do political advocacy. It is only justifiable and feasible if you work with unemployed or otherwise vulnerable people." Maisam interviewee

Another obvious problem in the management of organizations is the control by the government and the Ministry of Culture and of Youth Policy for the transfer of spaces, for the number of permits needed to carry out artistic-social activities.

"Jordan is constantly having problems with the Ministry of Youth Policy which does not help Jordanian youth even though we here are in agreement with them, so we have never had problems. You have to have a lot of authorization from them to open such places. The government is afraid of young people gathering in public spaces and talking about politics. Here in Jordan talking about politics is forbidden." Interviewee

"It is very complex to organize artistic events in public spaces because there are always many controls and secret services. A lot of permits are needed. We have good connections with the government and this is important to get their trust and permission (she tells us that to talk to the government she changes her accent and uses that of her family of origin to make it clear where she was born and who she is) even if it is not easy to get money from them, in fact the money to self-finance us has to be sought elsewhere." Interviewee

Government controls and permits also affect the political and artistic content of the works that are staged (mostly cinematographic or theatrical works):

"This is a very political space but if we have to organize something outside we need a lot of permits because they ask to see the performance first, by law they can ask you before putting it on as a form of control." Interviewee

In conclusion, the governance of Jordanian organizations and their role in community engagement is strictly dependent on their ability to behave within the laws of government, to adapt under veiled profiles without ever explicitly expressing potential progressive intentions.

Youth perception to Public spaces and Shams

From the group interview conducted during the field research in February 2025, the total absence of public spaces in the city emerged, of which young people are well aware, feeling deprived in their daily lives of places accessible and safe for them to spend time.

"There are no benches, having animals like dogs makes it possible to leave the house, there are no parks, there is no drinking water, the city is full of ups and downs so there are few bicycles, there are no monuments except for specific areas, the archaeological parks are poorly controlled, there is a lot of gentrification, before COVID they had invested so much in tourism now the with war much less." Interviewee

"On Fridays they go out, they all stay on the street because there is nowhere else to go and they all go to the mall or coffee houses." Maisam interviewee

Among the main places of reference, in fact, there are: *"the shopping centre, the bars, the sports centre, the gardens, I don't go out, I go to Omar's house, to the restaurant".* Among these places, a clear gender dimension also emerges. In fact, girls consider the shopping centre the safest place to be able to walk around alone. On the contrary, boys feel much safer even if the issue of safety is also a relevant issue for them.

"Some specific places are not safe. There are drugs going around, people are not very nice. All places we can go in general close at 8pm, sport city closes at 9.30. There are security cameras but they go off at 8 o'clock." Male young interviewee

The safety in a city like Amman seems to be perceived not only in terms of spaces where there are no drugs but also in terms of spaces where there is no gender and nationality harassment. The dynamics of racism in the city are in fact frequent. The large number of refugees makes a country like Jordan a multicultural pot even though there is no common culture educated in mutual respect.

"I am a mix because I am Palestinian, Libyan and Jordanian. I am a mix but they want you to be one." Female young interviewee

"Here in Jordan talking about politics is forbidden. Especially talking about Palestine. The relationship between Jordanians and Palestinians here is very complex." Interviewee

"There is a lot of racism here from Jordanians toward Palestinians. There is always something strange. We are the same people but even so I always feel that we are close but different, even though we live together. My friends are all Palestinians. I only have one Jordanian friend. We talk little about Gaza here. Jordanians talk little about Gaza, they don't post anything on their social media. There is an internal racism. It's a migration issue." Interviewee

"It is difficult to live in Amman, I come from another city and I am discriminated against in Amman. My language is different." Female young interviewee

"The pro-American King Abdallah does not want any more refugees but often the Palestinian refugees do not want any more Palestinian refugees either because the resources are not for everyone." Interviewee

For many young people in Amman, especially between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, *Wahj Alshams for Theater and Folklore Arts*, represents one of the few spaces to escape from the home environment, contributing to their psychological, social and physical well-being.

"Many people come here because they cannot find work given the big problem of unemployment. Both teenagers and children. One girl for example named her daughter Shams not to forget the love and respect she learnt with us. I am on my own here; I try to open doors as much as possible. I try to reason with everyone and listen, I also do psychological support and give space to their problems." Maisam interviewee

Figure 13: Picture taken from researcher during the Jordan field visit, 05/02/2025
Source: Research team

When the participants are asked to describe their day in their neighborhood, they draw their streets, often full of shops and houses. They describe the people they see looking out of the windows, their gestures during the day. Their idea of public space seems very crowded but also very static, stuck in the geography of very few places. Having no place to escape, in fact, many stay at home or choose pen and paper to find an outlet for their feelings of frustration. Or they decide to "*work in a cultural centre inside the Palestinian camp where I live."* Dealing with art and culture seems like a chance to escape from one's reality.

Figure 14: Picture taken from researcher during the Jordan field visit, 05/02/2025
Source: Research team

Main issues and Vision and Hopes for the Future

Sustainable management of Shams depends on a formal governance structure led by the municipality in partnership with community-based organizations and groups. A long-term vision should include inclusive programming that reflects the needs of different age groups and social groups. Direct financial support to individual entities that can support them in their community development work.

NGOs in Jordan are currently filling gaps left by the authorities, especially gaps left by institutional gaps in civil rights, but they cannot replace formal public governance. A sustainable strategy must include a clear division of responsibilities between the state and civil society, ensuring that associations like Shams remain an accessible, inclusive and vibrant space for all.

Future plans for a community like Shams must fit into institutional programs and gain recognition and visibility. The equity, transparency, and community contribution that Maisam advances make Shams a place where young people gain recognition, are seen, and are heard. In places like this, kids feel like they are in control of their lives and gain self-awareness.

"We do not want to leave. We should decide our future not them" Interviewee

The development of such programs requires not only a structured economic contribution from the Government but also a constant and continuous commitment to listening to the needs of the participants. Only in this way is it possible to begin to reimagine other possible scenarios for the city. Only by starting from the dreams and hopes of the youngest and supporting and leaving space for these affinities to become real, is it possible to imagine alternatives to the present.

"I would like a place to sing, a place for children because the street is dangerous, places where you think and you can change your thinking, a place to practise the arts, singing and dancing, a place to talk about the problems of society and unemployment, a gym for women only, neighbourhood more clean". FGD's interviewee

4.3 Treno della Barca (Italy)

"The first time we arrive at Treno della Barca, it's a quiet afternoon. The bus, the only line connecting the city center to this suburb, leaves us near a long, low building that looks like a stopped train. Along the ground floor, small shops are all over the place: a pharmacy, a market, a coffee shop... The shutters are half-closed, few people are around, and the place feels almost suspended, as if holding its breath. From the outside, it feels anonymous, silent. But as we step inside the CAV(CAV is a public educational service for young people aged 11 to 16), the atmosphere changes. The walls are bright with drawings and posters, young people move casually through the small rooms, and the air feels lived-in and warm, like a hidden gem known only to few. (15/02/2025)"

"We arrived at Treno della Barca on an infra-weekly morning to participate in a focus group with young volunteers from one of the associations working in the neighbourhood. We get off the bus, the only line that connects the centre with this suburb. The journey from the city centre takes about forty minutes and is a journey of respite and tranquillity. The chaos and the crowds stay behind, the sky opens up, the urban layout of the neighbourhoods changes, the streets become wider, people's faces look like those of ordinary people, who have a normal life, work, go to the bar, meet some friends. When we arrive at the Treno della Barca, it is sunny and the elderly residents of the neighbourhood are playing cards at the bar. The dogs are in the park, it is very quiet. At the pharmacy, the only one in the area, there is a queue to get the medicines people need for the week. We walk along the long porch that leads us to the hall where we will have assembly. It feels like being in another city when you walk around here, it seems that the forgotten, mocked and discriminated against neighbourhoods always have their own strong identity, clear and fascinating. Barca is not a perfect neighbourhood but it is a real neighbourhood. " (From diary camp, Bologna (15/02/2025)

Location: The Treno della Barca is a long residential building located in the Barca district in the western part of Bologna. It is so called because its curved and elongated shape is reminiscent of a train, with its porticoes resembling a continuous track.

Built in the late 1950s to a design by architect Giuseppe Vaccaro, it was part of a large social housing plan to provide housing for families moving to Bologna, often from southern Italy. The building is over 500 metres long, has two floors of flats above a continuous portico, and also houses commercial premises on the ground floor. Today it is a symbol of the district's history and an example of post-war urban architecture, and in recent years has been the focus of cultural and social regeneration projects.

"The Treno was built as a ghetto and it has remained that way. It was built for people from the south who came to the north to work in a totally discriminatory and anti-southern perspective. Now the situation is different because we have a new enemy. The enemies are no longer our parents from the south but foreigners" Interviewee

Figure 15: Treno building

Historical context: After the Second World War, Bologna - like many Italian cities - experienced strong population growth, in particular due to the arrival of migrants from southern Italy. To cope with the lack of housing, the state promoted large social housing projects, including the CEP (Coordinamento Edilizia Popolare) neighbourhoods. In this context, between 1957 and 1964, the Treno della Barca was designed by Giuseppe Vaccaro, an important architect from Bologna. The aim was to create a building that combined functionality and a sense of community, offering inexpensive but decent housing with common spaces and services. The Barca district was thus built from scratch and the Treno became its symbol: long, curved, with a portico that served as a public space and protection for those passing by. In short, the Treno della Barca was born to respond to an urgent need for post-war housing, but it also became an example of social architecture and urban planning designed for the community. In fact, the porticos are part of a context that mixes social housing and a strong sense of community, becoming today a meeting and socialising point, where the rhythm of Bolognese life intertwines with a more residential and family dimension. The arcades of the Train of the Boat are often animated by neighbourhood events and markets, which help to keep alive the community spirit that characterises the area.

Finally, since 2021, the high quality of the composition and the attention to detail have led the administration to include this long building outside the city centre in the list of arcades on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Figure 16:Treno building

Governance and Community Involvement

Since 2021 the Treno della Barca has been one of Bologna's Unesco heritage arcades, as an expression and element of the city's urban identity. The redevelopment project of the Treno della Barca wanted by the Municipality of Bologna and co-financed by the European Union, European Social Fund, Metropolitan Cities Operational Programme 2014 - 2020, aims according to the Municipality to "contribute to the regeneration of the area also thanks to the presence of new professional activities related to art, culture and creativity intended as accelerators of development".

The steps to achieve this goal were started in April 2022 with a public notice promoted by the Municipality of Bologna addressed to realities operating in the field of creativity, innovation and urban regeneration. The objective of the notice was to assign seven spaces located on the ground floor of the Treno della Barca free of charge for four years. Seven realities, including non-profit associations and private companies, were awarded the spaces. With their establishment, they should "animate the places on a daily and continuous basis, a fundamental element for the social inclusion and wellbeing of the area and the community as well as for the development of better socio-economic conditions with particular reference to young people and the city's peripheral areas".

Figure 17: Treno building

Among these, two premises were assigned to the so-called Captains with the role of community manager and link between the realities that already populate the Treno della Barca with the general objective of creating an active and well-integrated community in the area.
Finally, two premises have been assigned to the Neighbourhood Education Services, which carries out socio-educational activities for children and adolescents there.

Figure 18: Treno neighborhood map

Youth perception and participation to public spaces and Treno della Barca

During a group discussion held during the field visit in Italy, the participants (average age between 20 and 30) reflected on what public spaces they frequent in the city. They also speak about the situation of these spaces in Bologna and the line of the answers seems to be very common. A strong feeling of controversy and dissatisfaction hovers among them. What they complain about the city is a lack of quality spaces that can be truly inclusive and non-discriminatory from any point of view.

"Public and cultural spaces in Bologna do many things but they don't know how people are together, how they can feel comfortable. Many times, many spaces are exclusive, the political conception of these spaces is exclusive. In practice these political ideas do not exist." Interviewee

"Bologna has changed a lot. I have been here for ten years. Many free open spaces have been closed. The only space is the park behind my house. The center is not for those who live here but only for tourists. I avoid going there and try to live in my neighborhood." Interviewee

Figure 19:Figure 14: Picture taken from researcher during the Bologna field visit,14/02/2025
Source: Research team

In addition to lamenting the almost total absence of spaces in the city, young people also lament the total absence and closure of informal and non-institutional political spaces, once so characteristic of the current and socialist political vision of the city of Bologna. What emerges is a total repression of informal movements by the institutions and a lack of possibility for dialogue and the presence of antagonism.

"Rents have gone up, xm 24 was still there six years ago, there was a much stronger idea of sharing spaces, much more public and political. I live near Saffi and everything costs a lot. Bars are the only place to socialize. In my opinion, neighborhood houses have a lot of potential. I tried to bring people there but it didn't work. There are many elderly people who do things during their off hours." Interviewee

"In my opinion the municipality works only for profit, if they have a project it is only for money. For example, social spaces have become institutional and this is contradictory" Interviewee

"The problem is not institutionalizing but when this process does not take into consideration the conflict. The biggest goal is to resolve the conflict. There is no recognition from the municipality from this point of view. We all say that we are privileged to be in Bologna because it is different from other cities but still there are big problems." Interviewee

"This city has changed a lot. Since 2012 after the twin towers, safer cities, much more bureaucracy." Interviewee

Specifically in the Treno della Barca neighborhood, problems of security, gender, and nationality are amplified like any marginalized territory.What emerges beyond a clear gender division linked to the activities carried out in free time, is a total absence of public spaces of reference. Among the most common spaces, here too, there is the shopping centre.

"The boys in the neighborhood play soccer and box, the girls dance, skate but also attend theater and chess workshops at school in the afternoon. Many others do nothing but stay on the phone. On weekends they stay home to sleep or go to the mall." Interviewee

"We are a group born from the parish but after Covid we stopped going there but at Barca we have no places to go. Here the job opportunities either don't exist or they aren't good, they are different. The salaries and cultural centers aren't there. "

The gender dimension also has an impact on issues related to safety. Although most girls do not feel safe either in the center or on the streets of the suburbs, some of them recognize in belonging to the territory and the neighborhood a dimension of serenity and protection. Living and knowing the suburbs and feeling it as your own is a weapon of redemption against any security policy. A safe place, the interviewees seem to say, is made by the people who live there and know each other, not by the police.

"I feel safer here than in the center." Female young interviewee

"I'm aware of being a woman, but I'm not afraid, I have the tools to deal with the situation because I know my city." Female interviewee

"I hate the city centre, it's hard to get around, when I was at university I had to go there to go out with my classmates but I don't like it. I'm afraid to go downtown. The suburbs of Bologna are not so dangerous

anymore, they are gentrifying. In the 90s they were much more marginalized but now they are aggregating towards the center. Prices have increased a lot even in the suburbs." Male young interviewee

Figure 20:Pictures taken from researcher during the Italy field visit, 15/02/2025
Source: Research team

Social challenges and visions for the Future

The sustainable management of the Treno della Barca depends on a formal governance structure led by the municipality in collaboration with community-based organizations and groups. A long-term vision should include inclusive programming that reflects the needs of different age groups and social groups. Direct financial support is also foreseen for individual entities that can support them in their community development work.

Although as in Jordan, NGOs in Italy are currently filling the gaps left by the authorities, especially those due to institutional gaps in civil rights, the situation seems to be more structured. In Bologna in particular, the broad attention to the Third Social Sector makes the city's example particularly unique. But that is not all. Bologna's socialist historical-political legacy has increasingly lost its radical and revolutionary scope in recent years, slowly adhering to neoliberal models disguised as apparently proletarian tensions.

The structural problems related to the Treno della Barca are of various magnitudes that the interventions of organizations can only partially address.

Among the most important challenges are the “second generations" and young people with foreign citizenship and migration background. According to a recent study by the Municipality of Bologna (2022), among the people residing in the Borgo Panigale-Reno district, 13% are between 15 and 29 years old, 15% are minors and 16% are foreigners of 116 different nationalities. The same report also identifies Barca as one of the areas with the highest index of economic, social and demographic fragility in the district. A specific problem is found throughout the area with respect to the 14-18 age group, for which there is a lack of spaces and extra-scholastic and domestic aggregation centers, which in fact are completely absent, and among whose dynamics the high rate and risk of school dropout is highlighted, which is among the main reasons for access to the SEST.

Figure 21: Representation of the nationalities in the neighborhood
Source: Municipality of Bologna

For this reason, the second challenge falls on the suburbs like Barca, on the involvement of young people in living in spaces and taking an interest in politics. The difficult socio-economic conditions of the suburbs and the related conditions of vulnerability and existential precariousness push young people to a total social disinterest. The outskirts are also characterized by abandoned areas and lower accessibility and quality of transport compared to the downtown neighborhoods. All this could create the danger of making the outskirts a dormitory neighborhood. In this social condition, the declared propensity of the youngest to assert their rights is stronger even though the only means known to do so are violence in all its forms of application which often translates into the use of drugs, use of weapons (guns and knives), fights between gangs, violent language etc.

The weakening of social cohesion in this sense makes dialogue between citizens and institutions difficult, especially in suburban contexts where young people in particular feel abandoned and without points of reference, the only ones (often without families of reference) who have to provide for their own existences. One of the greatest challenges of the Treno della Barca is therefore trying to coexist with institutional needs but bring them to shed light on the structural problems of the neighborhood. Without solving class problems it will not be possible to completely solve and raise awareness of racial problems. Staying in the conflict of this neighborhood means listening to the needs and problems of the people, not imposing solutions from above, acting as allies and not as solvers of the problems of others. Understanding that "regenerating a suburban neighborhood" does not mean imposing an elitist idea of culture but trying to network between the various associations creating a "cultural welfare" that is designed, sewn and desired according to the dreams and desires of the people who live in the Treno della Barca. To do all this, a political construction work is necessary between all the organizations present in the territory.

"The Treno della Barca regeneration project includes a control room but the municipality already has some ideas addressed. It's a strange relationship, they actually hold the reins. The rules are not clear. As are the people to work with (0-100 years). The money is European and requires that the planning be participatory. Municipality, third sector and territories. Co-participation! But they don't have the tools. The goal is for the community to stand on its own. When the funds run out, how do the associations move forward? In my opinion, this causes discontinuity and a short circuit. I only work 8 hours here, I have a few hours to work as a community project. It takes time to create a network and to get to know people. Another problem is that there is no previous moment of sharing with respect to what the network is, because the associations and people don't know each other beforehand. Networking is imposed from above, it doesn't speak first with the realities. The realities that have been placed here are not used to reasoning in a participatory planning perspective. First there must be a work of political, conceptual and then practical construction and this does not exist!! The process is when money arrives, you have to use it in this sense but in my opinion a piece is missing." Interviewee

5. Main Findings

5.1 Youth perception towards public spaces

This section provides the perceptions and experiences of youth towards public spaces across Lebanon, Jordan, and Italy, shedding light on their evolving definitions, desires, and challenges related to public space usage. Despite shared ideals of public space as accessible, safe, and inclusive, the perception of youth in these countries is shaped by unique socio-political dynamics, urban governance, and cultural expectations.

Lebanon: When asked what public spaces mean to them, most young people in Lebanon described such spaces theoretically as those that are freely accessible, where they can feel safe, gather, and spend time without financial or social pressures. Yet, in the Lebanese context; particularly in urban centers like Beirut; the notion of safety and accessibility in public spaces is deeply shaped by fragmented urban planning, socio-political divisions, and the deterioration of public infrastructure. This shift reflects the broader impact of sectarian fragmentation, lack of urban governance, and uneven access across Beirut. This shift highlights a growing sense of disconnection from urban public life, where access to the city is increasingly shaped by one's economic means, social identity, and political affiliations; ultimately leaving youth with limited spaces that are genuinely public and inclusive.

Public spaces, as articulated by the youth in this study, are deeply valued for their potential to offer freedom, relaxation, and community. Raniaa, a youth participant from Lebanon emphasizes how outdoor settings have become even more important during COVID-19, preferring to work in open-air spaces rather than stay confined indoors. Similarly, Haya associates public spaces with formative childhood memories and sees them as places that can nurture personal growth, as in her brother's experience discovering a talent for tennis in Horsh Beirut.

Lebanese young people also define public spaces through their informal practices; places where they skateboard, share meals, or sit on public stairways to talk. These activities reflect a grassroots re-appropriation of urban environments that are often denied to them by design or neglect. Mohamad and Larissa describe such acts as a form of reclaiming ownership over city spaces through simple, everyday practices like picnicking or skateboarding.

For many young people growing up in Beirut, parks like Karam al-Aris[7] and Horsh Beirut have always existed more as ideas than functioning spaces; visible, but rarely accessible. As Ali, a youth and director of Spotlight organization, put it, *"You have the thing, you see it, but you can't use it."* His words echo a broader feeling among youth: public spaces in Lebanon are often removed from their intended purpose or repurposed by political or private interests.

"Before 2019, Karam al-Aris held the charm of a neighborhood park with animals and green corners. But even then, it was already neglected, no bathrooms, no water, no guards, no upkeep. The same went for Horsh Beirut. These weren't places young people could reliably visit to feel safe, unwind, or build memories. Instead, they were spaces haunted by absence; of infrastructure, of care, of access." Ali; interviewee

Public spaces are often viewed as shared urban commons, essential for social interaction, community cohesion, and even survival during crises. However, as highlighted by Mayssa and Rahaf from Procol [8] *"The reality of public spaces is far more complicated."* According to them, public spaces like parks and streets in Lebanon are crucial for community engagement. *"Public spaces provide a platform for people to come together, share ideas, and connect. However, the reality of these spaces is less idealized"*. While they offer potential for social cohesion, public spaces in Lebanon often fall short due to poor management, lack of safety, and insufficient maintenance. The transformation of spaces like Horsh Beirut, for example, has been a long-term struggle. Despite its potential to serve as a community hub, past management failures and security concerns led to the park being closed for extended periods.

In the eyes of youth, public space in Lebanon since 2019 has witnessed a quiet collapse. Not because parks disappeared, but because their meaning did. Once imagined as sites of gathering, rest, and play, they became zones of closure, repurposing, and social division. The physical presence of a park no longer plays its role. Moreover, in a time of multiple crises; economic, political, environmental, and recent war; the absence of these shared spaces has left a gap not only in the cityscape, but in the emotional and social lives of its youth.

[7] Karam al-Aris Park is located in the Hawd al-Wilaya area of Beirut, near the Burj Abi Haidar neighborhood. The name "Karam al-Aris" (meaning "The Groom's Vineyard") is said to originate from a wedding tradition in which the bride and groom asked their guests not to bring gifts, but instead to plant a tree in the park as a symbolic gesture. The park spans approximately 7,000 square meters. It was reopened after restoration and renovation in 2014.

[8] Founded in 2017, Procol (short for *Prosperity-co Lab*) emerged from the Institute for Global Prosperity, an initiative based at University College London (UCL). The center's focus on "prosperity in the age of mass displacement" examines how the Syrian refugee crisis and other socio-political issues affect the well-being of individuals and communities in Lebanon. A significant aspect of Procol's research is the intersection of prosperity with public spaces, as these areas often serve as both a symbol of urban development and a manifestation of societal challenges.

Amman: In the context of Amman, public space is not simply defined by open parks or civic squares, but by emotional safety, social belonging, and cultural appropriateness. For the youth gathered at *Shams*, public space is not always accessible or welcoming. Instead, youth emphasized the importance of "safe space," where they could express themselves freely, without surveillance or judgment.

"Shams is the only place I can be myself without feeling watched or criticized," one participant shared.
Another added, "Even parks don't feel public. They belong to certain people, and I'm not one of them."

Youth in Jordan; particularly in Amman; demonstrate a strikingly different perception of public space. Although the city offers a variety of open public spaces, including gardens, squares, and sports courts, these are rarely mentioned by young people when asked about public spaces. Instead, what stands out in the discussions with youth in Amman is their strong association of public space with the concept of "safe spaces." For these young participants, "safe spaces" are not necessarily open or publicly accessible areas in the traditional sense. Rather, they refer to enclosed, protected environments where youth can gather, engage in activities, and express themselves freely. These spaces are valued precisely because they offer a sense of security; both physical and psychological; and shield them from political pressures and social judgment. This redefinition of public space reflects the complex social dynamics in Amman, where access to physical public spaces may be available, but meaningful use is limited by broader issues of safety, surveillance, and societal expectations.

For many youths, this has led to a redefinition of what constitutes a "public" space. Shopping malls, for example, have become a default alternative to traditional public spaces in Lebanon, Amman and even in Bologna. Enclosed, secured, and often centrally located, malls are perceived as safe zones where youth can linger, socialize, browse shops, or simply observe new trends without necessarily consuming. While technically private and commercial, these spaces are viewed by many as more accessible and welcoming than neglected parks, restricted gardens without services and lighting like the case in Beirut where public green spaces are scarce, and unevenly maintained malls offer a form of social refuge.

In Amman, it is important to note that most malls; except for Al Abdali; do not permit entry to male youth unless they are accompanied by family members or female companions. As a result, many young men are often seen gathering outside these malls or along nearby streets, effectively excluded from accessing and benefiting from these semi-public commercial spaces. This exclusion contributes to a broader sense of marginalization and lack of accessible, youth-friendly environments. Given these limitations, many youths in

Amman seek refuge in enclosed spaces, particularly those affiliated with civil society organizations such as Shams. One notable initiative is the so-called “Art Street” (name to be added), which hosts several cultural spaces that are technically open to the public. However, access to these spaces is uneven. They tend to be concentrated in specific neighborhoods, making them primarily accessible to those who are already informed about their existence and who have the means; especially transportation; to reach them. Some organizations, like Shams, take a different approach by working directly within local communities, bringing cultural and social activities into neighborhoods and thereby reaching youth who might otherwise be excluded. These efforts help to partially bridge the spatial and social gaps that restrict youth participation in public affairs. This redefinition of public space as relational rather than physical reveals the gap between formal urban infrastructure and youth needs. Public libraries and university campuses were mentioned, but most youth felt they could not occupy those spaces freely due to social pressures, gender norms, and the lack of youth-oriented programming. In contrast, Shams functioned as a hybrid civic-public space; both structured and open, both safe and co-owned.

Discussion with Jordanian youth, participants highlighted a significant lack of public research and study spaces outside of universities. They described how coffee shops have become informal study hubs, where young people bring their books and laptops simply because there are few alternatives. This points to a wider gap in urban infrastructure that fails to accommodate the intellectual and creative needs of young people.

Safety in public spaces emerged as another central theme. Although many public parks are equipped with lighting and security cameras, participants noted that these spaces still close early in the evening, usually between 8 and 10 p.m. For some, this reflected cost-saving measures rather than real security concerns, while others believed the closures were intended to avoid nighttime problems. Despite visible security measures, many young people; especially women, felt unsafe in public spaces at night, citing societal frustrations, unemployment, and issues like drug use as contributing factors to a threatening environment.

Yet, despite these challenges, the group displayed a strong sense of social commitment. Many were involved in volunteering activities, including awareness-raising sessions for children and adolescents, engagement in civil society organizations, youth centers, and even political parties such as the “Jordanian Social Democratic Party”. Others were active in initiatives within refugee camps or used social media platforms to express opinions and advocate for change.

Italy: When asked what public spaces mean to them, most young Italians described them, in theory, as freely accessible spaces, where they can feel safe, be together and spend time without economic pressure.

"Public space is a large and open space without doors like parks, places where you can go without pay." Interviewee

"In my city public space is where people meet, they are together but for me it is also a space where I am alone, I take care of myself, it is something to reach to escape from family, one's home." Interviewee

When participants were also asked what they needed to feel safe in a public space, they responded: "*ramps, chairs, no police, bathrooms, places to eat, children, animals, common goals, respect."*

From these answers it is possible to highlight a common line, but also variable lines influenced by different factors. Although the most common answers of young Italians reflect the same cultural imagery of public space with the same characteristics, for example open, with many people interacting, green spaces, politicized, safe, accessible, open, with animals etc., there are still some differences. Among the youngest, in fact, the definition of public space seems to lose, as in Jordan, the characteristics of openness, limiting the definition to only closed and controlled spaces such as shopping centers where the possibilities of doing (and therefore of being) are lower and contradictorily make one feel safer. But the definition of public space also derives from one's personal experience. Thus Imen, a girl who lives outside the city answers:

"*For us who live far away, the public is everything because we are not used to dividing spaces in private and public." Interviewee*

As in the Lebanese context, also in Italy the notion of safety and accessibility in public spaces is deeply influenced by the lack of education on gender and discrimination that afflicts the urban planning of the city of Bologna, as well as by political awareness in general. This shift reflects the broader impact of the city's political fragmentation and lack of urban governance. Access to the city is increasingly influenced, as in Lebanon, by one's economic resources, social identity and political affiliations, ultimately leaving young people with limited spaces.
Young Italians, especially from Bologna, define public spaces through their informal and counter-institutional practices. The places they can occupy are, for them, the real spaces of political antagonism and where they can build alternatives to the reality they live in. Through grassroots reappropriations, they enact forms of claiming ownership of city spaces.

> What emerges in conclusion is a perception of public space by the new generations that is the daughter of the socialist legacy of the 70s that characterized the history of Bologna in Italy. What is missing in this perception is the possibility of implementing it due to the lack of political legacy from previous generations, of social cohesion and ability to live in diversity and contradictions as well as the presence of strong institutional repression.

Shifting back to youth perception towards public spaces, based on the data collected with youth across various locations, their perceptions of public spaces were explored in terms of definition, utilization, and desirable qualities. Youth expressed a strong desire for public spaces that support group activities suited to their age and lifestyle. In Lebanon, youth mentioned key factors in their evaluation of whether to use a space include aesthetic elements, which are closely linked to amenities, cleanliness, facilities, accessibility, and safety. Safety, in particular, is often emphasized by young females, especially in urban contexts, as a critical requirement for any space and it is a common need for youth in the three countries. Non-Lebanese youth, Palestinians in Amman and foreigners in Bologna often highlight safety as a key concern, noting that feeling secure and accepted by local communities significantly influences their comfort and willingness to engage with public spaces.

Another notable trend in responses is the increasing expectation for public spaces to offer free internet access. Growing up in a digital age, today's youth view public spaces not just as physical locations like parks or squares, but as places where they can actively engage in decision-making, freely express opinions, and collaborate towards solutions. This shift highlights a growing desire for public spaces to foster a sense of belonging and to be places where individuals feel truly safe and included.

Across the three contexts; Jordan (Shams), Lebanon (Horsh Beirut), and Italy (Treno in Bologna); youth seek more than just access to public space; they seek belonging, safety, and voice. Yet, youth engagement with public spaces reveals both convergences and sharp contrasts shaped by governance structures, socio-political climates, and cultural expectations. Eventually, youth in all contexts are not passive consumers of space, they are active agents shaping, reinterpreting, and reclaiming public life, often in the margins of official urban policy. Although youth in the three countries think they are different, they share similar needs and face some common challenges, even if the reasons are not the same.

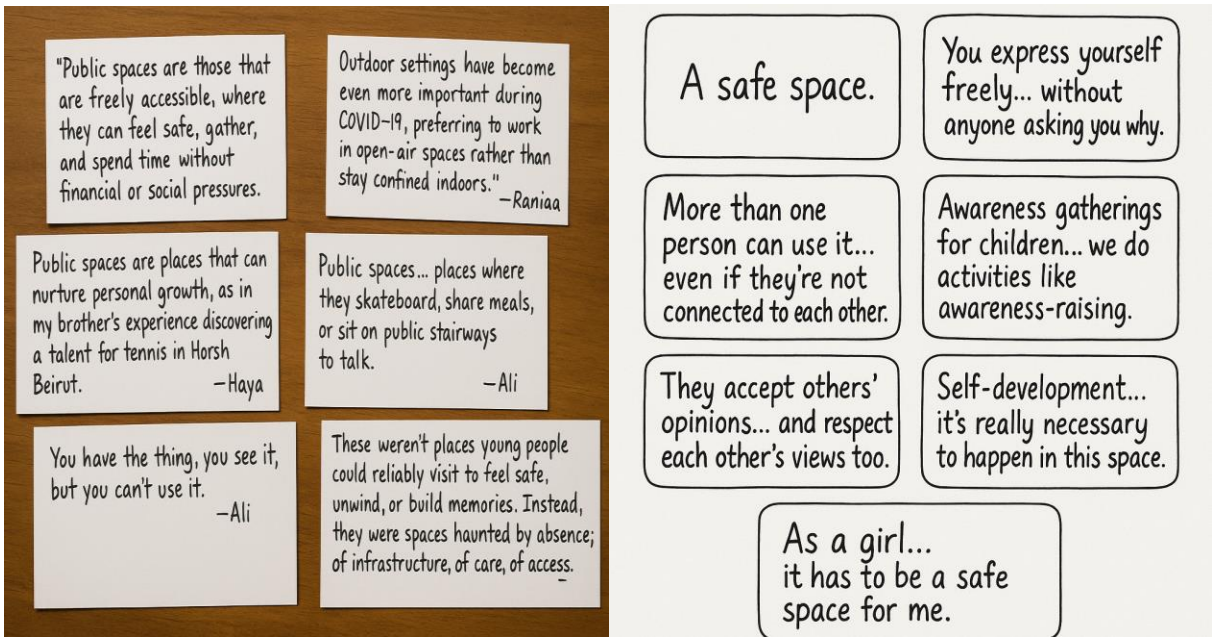

Figure 22: Quotes from youth about the definition of public spaces
Source: Research team

In Lebanon, youth experience a growing disconnection from public spaces due to fragmented urban planning and political divisions, with informal practices becoming a means of reclaiming space. In Jordan, youth seek emotional safety and belonging within "safe spaces," often redefining public space as enclosed, protected environments. Meanwhile, in Italy, public space is viewed as a site for both social interaction and personal retreat, but challenges such as political fragmentation and gender discrimination limit youth's access and engagement. Across all three countries, youth consistently highlight safety as a primary concern when evaluating public spaces, with a particular emphasis on the need for safe environments for young females. Additionally, the growing expectation for public spaces to offer free internet access reflects a shift in how public spaces are perceived, not just as physical locations but as platforms for engagement, collaboration, and expression. Youth in all contexts also emphasize the importance of belonging and the ability to participate in decision-making processes that affect the design and use of public spaces. The redefinition of public space by youth in Lebanon, Jordan, and Italy shows the gap between formal urban infrastructure and the needs of young people. In response, youth have become active agents in shaping, reclaiming, and redefining public spaces, often through informal practices, grassroots initiatives, and alternative spaces. Public spaces, in this context, are not merely places for recreation but sites of social, political, and emotional significance for youth, who are striving to develop spaces of safety, expression, and community in increasingly fragmented urban environments.

5.2 Governance and Management of Public Spaces

This section presents the governance and management of public spaces in Lebanon, Jordan, and Italy. The governance of public spaces across Italy, Lebanon, and Jordan reveals different approaches shaped by local political structures, resource availability, and cultural priorities.

Lebanon; fragmented authority and civil society interventions: Lebanon's municipalities, legally, are nominally responsible for managing local affairs, including public spaces. Yet in practice, the effectiveness of municipal governance is affected by the availability of resources, political fragmentation, and limited technical capacity. Beirut, despite its symbolic importance, exemplifies the gap between legal mandate and practical impact. Spaces like Horsh Beirut have suffered from neglect, prolonged closures, and exclusionary policies influenced by sectarian and political dynamics.

In Beirut, the situation of the municipality differs from that of other municipalities in Lebanon. The structure of local governance in Beirut is unique: the authority of the elected mayor is subordinated to a state representative affiliated with the Ministry of Interior. Executive power within the municipality is vested in the governor, while the 24-member municipal council holds legislative authority. The council is chaired by a president, who cannot implement decisions adopted by the council without the governor's approval. Thus, the governor simultaneously holds executive power and supervises/monitors the council's actions. These particularities in the structure of Beirut's municipality are closely tied to confessional concerns. Power-sharing between representatives of the Christian and Muslim communities has long been a guiding principle during municipal elections. This was reflected in the recent amendment to the electoral law for the upcoming municipal elections in May 2025, where Parliament introduced a special provision for Beirut: candidate lists must be complete to ensure equality between Muslim and Christian representatives. Thus, the basis of municipal governance is rooted more in confessionalism and political balancing than in development.

The governance of public spaces in Lebanon often reflects national political tensions, with local authorities implementing discriminatory policies; such as denying access to public gardens for Syrian refugees; despite being under the same municipal umbrella. This politicization of space changed the role of public areas as inclusive environments for cohesion and interaction. The governance of public spaces in Lebanon also presents significant challenges. Procol notes that despite the existence of public space committees within municipalities, the management and maintenance of these spaces often fall to private companies, leading to a lack of accountability and poor followup. The lack of vision for the management of these spaces, compounded by mismanagement and inconsistent funding, means that public spaces frequently fall into neglect. This issue extends to the legal framework as well. The coordination with local authorities often lacks transparency,

and there is no unified approach to the management of public spaces, making it difficult for the public to engage meaningfully with the spaces. In turn, this leaves youth and other community members uncertain about how to get involved in decision-making processes regarding public spaces.

In response to these challenges, civil society organizations like NAHNOO have emerged as vital actors in reclaiming and revitalizing public spaces. Through campaigns, participatory workshops, and collaborations with local authorities, they promote a more inclusive and community-oriented model of governance. For instance, in Horsh Beirut a committee from residents, experts and activists was established through the support of NAHNOO to manage the park. However, the path remains challenging: bureaucratic, inconsistent enforcement, and the absence of participatory frameworks hinder the institutionalization of community involvement. Youth voices, while present in advocacy campaigns, still struggle for sustained influence in public space governance. Procol's own experience with local municipalities, particularly in some projects in Tripoli, illustrates how security concerns often affect the desire for improving public spaces. The local community expressed more concern about law enforcement and safety than about creating or enhancing public spaces. Procol notes that such priorities reflect broader governance issues, where the lack of law enforcement contributes to a feeling of insecurity that limits the potential of public spaces to foster social interaction or community engagement.

There is a garden "Jnaynet Hassan Al Khaled", near our office, which became a symbol of urban mismanagement. Originally envisioned as a green space, the garden fell victim to poor planning; with a parking lot constructed under the park, uprooting trees in the process. "It's still in ruins," PROCOL

This example reflects on the disappointment of seeing a promising public space left incomplete and abandoned due to lack of funding and the municipality's failure to follow through on the renovation plans.

Procol also cited the example of Karantina park, a park renovated by an organization called Catalytic Action. However, even after the renovation, the park was only accessible under strict conditions, with representatives from the organization controlling entry. Currently in partnership between Catalytic action and NAHNOO Karantina garden to manage and activate it. The garden is open to the public. This limited access calls into question the nature of what constitutes a "public" space. If only certain groups are allowed entry or if people are restricted from freely using these spaces, the concept of publicness is undermined. *"Public spaces should be accessible to all,"* Procol argued, emphasizing that the public's trust in authorities is fragile when it comes to the maintenance and availability of these spaces.

Participants in this study also pointed out that there is a general mistrust between the government and the people. The state, on one hand, is hesitant to invest in maintaining public spaces, often citing financial limitations, while people on the other hand do not feel a sense of ownership over these spaces due to their poor state. This mistrust manifests in both physical and social terms; people are hesitant to invest time or energy into spaces that they feel are not "theirs" to care for. This lack of mutual responsibility exacerbates the challenges facing Lebanon's public spaces.

"it's just about opening the space and keeping it clean and safe"

"Public spaces can't be inclusive if the rules change all the time and no one explains why." Mohamad & Larissa

"There's a gap between the authorities and the people who actually use the space." Rania

"We need more transparency; just tell us what's allowed and why." Larissa

"Better spaces start with better communication." Haya

"If we're not part of the conversation, how can public spaces reflect our needs?" Rania

"It's not just about opening the gates; it's about opening a dialogue." Haya

Jordan; centralized governance with limited community autonomy: In Amman, public spaces are largely governed by centralized bodies such as the Greater Amman Municipality (GAM), the Ministry of Culture, and private developers. Official cultural venues, like the Osama Al-Mashini Theater and the Royal Cultural Center, fall under government management and funding, with a mandate to support theatrical groups and promote cultural programming. While this centralized model ensures structure and continuity, it also restricts grassroots participation and results in a cultural offering that remains largely traditional and repetitive.

Community involvement exists but tends to be limited to event participation rather than decision-making or long-term management. Although these institutions organize workshops and performances, youth-led or community-initiated programming is rare. Furthermore, grassroots venues in historic neighborhoods like Jabal Weibdeh are increasingly threatened by gentrification and economic pressures. Rising rents and commercialization are displacing creative spaces and replacing them with consumption-driven enterprises, prompting local voices to call for "more creative spaces and fewer restaurants."

Recent political instability and regional conflict—particularly after October 7, 2023, have further curtailed cultural activities, with many youth adopting solidarity-driven boycotts or

disengagement. This context highlights a governance model that remains state-led and top-down, with limited space for independent community governance or youth empowerment.

While the Greater Amman Municipality (GAM) plays a central role in managing official public spaces and cultural venues, youth centers such as *Shams, Jadal… Communities* operate within a more hybrid governance model that blends grassroots initiative with donor-based funding and limited municipal interaction. These spaces are neither entirely state-led nor completely autonomous. Instead, they function in a delicate ecosystem shaped by local needs, international donor agendas, and shifting urban policies.

Shams Community, for instance, emerged as a youth-driven initiative responding to a noticeable absence of inclusive, accessible public spaces for dialogue and expression. Unlike state-run venues, which often focus on formal cultural production and traditional programming, Shams is informal by design, it is agile, community-responsive, and anchored in social practice rather than performance. It creates space for workshops, civic engagement, creative writing, music, and debates, with a focus on intercultural dialogue and social justice. Youth from across Jordan and various refugee backgrounds gather here not only to express themselves but also to co-create knowledge and build solidarity.

In terms of governance, Shams does not operate under GAM, but it must still negotiate with municipal authorities, particularly when organizing events in public areas or attempting to access resources. While the municipality may grant logistical permissions or minimal support, the relationship remains transactional rather than collaborative. There are few structured mechanisms for long-term municipal-youth center partnerships, and the state tends to view such initiatives as external or temporary rather than as strategic partners in urban youth development.

At some organizations, young people are not passive recipients of programs; they are designers, facilitators, and organizers. This horizontal governance model contrasts with the top-down cultural approach of GAM or the Ministry of Culture, where youth engagement is typically limited to participation, not leadership.

Another type of organization in Amman is Tajalla. Tajalla is a cultural and social center in one of the most upscale areas of Amman, surrounded by embassies and royal buildings. From the outside, it doesn't feel like a place that's easy to reach. To get in, you have to pass a security checkpoint, and access is only granted if you have an appointment or are known to the staff. *"The royal family requested it," one of the founders explained.* Inside, however, Tajalla is warm and welcoming. The founders have created a beautiful space filled with art, music, and life. One of them, a well-known cultural figure with ties to both the government and the arts, says the space was given to them by the Ministry of Culture, but everything inside was renovated and built up by their team. They host projects for young people, especially women, and run workshops, concerts, and artist residencies. Still,

even with support from the Ministry, working in the cultural field isn't easy. "*We have to do everything under their control," the founder.* She even mentioned that when dealing with government officials, she changes her accent to show her background and gain trust. While they try to stay close to official institutions, most of their funding has to come from outside, since local funding is very limited.

Tajalla is trying to build a community; one that connects people across different social classes through culture and creativity. But the pressure of navigating bureaucracy, maintaining relationships with powerful actors, and ensuring safety adds complexity to their work. As the project manager said, *"It's hard to live in Amman, especially if you're not from here."* Yet, despite all that, Tajalla continues to create a space where music, stories, and community can grow; offering young people a chance to connect and express themselves in a city where public cultural spaces remain limited and tightly controlled.

Italy; between institutions and civil society: Since 2014, Bologna has been a pioneer in Italy in introducing the "Regulation on collaboration between citizens and the Administration for the care and regeneration of urban common goods". This regulation has established an idea of shared administration by proposing Collaboration Pacts, i.e. tools that allow citizens, both individually and in association, to take care of material common goods (such as squares, streets, green areas) and immaterial common goods (such as cultural, educational and social projects). To date, over 1,200 Pacts have been signed, with a significant acceleration in recent years thanks to the revision of the regulation and the recognition of shared administration as an implementing principle of the principle of subsidiarity.

Also within shared administration are the Neighborhood Houses, public places managed by civic entities (associations, third sector entities) in collaboration with the municipal administration. These spaces are open to the community and promote sociality, the experimentation of new services and proximity practices. They constitute a widespread civic infrastructure that supports and welcomes citizens' initiatives, enhancing intergenerational and intercultural exchange to generate social cohesion. The municipality also provides thematic laboratories and participatory planning to involve citizens in the design and management of public spaces. For example, the "Spaces Laboratory" aims to redesign administrative policies and practices to enable new uses of spaces, starting from the needs expressed by citizens to be concretized in ideas to be proposed that will then be put to a vote. These laboratories encourage collaboration between institutions, citizens and other actors in the territory. As a backdrop to all this, the idea of shared administration should take into account the individual needs of the neighborhood. In fact, for each area there are "proximity agents" with the task of activating paths of political involvement and participatory planning with the people of the territory.

The governance of public spaces in Bologna stands out for an innovative model based on civic participation, collaboration between citizens and institutions and shared management of common goods. However, it is essential to highlight the critical issues in the governance of public spaces in Bologna. Some observers highlight how increasing privatization and centralized management can limit civic participation and equal access to public spaces. It is essential to continue promoting shared administration practices and ensure that all citizens have equal opportunities to participate in the life of the city. Access to shared practices in fact presents many difficulties and gaps. In fact the main problem of shared administration in Bologna – and more generally of the model of Collaboration Pacts – is the risk of inequality in access and participation.Not all citizens have the same resources, skills, time or social networks to propose or manage a Collaboration Pact. This leads to: predominance of already structured groups (cultural associations, well-organized committees); exclusion, or poor participation, of more fragile subjects (young people, migrants, low-income people, non-digitized); possible "civic divide" between more active neighborhoods and those with less social capital. Another critical issue is the unbalanced relationship between citizens and administration because in theory the relationship is equal, but in practice it is the administration that decides which proposals to accept, how to structure the pacts, which spaces or goods to grant. Some scholars talk about an "asymmetric co-production", where citizens do a lot of voluntary work, but the decision-making power remains public. Agreements often work well at the beginning, but: hey lack stable tools to support continuity (training, economic resources, technical support); there may be a discharge of responsibility from the public body to the citizens, without however giving them adequate tools to manage the space in the long term.

The main risk of shared administration is finally the risk (already implemented) of institutionalizing and legalizing culture from below and implement practices of self-management of urban spaces (like urban commons in cities such as New York, Berlin, Barcelona and the community gardens, legalized squats, civic trusts etc) by stealing the language of the movements and creating the illusion of being truly inclusive despite the power remaining purely governmental. How can we talk about shared administration if power is not equally redistributed?

The question of legalizing grassroots culture remains open. Despite the existence of regulations such as shared administration, many social centers remain in a legal gray area. Tensions with local and national authorities, combined with the perception of some political sectors of these spaces as hotbeds of illegality, raise questions about the long-term sustainability of this model.

The last problematic point brought by the participatory budget is the model of the city that it supports and reflects and the type of urban interventions implemented. Limited and contingent interventions that do not really affect the urban structure of the city and

> consequently the quality of life and health of the people who live and pass through it. Security interventions such as inserting pedestrian crossings, coloring the streets and removing them from car traffic, rationing sports fields, putting up street lamps are positive interventions but partial, apparent, very similar to each other and not aligned with respect to the needs of the people but with respect to an idea of a dehumanized and depersonalized city.

The governance of public spaces in Italy, Lebanon, and Jordan is marked by a dynamic interplay between state control, civil society involvement, and the inclusion of youth voices; it reveals distinct yet interconnected challenges and approaches, shaped by each country's political structures, resource availability, and cultural priorities. While each country has its own governance model, common issues such as political fragmentation, the role of civil society, youth engagement, and the influence of privatization and centralization emerge as critical points.

In Lebanon, the governance of public spaces is characterized by political fragmentation and a lack of coordination across multiple layers of authority. Municipalities are legally responsible for managing public spaces, yet political instability, sectarianism, and resource limitations hinder their ability to effectively maintain these areas. Public spaces, despite their symbolic value, have often fallen into neglect, Lebanon's public spaces often reflect national political tensions, where policies, such as denying Syrian refugees access to public parks, have transformed these spaces from inclusive areas for social cohesion into politically charged sites of exclusion. The absence of institutionalized participatory frameworks and the reliance on project-based initiatives means that youth involvement in governance remains limited, despite some advocacy efforts. Even as local communities push for greater control, systemic challenges such as bureaucratic policies undermine their efforts.

In Jordan, the governance of public spaces is highly centralized, with decision-making power primarily in the hands of the Greater Amman Municipality (GAM) and other state-controlled bodies. This centralized approach ensures a degree of continuity and uniformity in the management of public spaces, but it also affects grassroots involvement. The state predominantly controls public venues such as cultural centers and theaters, limiting opportunities for community-driven initiatives. However, youth-driven spaces present an alternative model of governance where local youth play an active role in shaping programming and engagement. Moreover, the dynamics in Amman highlight the difference between state control and the needs of local communities. The state's failure to integrate youth perspectives into governance continues to limit the transformative potential of public spaces for young people. This top-down approach also extends to the state's limited response to youth engagement in decision-making.

In contrast, Italy, particularly in Bologna, offers a more collaborative and inclusive model of public space governance. Bologna has been a pioneer in developing regulations that encourage citizen participation through Collaboration Pacts, which allow residents and civil society groups to manage urban spaces jointly with the municipality. This shared responsibility model fosters a sense of ownership and accountability among the community. However, the Bologna model also reveals its limitations resulting from the already

set programs by the local authorities. While civic engagement is encouraged, inequalities in access and participation persist. Moreover, the increasing privatization of urban spaces in Bologna has raised concerns about the potential for exclusionary practices, where the governance of public spaces may favor those with more resources and political influence.

Across all three countries, governance structures reflect a balance of top-down control and bottom-up activism, each with its own set of challenges and potential for change. Despite these differences, common threads emerge across all three countries. One of the key issues is the limited involvement of youth in the governance of public spaces. This lack of meaningful engagement in governance means that public spaces often fail to meet the social, cultural, and recreational needs of young people. Furthermore, all three countries face challenges related to the sustainability of public spaces. In Lebanon and Jordan, the lack of long-term institutional support and the dominance of private sector involvement in space management result in public spaces being neglected, underfunded, or excluded from community engagement. In Italy, while there is a strong institutional framework supporting civic collaboration, issues of inequality and the privatization of spaces threaten the long-term inclusivity of the system.

5.3 Youth and Public Spaces: Use, Accessibility & Barriers, Comfort, and Sociability

According to the youth who participated in this study in all countries, the success of public spaces is strongly linked to the range and quality of activities they offer. Engaging activities not only attract visitors but also encourage young people to return, helping to establish a space for youth.

- **Use and activities**

Across all countries Lebanon, Italy, and Jordan, public spaces occupy a paradoxical position in the lives of youth: they are simultaneously places of opportunity and sites of exclusion. Young people describe public spaces as essential for self-expression, socialization, and escape from everyday pressures, yet their access to and comfort in these spaces is often restricted by broader social, cultural, and infrastructural constraints. These findings highlight how uneven urban development, social perceptions, and governance gaps shape youth relationships with public space across the different contexts. Sense of attachment, uniqueness, and value in the space. However, in Lebanon, few public spaces are intentionally designed with the specific needs, interests, and preferences of youth in mind.

In Lebanon, public spaces have a unique significance. The youth often view these spaces as a chance to escape from the pressures of daily life and express themselves, especially through informal means like music, socializing, or activism. However, the constraints of poorly managed spaces mean that these opportunities are often limited. *"Public spaces are a way for young people to find themselves, to belong, and to express their creativity,"* Procol observed. Yet, the reality is that many public spaces are either physically unsafe, inaccessible, or culturally segregated, making it difficult for young people to fully embrace these spaces.

Some organizations, however, are working to fill this gap. In Lebanon, TIRO Association for Arts, for instance, actively engages youth by offering a wide range of cultural and artistic activities such as theater, crafts, music, painting, and other creative workshops. These programs provide young people with opportunities to express themselves, meet others, and develop new skills in a supportive environment. Similarly, NAHNOO adopts a participatory approach in its work with youth, involving them in program planning and implementation. The organization focuses on capacity-building, life skills training, and volunteer engagement in managing and activating public spaces, creating spaces where youth can not only grow individually but also build a sense of community.

Comparable efforts can be found in Bologna, where youth spaces such as CAV and HAYAT are supported by the municipality but still offer room for intercultural exchange and creative expression. Likewise, in Amman, several independent and community-based organizations; including Shams Community, Darat al Funun, Jadal for Knowledge and Culture, and Al Balad Theater; serve as hubs where youth from different nationalities and backgrounds come together to engage in dialogue, art, music, and activism. These spaces not only provide a venue for cultural exchange but also help promote social cohesion and youth empowerment across diverse communities.

These types of spaces highlight a shared regional trend: youth are not merely passive users but active participants, co-creating the identity of the spaces they inhabit. A participant in Amman reflected that, *"In Jadal, we feel like it's our place. We bring our ideas, we create together—it's not just a space, it's a community."* In Lebanon, Procol noted similarly that *"Public spaces are a way for young people to find themselves, to belong, and to express their creativity."*

In Jordan, youth engagement with public spaces, as explored through various sites like Darat Space, Jadal Space, and Tajalla, reveals a pattern of selective usage driven by both social and cultural factors. Public spaces are often perceived as places of escape, socialization, and identity formation, but the extent of their use varies significantly based on their physical, political, and social contexts.

Spaces such as Jadal, Shams, TIRO, NAHNOO, Radio Cap , Labas or Camere D'aria in Italy demonstrate how youth utilize these areas not only for recreation but also as sites of cultural and political expression. Jadal Space, with its vibrant blend of community-oriented activities (e.g., free meals, cultural events, and a popular bookshop) and politically charged symbolism (such as Palestinian flags), emerges as a multifunctional space that attracts youth from diverse backgrounds. The underlying narrative here is one of empowerment; youth in these spaces are not merely consumers of culture but also active creators and participants in discussions about national identity and social cohesion. However, spaces like Tajalla present a contrasting dynamic. While Tajalla's high-end location and beautiful facilities suggest inclusivity, the physical barrier at its entrance, combined with its association with the elite and government, restricts its use to a select group of individuals. In this case, the youth who frequent it are likely to be from wealthier, more privileged backgrounds. While it holds great cultural significance, its actual accessibility to the broader youth population is limited, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Public spaces that offer a variety of activities tend to attract a diverse range of people from different socio-economic and educational backgrounds. This diversity encourages social interaction, idea exchange, and a stronger sense of community. Participants in the three countries indicate that youth typically engage in activities such as sports, socializing, relaxing, and picnicking in public spaces. When selecting a space to visit, youth prioritize factors like the availability of gathering areas, the types of activities offered, and the ease of access. Interestingly, in certain contexts, youth tend to favor "non-public" spaces over formal public ones, reflecting the importance of informal settings in building a sense of belonging and community.

Female youth typically prioritize safety and are more inclined to gather in groups in specific spaces, while some may even choose to venture outside their local area depending on the social environment. Male youth, on the other hand, are more likely to gather in streets or main squares, often without significant concerns about time or safety.

Across various locations, a significant number of youth report not having a clear favorite public space. Instead, they tend to gather informally in spaces such as streets or small areas between buildings, reflecting the social dynamics of each locality. Female youth may prefer rooftops or quieter, more closed spaces to ensure both safety and space. This highlights the diversity of preferences among youth and emphasizes the need for public spaces to accommodate varying social dynamics and provide spaces that foster both safety and social interaction.

The general trend observed is that "closed" spaces in all three countries provide not just a location but also a sense of community and purpose; such as Darat Space, TIRO Theatre, NAHNOO, TRENO or others, where youth feel a sense of ownership and responsibility. These spaces focus on providing cultural programming, networking opportunities, and a platform for activism, which are integral to youth identity in public space.

- **Accessibility and linkages**

Accessibility and linkages were identified as crucial elements for successful public spaces. Easy and safe access, regardless of physical ability, socioeconomic status, or transportation mode, ensures that everyone in the community can benefit from public spaces. In the three countries, urban and rural contexts also influence the dynamics of accessibility. In less dense, rural environments, informal networks, stronger social ties, and lower traffic volumes may support a sense of safety and ease of movement, especially for children. However, even in such settings, appropriate infrastructure, such as safe pedestrian crossings or traffic-calming measures, remains essential to ensure child safety. In contrast, urban areas often contend with busier roads, higher population density, and diverse user groups, which can complicate accessibility and perceptions of safety, especially for youth and children. Bologna Città 30 for example is an innovative project that aims to transform the city into a safer, quieter and more accessible environment for all. By reducing the speed limit on all urban roads to 30 km/h, Bologna is trying to make the city more accessible

to all by removing architectural barriers, improving sidewalks, creating protected crossings and creating squares and school streets.

Beyond physical infrastructure, public spaces are shaped by deeper psychological and cultural dynamics that influence who feels welcome. One major issue is the forced usage of public spaces; a phenomenon where limited access to private areas or socio-political pressures compel individuals to occupy available spaces, often under less-than-ideal circumstances. Procol suggests that understanding this dynamic requires deeper engagement with individuals who have lived through displacement.

One of the significant barriers to youth engagement with public spaces, as observed by the organizations working with youths and in public spaces, is the restrictive nature of their design. The use of physical boundaries, such as high fences around spaces like Horsh Beirut, creates psychological barriers that prevent people from entering. This sense of being confined or unable to see what's inside discourages potential visitors. The lack of transparency and the unpredictable opening hours further exacerbate this issue. Procol organization, for example, explains that even parks that could otherwise be considered inviting, such as Al Sanayeh garden, are often perceived as spaces primarily for families, not for youth looking to hang out with friends or engage in recreational activities.

"You can't even see what's inside. It makes people feel like they're not welcome, especially youth." Interviewee, PROCOL

In a very similar way, the Centro Anni Verdi (CAV) of the Treno della Barca is characterized by the same accessibility barrier. The educational center in fact, although it enjoys a good reputation among the guys who attend it assiduously and with pleasure, is not visible from the outside for privacy reasons. In order to protect the minors who attend it, in fact, the place is accessible only by ringing a bell which implies a limited and exclusive accessibility. Only those who know the place and have contacts can enjoy it. Similar dynamics unfold in Amman, where spaces like Tajalla; though beautifully designed and rich in programming; are situated in elite neighborhoods and subtly convey exclusion through architectural design and social signaling.

One youth from East Amman noted, *"It's not for us. We feel judged when we go there. It's like we don't belong."*

On the contrary, in Bologna a space like Giardini Fava, an outdoor basketball court visible from the outside, is able to welcome and bring together people with different and opposing life backgrounds. Although the park is fenced, the community of young people who know the place is very large. The open and recognizable space and the use of sport as a means of connection, undoubtedly facilitate accessibility to the court even if the gender dynamic is very present.

"The Fava court is the heart of this "Basket City". Here they don't just play basketball, they create a community united by a passion for the sport. This place has seen the birth of friendships, local legends

and a deep sense of belonging. The atmosphere is unique, every game tells stories of commitment and passion. If you love basketball, this court is a must-see: more than just a place to play." Interviewee

In addition to physical and psychological barriers, location also plays a crucial role in youth reluctance to visit public spaces. Parks or recreational areas that are far removed from universities or popular youth hubs often face lower foot traffic. In contrast, Procol cites a positive example from Furn El Shebbek, where a renovated park called "Jnaynet Ahel el Dar" has garnered attention thanks to the involvement of a local guard, a system of fines for littering, and a strong community investment in its upkeep. Such initiatives demonstrate that with the right management and community engagement, public spaces can indeed attract and retain youth participation.

Accessibility challenges are particularly difficult for people with disabilities, especially in Amman. Known as the "City of Seven Hills," Amman's topography inherently complicates movement. Despite the introduction of laws and regulations to improve accessibility, their implementation has been insufficient. For example, in 2019, a survey found that only 2% of buildings in Jordan met accessibility standards. Many public buildings, including ministries and government institutions, have ramps and elevators, but they often do not meet requirements for people with sensory disabilities, such as audible signals or tactile floors.

Amman's public transportation system is also fragmented and often inaccessible. Although the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system was designed with the intention of being accessible, the lack of adequate surrounding infrastructure, such as sidewalks and safe pedestrian crossings, compromises its effectiveness for people with disabilities. Bus stations often lack tactile or acoustic signals, making it difficult for blind or visually impaired people to find their way around.

Cultural perceptions further reinforce exclusion. Across Lebanon and Jordan, public spaces are often coded by class particularly those associated with lower-income or marginalized communities. There is a prevailing notion that public spaces are places for the less affluent, and this affects youth attitudes. For instance, in Beirut, the Corniche is sometimes perceived by wealthier youth as a space "for the lower class," discouraging their use despite its openness. Similarly, in Jordan, class divides are reinforced by location and the type of programming offered, with youth from East Amman or refugee backgrounds often feeling out of place in West Amman's more curated venues. In Amman, spaces like Tajalla; despite their quality programming; are located in elite neighborhoods, subtly signaling exclusion. One youth from East Amman explained, *"It's not for us. We feel judged when we go there. It's like we don't belong."* This phenomenon of cultural coding is not unique to Lebanon and Jordan. In Bologna, certain politicized spaces carry strong cultural narratives that can alienate those unfamiliar with them, reinforcing exclusivity even within spaces nominally open to all. Similarly, in Bologna, many spaces (especially highly politicized ones) are coded by an elitist and exclusionary cultural coding. Spaces such as Labas are independent of specific cultural narratives that can make one feel alienated if one does not belong to or is not familiar with them.

"People don't come here because they think it's strange even if they have a bottom-up vision. Very often they don't even have time and education in art. Many associations have an elitist conception of art. They have social projects for migrants and migrant women, oriented projects, directed but specific projects. There are many problems attracting people. Very often the lower social classes rightly need to earn money. We had a lady who came here to sew, after she didn't come anymore because she couldn't earn money. You have to start working with them with sewing courses, cooking, things from which they can earn money. Start from something concrete!!." Camere D'aria Interviewee

"People feel that the public space is not maintained for them, and therefore they see little reason to invest in its care." Mayssa, PROCOL

"A space works when people feel a sense of belonging, from this comes the desire to take care of it. When people come only to take it doesn't work. When they come to take care of it, the space improves, the years pass and people transform it. When people are fond of a place, the place works. It's an attitude." Camere D'aria Interviewee

At times, public spaces carry invisible social barriers unrelated to physical design. In Ashrafieh, Beirut, for example, a park became a site of tension not due to its infrastructure, but because it was predominantly used by Syrian children in a largely Christian neighborhood, subtly communicating exclusion to both groups. However, positive examples exist that showcase what inclusive public spaces can look like. Al-Shiyah Park in Beirut stands out for being intentionally maintained, accessible, and welcoming. Although details of its management remain unclear, its success highlights the impact of consistent care and genuine public-mindedness.

Access is also shaped by gender, class, and urban geography. In Lebanon and Jordan, female youth often reported being more selective in choosing where to go, emphasizing safety, privacy, and group presence. In contrast, male youth were more likely to use open or street-based spaces with fewer safety concerns. Still, many youth, especially from underprivileged backgrounds, gravitate toward informal or "non-public" spaces like rooftops, empty lots, or corners between buildings; spaces they form into sites of comfort and interaction out of necessity such as the case in Neighborhoods like Kaskas in Beirut and suburbs in Amman.

- **Comfort and Image**

Findings highlight the importance of the factors of comfort, image, and sociability in public spaces in creating a safe, welcoming, and engaging environment for visitors. Comfortable seating, shaded areas, lighting, and amenities contribute to the overall comfort of a public space, while a positive image attracts more visitors and increases community pride. Safety measures such as lighting, surveillance cameras, and trained security personnel promote a sense of safety and well-being. The study reveals that safety and amenities are the most important factors affecting the frequency and duration of youth's use of public spaces. Perception of safety greatly influences the duration of stay, with concerns about feeling safe and lighting affecting their visit and presence in public spaces. In some areas, being in a group and

accompanied by friends or family is considered sufficient for feeling safe. Gender plays a role in the accessibility and comfort of public spaces, with most of the youth perceiving public spaces to be unequally accessible by both genders. Societal expectations and cultural norms also influence women's use of public spaces. For example, in Amman, one of the most well-known public squares located near the Roman Theater is generally not perceived as safe by youth, even during the day. The exception is Fridays, the weekly public holiday in Jordan, when families gather in the square, bringing life and a sense of safety to the space. Outside of that, however, the square is often avoided by young people due to concerns about safety and a lack of welcoming infrastructure.

On the other hand, in Lebanon; specifically in the case of Horsh Beirut; youth often prefer to run around the perimeter of the park rather than inside it, particularly in the early morning or late afternoon. This preference is largely due to safety concerns, as the park is closed at night, lacks adequate lighting, has minimal security presence, and suffers from an overall shortage of maintenance and oversight.

Interestingly, perceptions of what increases or decreases safety vary significantly between the two contexts. Youth in Lebanon expressed a desire for the presence of surveillance cameras and police patrols, viewing them as reassuring and necessary for making public spaces feel safe. In Amman, however, many youth felt that the presence of police officers or security cameras created a sense of discomfort rather than safety, considering it as a form of surveillance or control rather than protection. This contrast highlights how cultural and political contexts shape youth perceptions of safety and trust in public space governance.

In Bologna, the Treno della Barca is considered a safe place by young people despite the fact that gender dynamics and differences are present here too. The Treno is in fact a comfortable place during the day but not so comfortable at night for girls who almost never visit the space after dark. Furthermore, the Treno is not only a covered and sheltered place that symbolically represents a place of protection, but it is also used in various ways for its architectural structure that allows you to walk, run, ride a scooter or bike, meet friends, sit and chat. It is essentially a place of passage, but also a meeting place and a community place.

- **Sociability**

Public spaces often foster two types of engagement: passive and active. Passive engagement involves low-intensity interaction with the environment, such as sitting on a bench, enjoying the view, or observing daily life. Active engagement, on the other hand, includes more direct and dynamic forms of participation like playing, exercising, attending events, or engaging in community activities. Both types of engagement are crucial for the vitality and inclusivity of public spaces. The question of how to make public spaces more youth-friendly remains critical. Several organizations working with youth across the three countries like Procol,Hayat, RADIO CAP, Camere D’aria, SHAMS , and NAHNOO highlighted the importance of creating spaces that are not only physically accessible but also inclusive in terms of design and function. Public spaces should not be limited to just parks or gardens but should include spaces for youth to engage in music, art, and other forms of self-expression.

"In this space you have the opportunity to test yourself and discover that you can do something, to your potential." Camere D'aria interviewee

To the Treno della Barca, for example, some spaces are jointly managed by the various associations appointed by the Municipality to be present in the area. These spaces, called "Passaporta", were born with the idea of putting them at the service of the community. A few months ago, with a new management, we reflected on the concept of beauty linked to an idea of belonging. In this perspective, in fact, following the idea that the more beautiful a space is, the more you want to stay there and live in it, the spaces were repainted and colored, giving them back an identity and creating fertile places for socialising and meeting people.

Moreover, ensuring that these spaces are safe; both physically and emotionally; is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging and ownership among young people.

In discussing public spaces in Lebanon, it highlighted a multifaceted relationship between individuals and the spaces they occupy. This relationship, which can sometimes be forced or born out of necessity, reflects broader societal issues and the complexities of public space utilization in Lebanon. Procol points out that, particularly in times of crisis, individuals might seek an escape in public spaces, adapting to their environment in order to normalize their situation. This includes actions such as bringing personal items like shisha to the space to create a semblance of comfort or routine. This coping mechanism is an important factor in understanding how public spaces are used, particularly in difficult contexts. Across various towns and neighborhoods in Lebanon, both forms of engagement can be observed in different ways, depending on the characteristics of the space and the cultural practices of its users. In the coastal/ rural areas for instance, the beach and the town square offer opportunities for both passive and active use. People often gather to sit, watch the sea, or spend time under shaded spots, while others engage in walking, informal games, or social interaction. Along the coastal corniches, the natural setting encourages people to jog, bike, walk, and gather, while also providing benches and scenic spots that invite passive enjoyment and casual encounters.

In some towns in Lebanon and in Amman such as the roman theatre area and Al Weibdeh in addition to the Piazza Maggiore in Bologna, squares function much like traditional gathering spaces; similar to ancient agoras; where residents meet for evening walks, conversations, or to share street food. These squares serve as central points of social life, accommodating everything from quiet people-watching to cultural and religious events organized by local institutions like churches or municipalities. In smaller towns, where the pace of life is more relaxed, such spaces support a mix of informal gatherings and community events. In Bologna, for example, "Piazza Verdi", a renowned university square, is considered (even though the city council "coincidentally" started important works, taking it away from young people) an informal meeting and gathering space, a place for political declaration, entertainment and the creation of other and new ways of occupying the land. In Beirut specifically the main square " Martyrs square" is not considered as public space unless reclaimed by youth during manifestation or some big events and

holidays. In Beirut suburbs, informal street areas and cafés serve as vibrant meeting points, though safety concerns lead many women to gather in private or elevated spaces like rooftops.

Usually, the balance between passive and active engagement in these settings is shaped by the town's or the neighborhood size, the availability of infrastructure, and local traditions. In places like rural areas in Lebanon, Al Weibdeh neighborhood in Amman and Treno della Barca in Bologna, where spaces are centrally located and easily accessible, public squares or streets act as key sites for community life. They host seasonal events, religious celebrations, and casual daily interactions. In contrast, in denser urban neighborhoods such as Beirut and old Amman, public spaces may serve more specialized functions; commercial use, circulation routes, or resting points; limiting their versatility for broader forms of engagement.

In Amman, Treno and Beirut; Tarik Jdide for example , lively street life and improvised gathering spots; such as abandoned plots or local cafés; become key public spaces. These areas transform into shared social zones where children play and adults meet. For women and female youth, rooftops and upper floors often serve as alternative gathering spaces, offering more privacy and a greater sense of safety compared to the more exposed street level.

In the absence of welcoming and inclusive public spaces, in The three countries, urban youth often turn to streets in their neighborhoods. However, safety concerns and social norms can restrict this kind of engagement; especially for young women, who may face barriers to gathering in visible or mixed-gender spaces. This limits their opportunities for connection and contributes to a broader sense of disconnection from their immediate environment.

5.4 Crises and Public Spaces -Case of Lebanon

Lebanon, and particularly Beirut, serves as a powerful example of how public spaces become essential during times of crisis. In the context of ongoing political instability, economic challenges, and the 2024 war, public spaces have provided a unique refuge for communities. They have not only acted as physical spaces of escape but also as sites for collective memory, solidarity, and resilience. This section presents the significance of these spaces, focusing on how they contribute to the social and emotional wellbeing of youth.

Public spaces have always played a complex role in Lebanon's social and political life, but crises; whether war, revolution, economic collapse, or pandemic; redefine their meanings. Youth engagement reflects these transformations, moving between protest, survival, and everyday resilience. From the civil war to the 2019 movements, COVID-19 lockdowns, and the 2024 war, each moment reshaped how young people relate to shared spaces.

During the Lebanese Civil War, many public spaces were abandoned or repurposed as shelters. *"During such times, spaces like the Corniche, which runs along Beirut's seaside, became places where people from opposing factions could pass by without entering into direct confrontation." Mayssa/PROCOL.* This complex situation: where individuals from different backgrounds could share the same public space but still remain distant; reflects the complicated legacy of Lebanon's conflict. For older generations, particularly those from more politically divided areas like Ashrafieh or Mar Mkhayel, public spaces like the Corniche remain psychologically charged, and the trauma of the war continues to shape their willingness to return.

During 2019, youth demonstrated the powerful role that public spaces can play in fostering community and activism. These spaces became sites of social cohesion, where people from different backgrounds and sects could come together to protest. "The revolution showed us that public spaces are a powerful tool for mobilization," Rahaf/ Procol. Yet, after the revolution's momentum faded, public spaces once again became neglected and underused, a reflection of the country's broader political and social challenges. *"During such movements, the public space becomes more than a neutral zone; it transforms into a place of resistance, solidarity, and hope. Yet, despite this powerful use during extraordinary events, there is a broader reluctance to engage with public spaces in everyday life." Mayssa/ PROCOL.* While crises can alienate youth from public life, they also create openings for informal ownership and creativity. Haya draws attention to spaces like Martyrs' Square and the courtyard behind Al-Majidiyeh Mosque, where young people bring their own games and entertainment, transforming neglected or contested urban sites into meaningful spaces of resistance and expression. *These acts of re-appropriation serve as evidence of a persistent public imagination. They reflect a need not just for physical access, but for the ability to shape and animate the space; what Henri Lefebvre called "the right to the city." Haya*

During 2019, public spaces became vital sites for demonstrations and protests. Beirut's public squares, streets, and parks were not just places of leisure but transformed into arenas for collective action. *"The potential of public spaces during the revolution was immense," Procol* These spaces became a canvas for the people's grievances, aspirations, and unity, temporarily transcending their regular function. For the youth, these public spaces were more than just physical areas; they became symbols of resistance, empowerment, and hope.

Crises like the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the physical and social disconnection within public spaces. Procol reflected that during lockdowns, public spaces were often closed to prevent gatherings. This restriction affected not only the physical use of these spaces but also deepened the sense of isolation and disconnection among communities. *"The pandemic showed us how fragile our relationship with public spaces really is," Mayssa/Procol.* People became more dependent on private spaces, and the collective ownership of public spaces began to feel even more distant. When the COVID-19 lockdown began in 2020, what little access existed was completely cut off. The gates to parks were locked, and movement was policed. Even then, some youth like

Ali found brief windows to sneak in. Yet the memory of entering an empty, ghost-like park during lockdown only reinforced a recurring truth. *"These spaces were never truly for the public." Ali/SPOTLIGHT*

During the pandemic, many young people turned to the digital world for leisure and connection. Mohamad and Larissa mention how online habits like scrolling or gaming became more entrenched, creating a cultural shift away from physical public spaces. Yet, paradoxically, others, like Rania and Haya, say the pandemic renewed their appreciation for outdoor environments as vital outlets for fresh air and freedom.

In 2024, the war brought a new layer of complexity. Karam al-Ari's garden was transformed into an emergency zone, with certain political groups setting up makeshift kitchens to serve food to displaced families. The idea of the garden as a civic space was further diluted; it had become functional, but not communal. Parallel to this, grassroots efforts to revive the garden through tree-planting and gardening were undermined by theft and vandalism. Water tanks disappeared. Metal fences were stolen. Even the newly planted trees were uprooted and taken away. To young observers, this wasn't just about poverty or need; it pointed to a deeper erosion of public values, of any shared sense of responsibility for common space. It reflected a broken system where education around public behavior and collective ownership had been largely absent. Karem El Heresh, as Ali noted, was turned into something that resembled a kitchen too, but again, one controlled by political actors; not a space youth could step into, claim, or trust.

In Horsh Beirut, the crisis of access intensified. The war made the park's proximity to conflict zones a point of fear rather than freedom. The very idea of leisure became impossible. The Park was no longer a sanctuary; it was near military zones, aircraft noise, dust clouds, and uncertainty.

"Personally, to me, it played a massive role, since it is a barrier between Kaskas-Tariq Jdide and Ghbeireh, which was a targeted area during the 2024 war. My house is in front of the Horsh, and buildings 500+ meters[9] near us were targeted; however, the green open space acted as a protective barrier that created a safe zone for us. If there were buildings where the Horsh is, I am sure there would have been more damage, physically and mentally. It also offered a view for this side (Kaskas), witnessing people running, buildings collapsing, dust everywhere, etc."

The role of public space during wartime is particularly poignant. Haya speaks of Horsh Beirut as a "protective barrier" during the 2024 war, a rare green buffer between neighborhoods under threat. It offered both psychological and physical refuge in a moment of extreme instability. This view is

[9] During the 2024-2025 war on Lebanon, the israeli occupation forces through their Arabic-language spokesman released maps ordering residents to evacuate immediately and maintain a distance of at least 500 meters from designated areas.

echoed by Mohamad and Larissa, who describe their daily walks around Horsh as a form of mental decompression during the crisis.

The idea of ownership or belonging to public space also emerged as a complex issue during the war. Procol observed that displaced populations, especially those forced to seek shelter in public spaces, did not seem to form deep emotional connections to these locations. *"It was temporary,"* Procol remarked, reflecting the transient nature of displacement. Even as some individuals used these spaces for brief moments of refuge, they did not feel a sense of belonging to the area in a way that would suggest long-term ownership.

Public spaces in Lebanon have constantly changed meaning through times of crisis. They have been places of protest, survival, and emotional refuge for young people. Whether during war, revolution, or lockdown, these spaces showed both their importance and their fragility. They remain essential to how youth experience, resist, and imagine life in a troubled country.

5.5 Field reflections: Stories of Youth and Space

When asking youth about their needs in their neighborhoods and preferred public spaces, it became clear that young people across the three countries; Lebanon, Jordan, and Italy; share many common desires.

During a dynamic and reflective focus group held in Amman, Beirut, and Bologna, young participants expressed their views on what constitutes a good life in their neighborhoods and what is currently missing. The conversation opened with a broad question: *What do you need in your neighborhood to feel like you are living a life of quality and well-being?* This prompted a rich and multi-layered discussion, touching on physical infrastructure, emotional safety, community, and cultural expression.

A key desire repeated throughout the conversation was the need for inclusive and accessible public spaces. Participants emphasized the lack of playgrounds, parks, and safe areas for children to play, noting that the streets are often dangerous and unwelcoming. There is a lack of training centers or sports facilities. The absence of such spaces was seen as a major barrier to well-being.

Beyond physical infrastructure, the youth expressed a need for places that support their talents and creativity. Several participants spoke about the lack of appreciation or recognition for artistic expression. They often encounter mockery or dismissal from their families and communities when pursuing artistic interests. This lack of support can lead to isolation and disconnection with their environment. Youth in Shams, TIRO and TRENO; despite their efforts to change perceptions through theater and community work; they insisted on the importance of spaces where they can perform and be taken seriously; places that validate their passions and allow them to develop them further. The youth also pointed to the need for social development and community engagement. They spoke of wanting more social cohesion, and initiatives that promote acceptance of others' opinions.

Safety; especially for girls, was a significant theme. Young women in the three groups made it clear that many public spaces in their neighborhoods feel unsafe, particularly at night. This feeling of insecurity stems not just from physical threats, but also from the social perceptions and behaviors that discourage them from being visible in public spaces. They highlighted that while boys might feel safe moving freely, girls often face restrictions. Even in theoretically "public" spaces like promenades or neighborhood squares, the presence of large groups of unknown youth, especially boys, creates discomfort and fear.

"I only felt safe in commercial spaces like malls, where there is security." A female youth in Jordan

Others emphasized the influence of social media, they described the younger generation as increasingly disconnected from reading, learning, or engaging critically, a shift they see as making public spaces feel less socially stimulating.

Key among the needs are the need for their voices to be heard, a sense of safety, access to a variety of activities, and the availability of sport and cultural centers. However, in Lebanon and Amman specifically, young people also expressed a strong need for essential services such as proper lighting, cleanliness, and overall safety in public spaces. An additional need shared by most youth in Lebanon and Amman is the desire to be socially accepted, which they believe is essential to engage freely in their communities. This sense of seeking acceptance and belonging mirrors the experiences of foreign youth in Treno Della Barca, where the social dynamic similarly highlights the need for inclusivity and the ability to participate without discrimination.

It's important to note that youth in all three countries experience marginalization, in different ways. In Lebanon, the majority of young people feel marginalized by the authorities, as they are neither a priority in national policies nor included in local plans. Youth are often not mentioned in official documents, making them feel overlooked and excluded from decision-making processes that directly impact their lives.

The situation in Amman is somewhat different. Although youth are included in the Ministry of Youth’s strategic plans and budget allocations, there are significant restrictions placed on youth organizations. These limitations are framed around the need to align with "social and political norms," which restricts the freedom of these organizations to operate fully independently or with the autonomy that youth might desire.

Bologna's situation shares similarities with Amman in that youth organizations in the city are primarily municipal creations. These organizations are typically structured around pre-drafted programs, budgets, and agendas set by the local government. While this provides a degree of stability and support for youth programs, it also limits the degree of youth involvement in the design and direction of these initiatives, creating a more controlled environment compared to more grassroots-led organizations.

While youth in Lebanon, Jordan, and Italy share certain common needs, they often perceive themselves as distinct from their counterparts in other countries. Many young people expressed the belief that youth in other nations do not face the same challenges, which could stem from a lack of knowledge about the realities of youth experiences beyond their own borders. Additionally, some participants noted that social media can contribute to this perception by presenting a distorted or idealized image of youth life elsewhere. They argued that social media platforms, due to their widespread use and accessibility, can easily spread misleading or fabricated portrayals of youth experiences, which may inadvertently shape how young people view themselves in relation to others. This phenomenon highlights the role of media in shaping perceptions and underscores the need for more accurate, cross-cultural exchanges to bridge these gaps in understanding.

Figure 23: Drawings from the FGD with Youth in Amman, SHAMS
Source: Research team

"I am sure youth in Beirut do not suffer from the challenge of safety or restrictions in public spaces" Youth participant from Amman

I do not think youth in Bologna have the same needs they are in Europe they have everything that we do not have" A youth participant from Lebanon

Figure 24: Drawings from the FGD with Youth in Bologna, CAV
Source: Field research

"I never go to the park because it's ugly and ruined, there aren't even swings and the grass is too high." Youth participant from Bologna

"In my ideal neighborhood I would like new stores of brands like Nike or Adidas, a swimming pool, new luxury buildings and a new sushi and kebab shop." Youth participant from Bologna

"If I go out with friends I go to the mall." Youth participant from Bologna

"In addition to going to school and staying at home, I only come here to Cav." Youth participant from Bologna

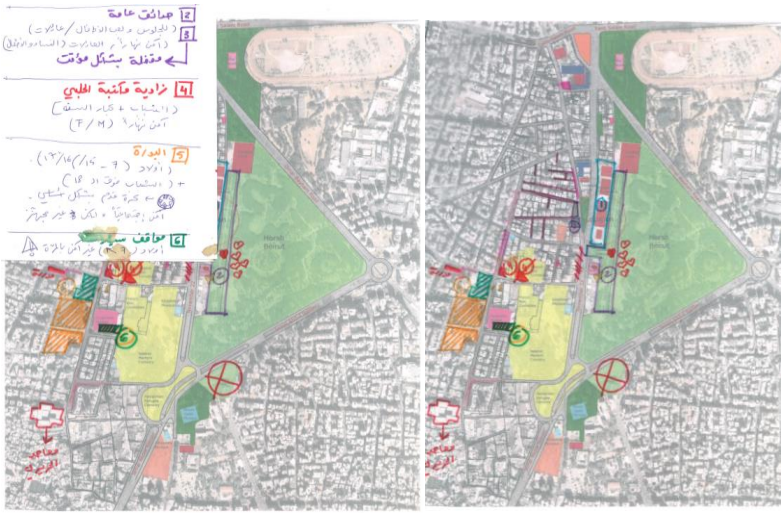

Figure 25:Figure 24: Drawings from the FGD with Youth in Beirut
Source: Field research

On the other hand, it is to note that the 2024 war affected the flow of discussion in this study. After the war, when asking youth near Horsh Beirut to share their memories about the park, most recollections were overshadowed by the war itself. The Park, once associated with leisure, became linked with narratives of fear, displacement, and uncertainty. However, one participant had already begun documenting her experience during the war, offering a unique and deeply personal lens into the transformation of urban life under siege.

"The view from my balcony has become a lens through which I witness the unfolding events of war in Dahye."

This statement summarizes the dual role of observer and resident; caught between passive witnessing and active survival. Over time, the participant noted a pattern in the targeting of buildings, which they meticulously mapped based on proximity and severity. Their observations are based on direct observation translating a lived trauma into a spatial narrative of conflict.

7. Conclusion

Public spaces should not only be regarded as a luxury, but also as a crucial element that must exist to improve the quality of both the town and the people's lives.

"First we shape the cities, then they shape us." (Jan Gehl)

This study reveals the role that public spaces play in the lives of young people across Lebanon, Jordan, and Italy, acting not only as physical environments but as reflections of socio-political systems, governance, and the everyday struggles of youth seeking inclusion, expression, and belonging. Despite the difference between Horsh Beirut, Shams in Amman, and Treno in Bologna, a common thread connects these spaces: youth are not passive users; they are active negotiators, often transforming spaces into sites of expression and empowerment.

Public spaces are crucial to the overall development and well-being of young people. They serve as key environments where youth can socialize, engage in physical activity, and participate in cultural and creative experiences; all of which are essential to healthy personal growth. Beyond recreation, these spaces offer opportunities for young people to build connections, express identity, and take part in the civic life of their communities. When taking into consideration youth needs, spaces designed and managed, public spaces can foster inclusion, belonging, and a sense of shared responsibility. According to youth perception, for a public space to succeed, it should meet four essential criteria: 1) it must attract people with a clear purpose; 2) it should encourage them to spend time freely and comfortably; 3) it must offer a sense of safety and comfort; 4) and it should be open, welcoming, and accessible to all.

The everyday use of public spaces is shifting from a necessity to optional, and recreational engagement and from open spaces to closed "safe" spaces. This evolution presents a growing demand for well-designed, democratic, and meaningful public environments where youth can spend their time. Increasingly, public spaces are seen as places of retreat; where individuals can "escape" from daily pressures. In this sense, public space not only enhances the quality of life for local residents but also serves as a cultural asset that can attract visitors and stimulate the local economy.

National and Local authorities play a role in shaping the character, accessibility, and relevance of public spaces. When municipalities invest in the creation and maintenance of safe, attractive, and inclusive environments that reflect the needs of young people, it shows that these spaces and; the youth who use them; are valued. Such investment not only enhances the physical quality of the space but also positively shapes how youth perceive and interact with it. While investment in safe, attractive, and inclusive spaces reflects that youth and their presence in public life are valued,

restrictive governance practices, such as excessive control over programming or lack of transparency in planning; can discourage youth and limit interaction.

In Lebanon, youth engagement with public spaces is shaped by contradiction and resilience. Unfortunately, in Lebanon, in recent years, many of these public spaces have been lost or privatized, resulting in a decline in community activities and a sense of disconnection among residents. This has led to a growing interest in understanding what constitutes a public space and why they are so crucial for building strong and healthy communities and a more engaged and empowered youth population. Spaces like Horsh Beirut and Martyrs' Square oscillate between neglect and vitality, reflecting a landscape scarred by sectarianism, economic collapse, and political fragmentation. For many youths, access is controlled by fear, class, or geography, yet their emotional connection to these spaces remain powerful. *"They do not inherit these places, they reclaim them, often through small but impactful acts."*

In Amman, conservative social norms, infrastructural gaps, and centralized governance limit formal youth engagement with public spaces. Yet youth-led initiatives like Shams challenge traditional definitions of space by centering participation, emotional safety, and creative expression. Here, public space becomes relational rather than purely spatial, a civic platform created through dialogue, trust, and grassroots initiatives. *"Shams' inclusive approach demonstrates how spaces, though not officially designated as 'public,' can represent a radically public spirit."*

In Bologna, a more institutionalized model emerges. Supported by commons-based governance and municipal frameworks, youth have access to platforms like Treno della Barca that prioritize co-creation and shared management. Bologna represents the potential of participatory urbanism when supported by political will and resource allocation. However, even in this progressive model, challenges of representation and accessibility persist, revealing the limits of well-designed spaces when not accompanied by critical attention to inclusivity and equity.

Across all three contexts, public space emerges as both a mirror and a zone revealing social divisions while offering the potential for transformation. Crises such as war, economic collapse, and the COVID-19 pandemic have repeatedly tested the resilience of these spaces and the youth who use them. In each case, young people responded with adaptability and imagination, transforming centers, parks, and even abandoned lots into spaces of community, creativity, and emotional survival. The inclusion in public space is not a function of physical design, but of governance, representation, and power. It is not enough to invite youth into public spaces, they must be empowered to shape, manage, and redefine them. Whether through participatory approach, common governance, or grassroots cultural initiatives, youth engagement must be institutionalized as a core principle of spatial justice, not a symbolic gesture.

Furthermore, the voices of youth from Beirut, Amman, and Bologna express a common desire: for spaces where they feel safe, seen, and involved. They do not simply want to enter public space;

they want to transform it. If cities are to become more just, inclusive, and vibrant, then urban planning must recognize young people not as beneficiaries, but as architects of public life. Only then can public spaces respond to their needs not just as shared places, but as shared responsibilities.

In general, youth across the three countries; Lebanon, Jordan, and Italy, tend to view themselves as distinct from one another, citing various reasons. However, despite perceiving themselves as unique, they share many common needs and challenges. For instance, across all three contexts, youth expressed a common desire for safety, freedom of expression, and equality. These fundamental needs transcend national borders, illustrating a shared vision for what public spaces and youth-friendly environments should offer. While there are some country-specific differences in the needs of youth, such as the demand for better lighting and infrastructure in Beirut and Amman; these differences often stem from the unique socio-political and infrastructural conditions in each location. Despite these local variations, the overall goals of youth in all three countries remain remarkably similar: they seek inclusive spaces where they can feel safe, express themselves freely, and experience equality.

The challenges faced by youth in these countries are not as disparate as they may first appear. At their core, the issues they face are rooted in the same systemic factors; namely, political structures, governance practices, and social norms. Whether it's a lack of infrastructure in Beirut or the restrictions on youth activities in Amman, or the governance system in Bologna, these challenges all originate from systemic issues. The governance structures in each country have a significant influence on how youth are able to engage with public spaces and exercise their rights. These shared structural barriers highlight the interrelation of the challenges, despite the apparent differences in each context.

Finally, while the specific challenges may differ in their expression, the underlying causes are remarkably similar, shaped by the political and social systems in place. Youth across these countries are united in their struggles for better public spaces, greater inclusion, and the opportunity to participate fully in society.

6. Recommendations

The key to transforming public spaces into more youth-friendly and inclusive environments lies in reimagining how they are managed and who gets to participate in their sustainability. The participants in the study emphasized the need for a more collaborative approach, one that involves local communities, youth organizations, and civil society in the process of revitalizing public spaces. This could take the form of community-driven maintenance initiatives or local governance structures that ensure public spaces are accessible, safe, and inclusive.

"The goal is not just to create spaces for people to meet but to create spaces that people care about and feel responsible for".

Creating a more inclusive, youth-friendly public space requires addressing the systemic issues of mismanagement, security, and lack of access, while also fostering a sense of ownership among the community. By doing so, public spaces can become dynamic spaces for social interaction, creativity,

1. **Recognize Youth as Co-Creators of Space:** Municipalities and NGOs should work together beyond top-down planning and meaningfully involve youth in decision-making processes not just in the implementation from needs assessment to program design to long-term management. This includes youth advisory committees, participatory budgeting, and design workshops included in policy. It could also include making information about public space management and community involvement more accessible. For example, establishing clear communication channels about how youth can contribute ideas, participate in planning, or join clean-up initiatives would increase their involvement and foster a greater sense of ownership. A methodology of incorporating citizen scientists, where local youth participate in research to assess the needs and conditions of public spaces, is another promising approach to engage youth in the management of these spaces. By allowing youth to gather data, conduct interviews, and observe the use of these spaces, they would not only gain valuable experience but also develop a deeper connection to the community's well-being therefore, training youth on
2. different topics and empowering them with skills that make them work as catalysts in the society is a must, Topics such as civic engagement, conflict sensitivity, participatory research, legal framework, and life skills. All this is possible only if we do not infantilize young people, if we move away from an adult-centric vision of the world and begin to take into consideration the needs of children and young people as equally valid and legitimate needs of those adults.

3. **The activation of public spaces** through targeted programming, such as community events, concerts, or workshops, could also be an effective way to draw youth into these

spaces. It was suggested that maintaining the basic infrastructure of a public space, ensuring cleanliness, proper lighting, and secure bathrooms, can make these spaces more inviting. However, it is also crucial that public spaces provide activities that cater to the interests of young people. From casual picnics to organized sports, public spaces need to offer something dynamic and engaging for youth to feel welcome in addition to the services related to technology in these spaces.

4. **Support Hybrid and Flexible Spaces:** The success of Shams in Jordan and Treno in Bologna, NAHNOO and TIRO in Lebanon shows that public space does not have to be purely physical or purely civic. Hybrid models that blend creativity, care, and cultural programming are more likely to foster belonging and sustained youth engagement.

5. **Institutionalize Youth Governance Models:** Inspired by Bologna's commons-based governance and Jordan and Lebanon's grassroots organizing, new frameworks should be developed that give youth long-term roles in managing and governing space. This creates accountability, trust, and a sense of shared future. Creating committees for the public spaces including youth and locals to manage these spaces is one of the successful models. It was also suggested that municipalities could employ university students and school students under the social services programs to serve as guardians of public spaces. This initiative would not only help maintain the public spaces but would also instill a sense of responsibility among youth, creating a deeper connection to the space. The idea of involving youth in the management of public spaces in exchange for community service credits or other incentives could be a transformative approach.

6. **Include Emotional and Cultural Belonging in Spatial Design:** Spaces should be designed not just to be functional, but to resonate with local identities, languages, and emotional needs. In contexts like Lebanon, this means addressing histories of trauma and fragmentation, political challenges while offering opportunities for joy, memory, and healing. In Jordan, addressing the safety issue and the belonging/ trust of youth with local authorities, especially armed authorities, and In Bologna addressing the political fragmentation and reclaiming the spaces.

7. **Foster Transnational Learning and Exchange:** Platforms for knowledge-sharing between youth organizations in Italy, Lebanon, and Jordan could help diffuse successful models, adapt strategies to different contexts, and build a regional understanding of youth spatial justice. In the three countries studied, youth expressed a range of needs, challenges, fears, and perceptions related to public spaces, their local environments, and governing

authorities. A recurring theme across these contexts was that young people tended to perceive their experiences as unique, shaped solely by the political and governance systems of their own country. Most were unaware of the realities faced by their peers in other countries and assumed that their struggles were isolated. However, when presented with insights from youth in neighboring contexts, many were surprised; and at times deeply moved; to discover how much they had in common. Despite cultural, political, and geographic differences, they shared strikingly similar perceptions, aspirations, and frustrations. This realization fostered a sense of solidarity and highlighted the transnational nature of youth experiences in navigating public space and civic life. The shared experiences of these youth highlight the idea of Transnationality, which means that social and political issues are not limited to one country but extend across borders. This connection between youth in different countries shows that, despite differences, they face similar challenges and exclusions. It also suggests that young people can work together across borders to create more inclusive and accessible spaces for their communities.

8. **Include psychological and technological support:** The field research has highlighted how social networks in all three countries are in effect social spaces but closed and delimited in which the complexity and truthfulness of life is missing. Social networks are utopian spaces of beauty where true human comparison is lost. What they generate is a sense of comparison, competitiveness, performativity and confusion as well as loneliness and labeling of life. Opening new and real spaces is certainly necessary to compensate for the virtual and the inconsistent, but at the same time this step must be supported by free psychological and technological support desks as well as educational figures specialized in psychological issues. Emotionally supporting a young person and knowing that they can have a space for dialogue and comparison is the first step to deconstructing the isolation and psychological distress generated by technologies, the first step to actively learning to manage them.

9. **Prioritize Accessibility and Safety:** Investment in transport, gender-sensitive design, and security without surveillance is essential, especially in cities like Beirut and Amman, where fear, stigma, and logistical barriers still exclude many young people from even entering public spaces.

8. References

Ababsa, M. (2007). Urban expansion and social inequality in Amman: Palestinian refugees and informal settlements. In *Jordan's refugees: Politics, socio-economy, and diaspora* (pp. 101-120). Amman: Center for Strategic Studies.

Ababsa, M. (2010). The social and spatial transformation of Amman: Palestinian refugee camps and informal settlements. In *Urban poverty in the Middle East: Studies of collective and community action* (pp. 45-62). Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

Al-Tamimi, A. (2017). Youth engagement in cultural spaces: A case study of Amman. *Arab Youth Studies Journal, 22*(4), 87-99.

Augé, M. (1992). *Non-lieux. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité.* Paris: Seuil.

Arab Barometer. (2019). Public opinion survey on economic and social issues in the MENA region. Arab Barometer.

Badawe, N. (2021). Gentrification and cultural spaces in Amman: The impact of commercialization. *Urban Studies Quarterly, 59*(2), 234-249.

Bodnar, J. (2015). Reclaiming public space. *Urban Studies, 52*(12).

Bologna Welcome. (2023). Disclosing Bologna: Interview with Cephas from Regaz dei Fava.

Bologna Zerodiciotto. (2024). Retrieved from https://www.bolognazerodiciotto.it/

Carmona, M., Magalhães, D., & de Magalhães, M. (2007). *Public space: The management of design and development*. London: Routledge.

Cultural and Social Development Fund, Jordan. (2020). *Report on the challenges facing cultural spaces and youth engagement in Jordan*. Amman: Cultural and Social Development Fund.

Cuzzocrea, V., & Bello, B. (2020). Introduction: Italian youth in context – An analysis through multiple dimensions. In E. Lello (Ed.), *Italian youth in international context: Belonging, constraints, and opportunities* (pp. 1-19).

El Khoury, R. (2016). A brief history of public space under the rule of sectarianism in Lebanon. *The Funambulist Magazine*, *10*, 57-64. Retrieved from https://thefunambulist.net

European Commission. (n.d.). Employment & entrepreneurship in Italy. Retrieved from https://europa.eu

European Training Foundation (ETF). (2015). Labour market and employment policy in Lebanon.

Fondazione innovazione urbana. (2024). Radicalmente adolescenti: 10 azioni e una politica per e con ladolescenti di Bologna. Retrieved from https://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it

Genova, C. (2018). Social practices and lifestyles in Italian youth cultures. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies, 23*(1), 75-92.

Giovani 2024, il bilancio di una generazione. (2024). *Giovani 2024: Il bilancio di una generazione.* Pubblicato il rapporto EURES per il Consiglio Nazionale dei Giovani e l'Agenzia Italiana per la Gioventù. Retrieved from Agenzia Italiana per la Gioventù

Greater Amman Municipality (GAM). (2020). *Urban development and public space management report*. Amman: Greater Amman Municipality.

Iperbole. (2017/2018). Il piano per l'innovazione urbana di Bologna. Retrieved from https://www.comune.bologna.it/pianoinnovazioneurbana/info2019/luoghi-prossimita/

Iperbole. (2023). Bologna partecipa: Bilancio partecipativo. Retrieved from https://www.comune.bologna.it

Iperbole. (2023). Piano adolescenza del Comune di Bologna. Retrieved from https://www.comune.bologna.it/servizi-informazioni/piano-adolescenza

Jaber, M. (2015). The role of the Ministry of Culture in public cultural spaces in Amman. *Middle East Cultural Policy Review, 13*(2), 34-47.

Jordan Times. (2023). Cultural spaces struggle amid economic crisis and political uncertainty. *Jordan Times*, October 15, 2023.

Karizat, N. (2019). The story of public space in Beirut's geography of power. *Agora Journal of Urban Planning and Design, 36,* 36-45. Retrieved from https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu

Kastrissianakis, K. (2015). Rethinking public space in Beirut since the Ta'if agreement: From the reconstruction-reconciliation discourse to "spherebuilding." *OIS.*

Liberatore, A., & Odoardi, I. (2021). Youth unemployment: A serious problem for young Italians NEET and a comparison with the social exclusion condition. *Journal of Urban and Regional Analysis, 13*(1), 177-193.

Mady, C. (2014). Diversity in conviviality: Beirut's temporary public spaces. *Open House International, 37.*

Ministry of Culture, Jordan. (2021). *Annual report on cultural initiatives and public spaces*. Amman: Ministry of Culture.

Mermier, F. (2015). *Récits de Villes: D'Aden à Beyrouth.* Sindbad, Actes Sud.

NAHNOO. (2015). Public spaces and public platforms for a new understanding of the role of Lebanese municipalities regarding public spaces.

NAHNOO. (2018, October). From the common to the public, from the public to the common: The socio-spatial production of public spaces in Tarik el Jdideh.

Nahas, C. (2023, October). Liban: Migrations et crise; territoire, population, État? Fondation Citoyenne libanaise d'Alain Bifani.

Nazzal, M., & Chinder, S. (2018). Lebanon cities' public spaces. *The Journal of Public Space, 3*(1), 119. Retrieved from https://www.journalpublicspace.org

OECD. (2018). Youth employment in Jordan: Challenges and opportunities. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Osama Al-Mashini Theater. (2020). *Annual report on cultural programming and community outreach*. Amman: Osama Al-Mashini Theater.

Pallagst, K., & Ye, L. (2012). Urban informal spaces and their role in social development: A case study of Amman. *Urban Affairs Review, 48*(1), 56-75.

Pilder, M. (2011). The refugee crisis in Jordan: Implications for urban development and housing. *Journal of Urban Affairs, 33*(2), 149-168.

Rarrbo, K. (2018). Studies on youth policies in the Mediterranean partner countries.

Regaz dei Fava. (n.d.). Brochure Regaz dei Fava: Who we are. Retrieved from https://linktr.ee/Regazdeifava

Rigenerazione Urbana. (n.d.). Bologna - Villa Celestina. *Rigenerazione Urbana - Territorio*. Retrieved from https://regione.emilia-romagna.it

Royal Cultural Center. (2019). *Cultural exchange and international seminars at the Royal Cultural Center*. Amman: Royal Cultural Center.

Salameh, F. (2020). Cultural institutions and public spaces: The case of Al-Hussein Cultural Center. *Journal of Middle Eastern Arts, 8*(3), 112-126.

Shayya, F. (2016). At the edge of the city: Reinhabiting public space toward the recovery of Beirut's Horsh Al-Sanawbar. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net

Stephan, J., & Chbat, N. (2019). Systemic triangulation, a tool for complex urban diagnosis: The case of Horsh Beirut. *The Journal of Public Space, 4*(4), 5-36. https://doi.org/10.32891/jps.v4i4.1232

UNICEF. (2021). Jordan: Youth demographics and population data. United Nations Children's Fund.

USAID. (2015). Jordan youth and employment: The impact of education and training on youth unemployment. United States Agency for International Development.

Wahj Al-Shams for Performing Arts and Folklore. (2018). Impact of theater on youth education and employment. Amman: Wahj Al-Shams.

Weintraub, L. (1995). Public space: A conceptual overview. *Urban Studies, 32*(3), 279-294.

World Bank. (2021). Jordan's youth unemployment crisis: Policy responses and recommendations. World Bank Group.

Youth Foundation, Jordan. (2019). *Youth participation in public cultural spaces*. Amman: Youth Foundation.

Zahra, M. (2014). Public space and community development in Amman. *Urban Studies Journal, 51*(4), 763-783.

9. Annexes

Annex 1: Field work tools

KIIs Guiding questions with organizations (common questions in Lebanon Jordan and Bologna)

General Understanding of the Organization's Work

Overall presentation about the organization's mission and focus? We can add: what is the composition of your organization's team like? (adults, young people etc.), what do they do if they are young?

1. *How does your work relate to public spaces and youth engagement?*
2. *What are some key programs or initiatives, good practices your organization has implemented to activate or improve public spaces, and to empower youth?*
3. *Beneficiaries profile (Gender, Nationalities age…)*

Public Spaces and Youth engagement

5. *How do you perceive the role of public spaces in fostering community engagement and social interaction, especially among youth?*
6. *What challenges do you think public spaces face in terms of accessibility, inclusivity, or safety? (concrete example)*
7. *Have you observed any significant changes in how public spaces are used over time, particularly by youth? particularly following events like the October 2019 uprising, the economic crisis, or the Beirut port explosion, and the 2024 war?*
8. *What strategies or approaches does your organization use to involve youth in the design, activation, or governance of public spaces?*
9. *What factors influence youth participation in public space activities (e.g., cultural, social, economic)? What are some key activities or events that attract youth to public spaces?*
10. *Can you share examples of successful youth-led or youth-focused initiatives in public spaces? What made them successful?*
11. *How do public spaces contribute to fostering a sense of belonging or community among young people?*

Challenges

11. *What are the main barriers to public spaces activation/ youth engagement and how does your organization address these challenges?*
12. *How do issues such as the governance system, economic disparities, gender, or mobility impact the activation of public spaces and the ability of youth to access and use public spaces?*
13. *How does your organization collaborate with local municipalities, government bodies, or other stakeholders to improve public spaces/empower youth engagement in Lebanon?*

- *Are there any policies or regulations you believe hinder or support youth involvement in public spaces?*
- *In what ways can public spaces in Lebanon serve as platforms for youth advocacy or activism?*
- *How much has covid 19 and digital entertainment influenced and continues to influence, in your opinion, the attendance of young people in public spaces?*
- *Do you think there are informal practices of re-appropriation of denied public space by young people? If so, which ones? example: listening to loud music is a form of reappropriation of a space*
- *What role do you think the school or university plays in young people's conception of public space? Is the school/university itself considered a common space?*

Future Opportunities and Recommendations

14. *What are your organization's future plans for public spaces and youth involvement?*
15. *What opportunities do you see for scaling up or replicating successful initiatives in other areas?*
16. *Are there any best practices or lessons learned you would like to share regarding your work on public spaces and youth involvement?*

What can you tell about the role of public spaces during the 2024 war on Lebanon.

Case study- Horsh Beirut and Shams
(Interviews with organizations working in Horsh Beirut and with Shams)

1. *Could you provide a brief history of Horsh Beirut/Shams and its significance to the city?*
2. *What role do Horsh Beirut/ Shams play in the daily lives of Beirut residents, particularly youth?*
3. *Who manages Horsh Beirut/ Shams? Are there any partnerships with local organizations or institutions?*
4. *What policies or regulations affect how Horsh Beirut/ Shams is accessed or used by the public?*
5. *How does your organization address challenges like maintenance, safety, or accessibility in Horsh Beirut/ Shams?*
6. *Are there specific programs or activities aimed at engaging youth in Horsh Beirut/ Shams? Can you provide examples?*
7. *What barriers do young people face when accessing or using Horsh Beirut/ Shams? How can these be overcome?*
8. *What role does Horsh Beirut/ Shams play during crises (e.g., displacement, war, or economic struggles)?*

10. *What opportunities do you see for improving space, particularly in terms of youth engagement and social life?*
11. *Are there any examples of successful interventions or activities in Horsh Beirut/ Shams that you think could be replicated?*
13. *What is your vision for the future of Horsh Beirut/ Shams? How can it better serve as a public space for all, especially youth?*
14. *How can different stakeholders (e.g., government, NGOs, youth) collaborate to enhance Horsh Beirut/ Shams?*

Case study- Treno della Barca

1. Could you provide a brief history of Treno della Barca?
2. What role does Treno della Barca play in the daily lives of Bologna residents, particularly youth?
3. Who manages this place? Are there any partnerships with local organizations or institutions?
4. What policies or regulations affect how Treno della Barca is used by the public?
5. What role does your organization play in this place?
6. Are there specific programs or activities aimed at engaging youth in Treno della Barca? Can you provide examples?
7. What barriers (social, economic,cultural barriers) do young people face when walking under Treno della Barca? How can these be overcome?
8. What role does Treno della Barca play in the neighbourhood?
9. How do you think the regeneration of this place has affected it and how it has been interpreted by the people of the neighborhood?
10. What opportunities do you see for improving the space, particularly in terms of youth engagement and social life?
11. What is your vision for the future of Treno? How can it better serve as a public space for all, especially youth?
12. How has people's use of the place changed over the years and in which direction it is going today?
13. How do you think the place is perceived by the rest of the city, the center for example?
14. How can different stakeholders (e.g., government, NGOs, youth) collaborate to enhance Treno della Barca?
15.Who lives on Treno della Barca and who is the boy or girl who frequents this place?
16. What is the common attitude of young people in the area? How and where do they stay together?

Focus group discussion (Lebanon)

section I

1. *How much has covid 19 and digital entertainment influenced and continue to influence, in your opinion, the attendance of young people in public spaces?*

2. *Do you think there are informal practices of re-appropriation of denied public space by young people? If so, which ones? example: listening to loud music is a form of reappropriation of a space*
3. *What role do you think the school or university plays in young people's conception of public space? Is the school/university itself considered a common space?*

Section II

1. *What do you mean by public space? If you can give a definition*
2. *How often do you visit Horsh Beirut, and for what purposes (e.g., leisure, sports, socializing)?*
3. *What does Horsh Beirut mean to you personally and to your community?*
4. *What activities or events in Horsh Beirut attract you the most?*
5. *Do you feel safe and comfortable using Horsh Beirut? Why or why not?*
6. *Is Horsh Beirut easily accessible to you? What challenges do you face in reaching or using the space?*
5. *Do you think Horsh Beirut is inclusive for people of all ages, genders, and social backgrounds?*
7. *What role do young people play in Horsh Beirut's activities or upkeep?*
8. *Are there enough spaces or activities for youth in Horsh Beirut? If not, what would you like to see?*
9. *How do you think Horsh Beirut contributes to the social and cultural life of the city?*
10. *Has Horsh Beirut played a role during times of crisis (2024 war)? Can you share any specific stories?*
11. *What challenges have you experienced or observed in Horsh Beirut?*
12. *What changes or improvements would you like to see in Horsh Beirut to better meet your needs and those of your community?*

    - *What can local authorities, NGOs, or community members do to make Horsh Beirut more vibrant and accessible?*

Can you share with us what you like to have in Treno Della Barca? Compare your neighborhood now and what you would like to have in the future and what would be your role. (Linking to the first question)

Focus group discussion (Jordan)

1. *What do you mean by public space? If you can give a definition*
2. *How often do you visit Shams, and for what purposes (e.g., leisure, sports, socializing)?*
3. *What does Shams mean to you personally and to your community?*
4. *What activities or events in Shams attract you the most?*
5. *Do you feel safe and comfortable using Shams? Why or why not?*

6. *Is Shams easily accessible to you? What challenges do you face in reaching or using space?*
7. *Do you think Shams is inclusive for people of all ages, genders, and social backgrounds?*
6. *What role do young people play in Shams activities or upkeep?*
7. *Are there enough spaces or activities for young people in Shams? If not, what would you like to see?*
8. *How do you think Shams contributes to the social and cultural life of the city?*
9. *Has Shams played a role during times of crisis? Can you share any specific stories?*
10. *What changes or improvements would you like to see in Shams to better meet your needs and those of your community*

Can you share with us what you like to have in Qasqas/Tarik Jdideh? Compare your neighborhood now and what you would like to have in the future and what would be your role. (Linking to the first question in section two)

Focus group discussion (Bologna)

1. How often do you visit Treno della Barca, and for what purposes (e.g., leisure, sports, socializing)?
2. What does Treno mean to you personally and to your community?
3. What activities or events in Treno attract you the most?
4. Do you feel safe and comfortable walking under Treno della Barca? Why or why not?
5. Is Treno easily accessible to you? What challenges do you face in reaching or using space?
6. Do you think Treno is inclusive for people of all ages, genders, and social backgrounds?
7. What role do young people play in Treno della Barca's activities or upkeep?
8. Are there enough spaces or activities for young people here? If not, what would you like to see?
9. How do you think this place contributes to the social and cultural life of the city?
10. What challenges have you experienced or observed in Treno della Barca?
12. What changes or improvements would you like to see in this place to better meet your needs and those of your community?
13. How would you like to be more considered in the place where you live?
14. Do you have dreams (a football field, a cinema, a bookstore, etc.) that you would like in your neighborhood?
Can you share with us what you like to have in Treno Della Barca? Compare your neighborhood now and what you would like to have in the future and what would be your role.

Annex 2: List of interviews and FGDS in Lebanon Jordan and Italy.

Lebanon

KII/FGD	Place and Date	Institution (position at the time of the Interview)
KII	Beirut, 30/01/2025	PROCOL; Mayssa Jallad and Rahaf Zaher
KII	Beirut, 03/02/2025	LEBANESE SPOTLIGHT, Ali Omar Ali
KII	Beirut, 28/01/2025	NAHNOO, Mohammad Ayoub President, Advocacy campaign to open Horsh Beirut leader
KII	Beirut, 25/01/2025	Beirut Families Association, Mona Itani president
KII	Beirut, 25/01/2025	Arc En Ciel, Rose Abou Elias
KII	TIRO, Tyre 27/01/2025	TIRO, Bahiya Zayyat
Street interviews	Beirut during January month	Quick interviews/ informal chat with residents and visitors of Horsh Beirut and around Horsh
FGD	TIRO 27/01/2025	FGD with TIRO beneficiaries and participants
FGD	Beirut, 25/01/2025	FGD with residents mainly youth
FGD	Beirut, 31/01/2025	FGD with a local committee participate in Horsh Beirut activation (Youth)Organizations…

Jordan

KII/FGD	Place and Date	Institution (position at the time of the Interview)
KII	Amman: 5/02/2025	Arcs culture solidali team, director and civil services
KII	Amman: 5/02/2025	Shams association, interview with Maysam, founder and theatre teacher
FGD	Amman: 5/02/2025	FGD young people of Shams
KII	Amman: 06/02/2025	Darat space, interview with 3 local employees of Darat cultural space, founder and others
KII	Amman: 06/02/2025	Jadal space, interview with an employee

KII	Amman: 06/02/2025	7hills association, interview with founder and employee
KII	Amman: 07/02/2025	graffiti tour, interview with Aladdin found of association
KII	Amman: 09/02/2025	Tajalla cultural space
KII	Amman: 09/02/2025	Al- Balad Theatre
KII	Amman: 10/02/2025	young Amman resident

Italy

KII/FGD	**Place and Date**	**Institution (position at the time of the Interview)**
KII	Bologna: 13/02/2025	Camere D'aria, director and employees
KII	Bologna: 13/02/2025	Treno della Barca directors called "Passaporta"
KII	Bologna: 13/02/2025	CAV, youngers and educators
KII	Bologna: 14/02/2025	Labas, social municipality, volunteer
KII	Bologna: 14/02/2025	APE onlus, educative organization for youth, educators
KII	Bologna: 14/02/2025	RADIO CAP, youth founders of the radio
FGD	Bologna: 15/02/2025	Hayat assembly with volunteers and employees
KII	Bologna: 15/02/2025	Fava gardens, basketball court, volunteers

Annex 3: Pictures from the field visits in the three countries


CAV
TRENO