The urban university as good citizen: The American University of Beirut’s Neighborhood Initiative
Cynthia Myntti
Local Economy published online 27 February 2013
DOI: 10.1177/0269094213478400

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://lec.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/02/27/0269094213478400

Published by:
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
London South Bank University

Local Economy Policy Unit

Partner Organisation: Centre for Local Economic Strategies

Additional services and information for Local Economy can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://lec.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://lec.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> OnlineFirst Version of Record - Feb 27, 2013

What is This?
In perspective

The urban university as good citizen: The American University of Beirut’s Neighborhood Initiative

Cynthia Myntti
American University of Beirut, Lebanon

Abstract
The American University of Beirut’s Neighborhood Initiative was launched in 2007 to encourage faculty and students to contribute to solving the problems affecting the district of Beirut located just outside the university walls. Among the issues addressed are congestion, poor walkability, near absence of greenery, an aging population, and growing disparities between rich and poor residents. Four challenges confront the Initiative: attracting over-committed faculty to work on local problems; raising funds for programmatic activities; creating meaningful relationships with neighbors and other stakeholders; and addressing the economic trends now transforming the neighborhood.

Keywords
Arab world, gentrification, Middle East, neighborhood, university-community partnerships

Background
When the American University of Beirut (AUB) was founded in the 1860s by Protestant missionaries from New England, they established its campus outside the city walls on Ras Beirut, a wind-swept promontory overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. In subsequent years, the city grew and surrounded the university. During its heyday prior to the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990), Ras Beirut – with its sidewalk cafes, art spaces, theatres and cinemas – was the city’s most open, diverse and cosmopolitan district, Beirut’s Left Bank, often called the breathing space of the Arab World.

The civil war, however, forced the university to turn inward as the neighborhood suffered physical damage, staff and students were kidnapped or murdered, and residents fled to be replaced by families escaping violence in other parts of Beirut and Lebanon.

Corresponding author:
Cynthia Myntti, Office of the President, American University of Beirut, PO Box 11-0236, Riad El Solh, Beirut 1107 2020, Lebanon.
Email: cmyntti@aub.edu.lb
The university became surrounded by a neighborhood broken by the violence: abandoned, pock-marked buildings, shuttered businesses and damaged streets and pavements.

More recent sectarian disturbances and hostilities with Israel further impeded development, leaving Beirut, ironically, one of the real estate ‘bargains’ in the Middle East. But investors and speculators have caught on, and a new kind of war is unfolding near campus: wrecking crews and construction cranes dominate neighborhood streets as the old mixed-use buildings give way to luxury residential towers. Ras Beirut now has some of the highest property values in the city thanks in part to the presence of the AUB – as a respected institutional anchor and the city’s most beautiful green space. Developers capitalize on unimpeded sea views over the flowering gardens of AUB, making great profits from the sale of oversized, expensive flats to other Arabs and Lebanese expatriates who use the premises as holiday homes.

Rationale for engagement

The well-documented experience of urban institutions in North America presents a number of reasons why universities reach out to their neighborhoods. Some aim to strengthen their teaching and research through real-world problem solving and applied interdisciplinary work (Vidal et al., 2002; Wiewel and Lieber, 1998). Others, particularly in poor and crime-ridden inner cities, cite ‘enlightened necessity’ and moral obligation to make their urban environment a better place in which to live, work and study (Maurrasse, 2001; Rodin, 2007; Trostle and Hersch, 2003). Still others engage with their neighborhoods for a more self-serving reason: to head off political opposition to campus expansion through property acquisition. Recent developments at Harvard and Columbia offer cases in point.

For AUB, the rationale for engagement with the neighborhood is both the same and different. AUB’s explicit mission is to serve the Middle East region. With nearly 4000 employees at its main academic campus and medical center, AUB is Beirut’s largest private employer. For this reason the university aspires to be a good neighbor: contributing its unique intellectual resources to solving local problems; serving as a role model in green design and environmental sustainability; minimizing the congestion caused by the movement of employees, students and hospital patients. The university’s leadership also recognizes that linking teaching and research to the problems just beyond the campus walls increases the relevance of these academic endeavors. Finally, ‘enlightened necessity’ spurs action.

One of AUB’s comparative advantages in an increasingly competitive higher education market is its location in a lively and livable neighborhood of Beirut. However, this neighborhood is now being transformed by gentrification. Its character and streets with useful small businesses and cultural destinations are changing as luxury towers with gated private gardens replace lower rise mixed-use buildings. AUB professors, staff and students can no longer afford to live near the university, and the new buildings sit dark for much of the year. AUB therefore has a vested interest in protecting and promoting its neighborhood as an attractive place for all, but especially for prospective faculty and students.

Initial activities

The AUB Neighborhood Initiative was launched formally in 2007, and is institutionally located in the President’s Office. It currently has one full-time project leader of professorial rank, and a full-time
outreach coordinator. Priorities for the Initiative were determined from a series of interviews conducted between 2006 and 2007 with neighborhood residents from different social and economic backgrounds. The priorities included (in no particular order) noise; traffic congestion; poor walkability; lack of parking; decreasing affordability and insecurity of renters; lack of green space and increasing building density; and the needs of a graying population.

The Initiative plays the role of catalyst and facilitator for neighborhood-focused interventions including:

- the Neighborhood Congestion Studies, which investigate how to reduce the conflict between walking and driving in neighborhood streets; what to do about parking; and how to enable more faculty, staff and students to move away from private cars;

- Greening the Neighborhood, an interdisciplinary and multi-pronged initiative developing prototype rainwater catchment systems, and promoting urban agriculture through green walls and roofs for institutional and residential buildings in the neighborhood;

- the Inclusive Neighborhood, a project with the Beirut Municipality to transform a neighborhood street into a model for barrier-free pedestrian movement;

- the Ras Beirut Well-Being Survey, a participatory demographic and health survey of the neighborhood; and

- the University for Seniors, a special membership program for older adults offering learning opportunities in a supportive and sociable environment.

In each case, the Neighborhood Initiative has identified the intersection between neighbors’ concerns and faculty interest and expertise. Neighbors and public officials are involved at every stage of the work.

**Challenges**

As it marks its fifth anniversary, the Initiative faces several challenges: attracting faculty to the Initiative; stabilizing its programmatic funding base; forming durable partnerships outside the university; and addressing the economic trends transforming the neighborhood.

Outreach programs at other universities have identified both the necessity and difficulty of involving faculty in their neighborhood work. The incentive structures of universities privilege for promotion the publication of theoretical, internationally oriented research in high-impact journals; they discourage time expenditure on community-based service activities and the publication of ‘applied’ research (Wiewel et al., 2000). At AUB, the Initiative has taken the long view on faculty involvement and adjusted expectations to acknowledge the many competing pressures on academic colleagues. Research projects have been designed broadly enough to include both applied and theoretical questions. And the Neighborhood Initiative staff have explicitly played a facilitating role to lighten the load on faculty of everything from meeting organization, report writing, correspondence and fund raising. At a recent retreat, faculty colleagues noted the catalytic role played by the Initiative: posing the original questions; encouraging new collaborations among faculty by forming problem-focused multidisciplinary teams; and promoting participatory approaches.

Our second challenge is resource mobilization. AUB covers the salaries and benefits of two full-time staff, and this currently represents more than half of annual operating budgets. Funds from independent foundations support the research and outreach activities. Fund raising for activities in a neighborhood that is not among Beirut’s most disadvantaged, and on issues that are considered more as problems of developed...
nations (population aging; public transit; urban agriculture; barrier-free walkways), do not often fit the international priorities of private and public sector funders. It takes a flexible and sophisticated funder to appreciate the lessons learnt by work in Ras Beirut: lessons for other universities, for other large urban employers, and for congested but gentrifying neighborhoods, no matter where they are in the world.

The third challenge relates to the notion of university-community partnership. A growing literature describes the ideal of durable, candid, mutually beneficial relationships. This literature assumes that even in disorganized neighborhoods, organizations exist to represent the community (Reardon, 2006; Silka, 1999; Vidal et al., 2002). In Ras Beirut, however, AUB must involve neighborhood residents and businesses individually as no community-based organizations exist to represent them. It is a labor-intensive process and requires a subtle understanding of the different constituencies and their diverse points of view. Given Lebanon’s ubiquitous sectarianism, the idea of AUB helping create a new neighborhood development organization – as other universities have done – presents extraordinary risks.

The fourth challenge is perhaps the most difficult, and raises particularly thorny questions about what AUB should do to address the economic changes occurring in the neighborhood. It has become clear that Neighborhood Initiative needs to find ways to address these local economic changes, which are not tackled by its current projects. What Loretta Lees has described as ‘super-gentrification’ transforming Brooklyn Heights in New York appears to be happening in Ras Beirut (Lees, 2003), with intense investment and conspicuous consumption by a new generation of the globally wealthy buying up residential real estate near the university. The demolition of low- and middle-rise buildings creates a formidable new economic reality in the neighborhood, threatening its economic and social diversity and its mixed commercial and residential character. Private developers in Beirut operate with few constraints; neither municipal nor national authorities indicate any ability to regulate the built environment for the public good. Given these circumstances, difficult questions arise: Should the university play a more pro-active role in the local real estate market? If so, with little in-house expertise, how should it begin? In places where private capital is strong and ‘the state’ is weak, do proven strategies exist to counteract gentrification? Is increasing the supply of affordable housing an effective intervention point in a gentrifying neighborhood?

The Neighborhood Initiative at AUB is at a crossroads. What does the aspiration of being a good urban citizen imply for AUB? To what extent should AUB, as a private university, intervene to change the way the neighborhood is being transformed socially and economically? These are the overarching questions for the next five years.

Acknowledgements

I thank my colleagues Isam Kaysi, Samar Kanafani and Tonnie Choueiri for helpful comments on earlier versions of the article.

Funding

The Neighborhood Initiative has received substantial support from the Ford Foundation office for the Middle East and North Africa, and, for the University for Seniors, funding from the Dr Scholl Foundation.

References


Maurrasse DJ (2001) Beyond the Campus: How Colleges and Universities Form Partnerships
with Their Communities. New York: Routledge.


