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Commoning Mansion:
Precarity as a Condition of Possibility
– Samar Kanafani –

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Commoning Mansion: Precarity as a Condition of Possibility

Abstract

In 2012, in a gentrifying fringe neighborhood of Beirut, a collective of cultural producers transformed a derelict 19th century villa that they borrowed from its owner into a shared workspace and a cultural venue, calling it Mansion. They developed their social relations within and through the materiality of the house, refining an ethos of care and defining the contours of collectivity. Exploring their practices and ethics of adaptive reuse, economic welfare, spatial inclusion and participatory governance, this paper shows that Mansion is a rare experiment in commoning in the Lebanese neoliberal urban context. Yet without any legal rights to the property, the owner has the absolute prerogative to reclaim his house at will, a central term of the borrowing agreement. Mansion was able to negotiate extensions past several possible evictions, based on the renewed mutual understanding of its fundamental evictibility, which reassured the owner while complying with the primacy of private ownership. I argue, therefore, that Mansion's precarity is its condition of possibility, and invite an exploration of what implications this has on commoning practices. How does one collectivize under the perpetual threat of eviction? Even as Mansion operates internally according to a deliberate anti-neoliberal ethos, the neoliberal regime that enables the owner's surplus undergirds its very existence. As such, Mansion's commoning remains locked in a condition, which echoes the patron-client relationships and charitable tendencies that pervade the Lebanese state and society. With its accumulated experience, Mansion is well-placed to grapple with these crucial questions beyond their relevance for its own locale and the convenience of its temporary arrangement.

Keywords: urban commoning, adaptive reuse, cultural patronage, precarity

Introduction

Mansion is a collective in Beirut that borrowed a late 19th century villa from its owner in 2011, gradually transforming it from its former state of dereliction into a workspace and cultural venue. Situated in a neighborhood adjacent to Beirut's gentrified city center, the 800m² and three-story villa opened in 2012 as a multipurpose space for public usage, gradually attracting 15-20 regular users (or 'Mansioners'), who include artists, designers, architects, cultural associations, activist groups, and academic researchers who work out of their personal or shared studios, while caring for the whole house. Ghassan, Mansion main founder and spokesperson, got permission from its owner, Imad, to use the house free-of-charge on a 'gentleman's agreement', in a rare case of borrowing property between non-kin. After the initial clean-ups, and with the involvement of a growing pool of people, Mansion evolved beyond an affordable workspace, and into an experiment in opening up private urban space to a wider public, while running it according to collectivistic principles. Mansioners have proposed this as a deliberate position against the grain of neoliberal state policies and the hoarding practices of ruling elite, which imposed spatial exclusion, financial stringency and inegalitarian access to dwelling in Beirut.

Based on extended fieldwork as ethnographer and Mansioner, this paper reveals the conditions that render Mansion both possible and precarious as a collective and open space. Detailing the internal relations and machinations since its start until 2019, I identify Mansion as an experiment in urban commoning, defined as a set of people, a common resource and the social and material practices and principles of shared obligation that govern their benefit from this resource. I understand the owner's incentive to lend his house as stemming from his "benevolent surplus", with benevolence being that seemingly altruistic act that benefits the giver as well as the receiver (Thorpe 2015, 106). Mansioners gain affordable space in Beirut's otherwise prohibitively expensive city center, where to experiment with an egalitarian and participatory model of dwelling and spatial governance. He gets to speculate on his property, which he has no immediate need for, while gaining free guardianship of his

otherwise derelict villa and the cultural capital of patronizing an initiative for the ‘public good.’ But to comprehend the conditions that enable Mansion’s commoning, we should look beyond the singularity of the owner’s intentions, at the broader material and social conditions that make the place and collective possible. While Mansion’s borrowed status is its main condition of possibility, its evictibility is its main condition of precarity. For without any legal rights to the property, Mansion is entirely dependent on the owners’ will to continue lending. However, the central term of the borrowing agreement is the owner’s absolute prerogative to reclaim the house whenever it convenes him. Mansion was able to negotiate extensions past several moments of possible eviction, based on the renewed mutual understanding of its fundamental evictibility, which reassures the owner while complying with the primacy of private ownership. I argue, therefore, that Mansion’s precarity is its condition of possibility, and invite an exploration of what implications this has on commoning practices.

Research on examples of rural land struggles in the Maghreb (c.f Tunisia in Hamouchene 2017, Gana 2012) and grassroots popular committees in the Mashreq (c.f Syria and Egypt in El-Meehy 2017) both before and after the Arab Spring of 2011, demonstrate the enormous challenges grassroots organizing practices and politics face under despotic rule and forceful counter-revolutionary tendencies that see to quash them (Zaatari 2015). Exploring this instance of commoning in Beirut contributes to scholarship on what just, equitable and sustainable lives are imaginable, possible, practicable and sustainable in the Arab region and comparable elsewhere today. It also joins the conversation around the role of the “urban creative class” (Florida 2003), namely artists, cultural producers and innovators, in redefining the agendas of neoliberal urban space and life in the Arab region, and other comparable contexts of the southern hemisphere. Daher suggests that art and culture spaces, institutions and practitioners in Amman and Beirut carve out zones of authentic dwelling, which challenge the placelessness and soullessness of transnational urban developments (2014). Conversely, Brones and Moghadam chart the ways a trans-regional art and culture market intersects in Dubai and Beirut institutions, attracting real estate developments that transform as they gentrify their urban locales, thereby commodifying space through the

notion of ‘creativity’ and ‘culture’ (2017). Meanwhile, intervening on the domain of participatory urban planning in site of contentious spatial politics, collectivizing in Kuwait city exemplifies the difficulty of organizing outside the grips of established political avenues (Al-Nakib 2014).

While being exempt from the burden of rent and suspended in an ambiguous legal status, Mansion strives for the autonomy from state and market, by which classical commons are defined (Opazo Ortiz 2015). Yet even as Mansion operates internally according to a deliberate anti-neoliberal ethos, the neoliberal regime that enables the owner’s surplus undergirds its very existence. As such, Mansion’s commoning remains locked in this possible yet precarious condition, which echoes the patron-client relationships and charitable tendencies that pervade the Lebanese state and society.

Ethnography from and on

Since its establishment, Mansion has been a launching pad and meeting point for various artistic practices and rights-based causes, with an emphasis on urban spatial and social issues. As collective, it has strung together a network of geographically dispersed and periodically shifting people from across Beirut, Lebanon and the diaspora, and of various national backgrounds including Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian, Saudi, French and British among others. In January 2013, mid-way through my PhD fieldwork, I myself was strung in when I took my daughters to participate in “Mini-Mansioners,” a family-oriented recreational program that took place there. Following directions from Mansion’s website, we looked for an “intact” yellow villa on Abdel Kader Street, in the neighborhood of Zoqaq al-Blatt, just two kilometers from Beirut’s city center. Mansion was indeed among the more well-preserved houses relative to the other completely derelict and gutted villas that surround it, marking the drastic disinvestment from a previously affluent residential neighborhood. We entered Mansion through from a small side alleyway where a rusted metal gate had the hand-written words “Mansion” in English and Arabic on it, barely visible

in faded white chalk. Across the threshold, we found ourselves in the kitchen yard where most of Mansion's garbage sorting and disposal takes place in labeled plastic bins, some of which the household and neighborhood cats had visibly rummaged through. A string of bicycles were parked to one side. Past this yard, we entered the house through what used to be its service quarters, passing kitchen, mezzanine, toilets and storage rooms, through a corridor that opened up to the spacious heart of the house. We were in Mansion's central hall that had hot-desks and gave onto the library and various offices and studios. A stairwell would take us up to a silk-screen workshop and wood-floored movements space, and down to a sound-recording studio. The ceilings towered seven meters above us, large white marble slabs clad the floor beneath us. A moderate wintry breeze wafted between tall wooden windows from the south and the triple arched facade to the north, which opened onto a concrete terrace and garden. It was there amid bushes and trees of various heights and ages, and overlooking a busy and noisy thoroughfare, that the day's activities took place.

There to greet us was Sabine, the organizer, an art curator, Mansioner and parent of two. Through Mini-Mansioners, she invited families to take turns running children's workshops on a weekly basis, charging a contribution of 75,000 Lebanese Lira¹ per trimester to cover workshop materials, cleaning costs, and make-shift repairs to the house. Activities included handicrafts, planting, carpentry, movement classes and free play, distinguishing the program from dominant forms of children's recreation in Beirut, namely commercial playgrounds and amusement parks embedded in large shopping malls or temporary trade fairs. These sanitized and costly options, with blasting music and bright lights, often supervised by under-paid and dispassionate young chaperones and migrant workers, are spatially segregated from the spaces around them, effectively herding children to one side while parents consumed in cafes and stores, undisturbed by the unruly demands of childhood. At Mini-Mansioners, parents and children were to set things up together, invent and improvise activities, play, socialize and share snacks, while serving and cleaning up after themselves. Mini-Mansioners also sought to open the garden up for wider public usage, given the near-absence of open public spaces - especially green spaces - in Beirut more generally². The objective, Sabine said, was "healing Mansion," a phrase some Mansioners often used while I

did fieldwork to describe their existence in the house. Similar to Heidegger's notion that people do not build in order thereafter to dwell in what they built, but rather we dwell in the world by the very process of building our world around us (Heidegger 1971, 148), healing meant repairing, maintaining and enhancing the derelict parts of the house while creatively using them.

At one such events, I met Ghassan, Mansion's main founder. I told Ghassan about my ethnographic research on gentrification and dwelling in derelict houses at the interstice between material decay and rapid urban renewal at the fringes of Beirut's exclusive city center. He invited me to work from a studio on Mansion's first floor. Between January 2013 and mid-October 2017, I furnished and occupied a studio on the first floor, where I did research and prepared for fieldwork in adjacent neighborhoods. Yet the house itself, its age, its disrepair, its historical trajectory, its location, its status as previously abandoned and its dual potential as urban heritage and lucrative real estate, put it squarely within the purview of my research interests. So, while I initially moved in to work *from* Mansion, I quickly found myself also working *on* Mansion. During that period, I went there almost daily, mainly to work, but like most other Mansioners, also to socialize and to "heal" the space and be healed by it in various aesthetic and affective ways. This included cleaning, sewing curtains, tidying neglected nooks, helping to stock firewood, watering plants, celebrating special occasions, cooking and repairing things, including after the huge explosion that ripped through Beirut on August 4, 2020, destroying neighborhoods around the city center and causing Mansion damage. Meanwhile, the reciprocity of meals, free labor, child-minding, and the borrowing of spaces and things, recruited meaningful social relations among Mansioners and into my life.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with Mansion's co-founders, the property-owner Imad, and its previous owners and residents, as well as real estate brokers from the neighborhood, urbanists and legal experts. I conversed informally and at length with key interlocutors, either regular occupants or occasional users of Mansion. These were predominantly 20 to 50+ years old, working in the cultural, design or artistic sectors,

knowledge production, and activism, mostly of middle-class belonging either by socio-economic standing, formal education or the acquisition of social capital through their vocations. I observed the house's spatial and social transformations, taking part in regular meetings about everyday practical household affairs as well as more politico-philosophical ones. My involvement in Mansion extended past my formal occupancy, as I remain connected to various Mansioners either as friend or colleague today. Other members who leave temporarily or switch from having a studio, to working there occasionally, have also found ways to maintain involvement with Mansion, constituting a pool of Mansioners 'in absentia.' Such possibility renders being a part of this collective open to whomever becomes entwined in its quotidian life, spatial care and web of relations, and whomever has contributed significant labor and interest in the place. Thus, being a 'Mansioner' is a matter of degrees, depending on the intensity of such entwinement at any given time rather than on any bounded membership status, although active presence, work and payment of monthly contributions for studio space remains the standard avenue.

Commoning after the Commons: Paving a Way

The commons – as it was practiced and understood for centuries, before the rise of the nation-state but also to a degree under the era of social democratic states – is believed to be a thing of the past, planetary resources having been eroded over a long history of colonization and capitalization (Kalb 2017). Understood as that which is for no one and for everyone, and operating outside regulation from either state or market, the commons describes social realities and practices of mutual obligation where people thrive equally from sharing available resources instead of just surviving despite their availability (Linebaugh 2014). This mode of production and the social relations surrounding it, require constant creation and reproduction by a set of people, and the coordinated practices, rules and values that govern their sustained use of a shared resource (Ostrom 1990). Yet in this late capitalist moment in Lebanon, as on the global scale, the seemingly irrecoverable capture and privatization of property that exacerbates social hardships, makes the commons a tenuous if defensible defense, much like the 'public' or 'public good', which is governed by

an extraneous authority, rather than self-governed (Hardt and Negri 2009, 377). In the absence or shrinkage of both public and the 'real' commons, the concept of "commoning" emerged as verb to think about complex assemblages of social, ecological and material relations and mutual obligation where people strive for the common good under capitalist conditions (Parr 2015).

More than half the Lebanese population is currently living under the poverty level, and the richest 10% own about 70% of all personal wealth in the country (ESCWA 2020). By 2016, the Lebanese ruling class and individuals closely linked to them owned 43% of the total assets (worth 7 billion dollars) of the country's commercial banking sector (Chaaban 2015), which essentially established and governed the state since its independence from French mandate in 1943 (Safieddine 2019). Even before independence, however, Lebanon has exemplified the modern mercantile state in the region and beyond, one governed by a freer-than-free market and an outwardly-oriented service and financial economy (Gates 1998). According to Hage, Lebanon's economy is "*laissez-tout faire*",³ an extreme variant of the free-market economy that is "bereft of any government regulation" (Hage 2018, 88). Plagued by internal political rivalries that are intertwined with geopolitical conflict, and overstretched financial engineering, Lebanon has teetered on the verge of a economic collapse for decades, postponed chiefly by the billions of US dollars that Lebanese diaspora and other Arab investors pumped annually into the construction sector (Soueid et al 2016; Tierney 2015). Since reconstruction began in the mid-1990s of Beirut's commercial center destroyed during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), Beirut began experiencing an unrestrained flurry of construction, that took the pattern of properties with single houses or low-rise buildings on them being sold, demolished, agglomerated with adjacent plots, and developed into taller, wider and high-end buildings. These could be seen rising one after the other on the skyline, their construction process cluttering and clogging up streets, while drilling, clanking and hammering into the city's soundscape on a daily basis for years on end. Heavily contested, this reconstruction wrought by a private-public corporation, relied on mass evictions and expropriations, which raised land prices and instigated waves of unplanned development in neighborhoods adjacent to the center (Sawalha 2010), such as in Zoqaq al-Blatt where Mansion stands.

This cookie-cutter standard of reconstruction was accelerated when in 2004 the government amended building law 646 (from Law 148 of 1983) to permit higher and bigger buildings, and to grant exceptions and incentives to larger development projects and tourist resorts, with the purpose of attracting foreign investment. This deregulation was promoted mostly by a collusion of public and private stakeholders (including members of parliament and the Beirut municipal council), who drafted and passed laws that cater to the growth needs of an increasingly neoliberal building regime and its small set of elite beneficiaries (Ashkar 2014; Krijnen and Fawaz 2010, 251). By the turn of the millennium, the city had effectively become an “urban growth-machine” with elite actors and institutions - including (predominantly male) members of government - enjoying a large degree of freedom to strategically drive real estate interests that secure and guarantee their financial and political control (Marot 2014). The result has been not only the exponential up-scaling of the urban landscape, but the displacement of thousands of dwellers as well as the privatization of public lands (Saksouk-Sasso et al. 2015). With such policies, the ruling class marginalized the needs of a growing proportion of the urban population for affordable spaces of residence, work and recreation, effectively forcing them out to more affordable suburbs. There was — and still is — no urban master plan outside of the exclusive bounds of the city center since 1954 (Marot and Yazigi 2012, 4), no social housing policy, and no cap on land prices. Until roughly 2016, those who were able to continue residing inside Beirut, did so thanks to a rent control law that was instated in 1992, and which applied also to aging unlisted buildings and houses. Yet the passing of a 2014 law that liberalizes rent controls has expedited evictions of residents, particularly from aging properties under threat or discretionary rulings, even though the law has yet to be officially put into effect.

The neighborhood of Zoqaq al-Blatt where Mansion stands, has undergone numerous transformations that preface its owner’s purchase of the property and Mansion’s establishment as a collective. In its heyday, Zoqaq was famed for its cultural, social, education, and political significance prior to the Civil War of 1975-90. During the neighborhood’s initial establishment around the mid-19th century, it was also the first

alleyway to be paved outside Beirut's historic city walls, Zoqaq el-Blat (Arabic for 'the paved alleyway') attracted several prominent merchant families who sought residence there to be close to but outside the intramural commercial and political centre, which had become overcrowded (Féghali 2009). The area reached its peak prosperity around the mid-1900s (1950-1970), while also attracting people of various socio-economic, ethnic and sectarian backgrounds, who built and lived in houses and apartment buildings of varied size and architecture, making for a heterogeneous neighborhood in terms of sectarian and class identity (Davie 2001). During the fifteen years leading up to the Civil War, the capital's population doubled with rural-urban migrants who flocked to the city in search of work close to the commercial center. Meanwhile, with the outbreak of the Civil War that affected trade and security, several of Zoqaq's wealthier inhabitants gradually left either to other parts of the city or abroad. During the several consecutive waves of civil conflict that characterized Lebanon's internecine war, several new waves of rural migrants arrived in search of safety and work. When the blue-collar jobs that in-coming inhabitants had once found in the city ran dry with the center's destruction, fringe neighborhoods such as Zoqaq turned into mixed residential and commercial hubs in their own right (Stolleis 2005, 184-187).

As a family home and social and political hub,⁴ what came to be called "Mansion" was among a row of large villas for Beirut's affluent and influential merchant class of turn of the 20th century Zoqaq. Not the largest or most externally lavish villa on the block, Mansion nevertheless falls within the typology of the well-to-do abode, with its surrounding gardens, separate servants' quarters, and plush interior scale and building materials. This includes white marble floors, hardwood and frescoed walls and ceiling, crafted by Italian craftsmen who were allegedly transported to Beirut explicitly for such jobs and their maintenance. This was a period in Beirut's history when the Ottoman empire was on a mission to modernize its cities by emulating European urban aesthetics, and elite neighborhoods like Zoqaq were among the first to exemplify this (Gebhardt 2005; Féghali 2009). Yet like many of its neighbors, the villa was built, owned and inhabited by a once-affluent merchant family, who was propertied, with global and local trade and political connections, enjoying half a century of economic and social prosperity before their economic downturn in the late 1970s. As the

family's socioeconomics worsened, family members moved to other neighborhoods or other countries, and the house emptied out and fell into disrepair, one part after the other until it total abandonment in 1995.

Having lived in the neighborhood since 1982, Imad spotted the house and lush surrounding garden on his daily walks to and from work, and developed a special attachment to it, naming it "The Yellow House" after the color of its facade. When he bought it in 1999, he had intended to renovate it and make it his residence, hiring an architectural firm, which designed an extensive revamping and expansion works on the property. But when the renovations proved too costly and he no longer felt like inhabiting such a large house, he bought instead a second floor in the apartment block where he already resided with his wife and only son. Between those plans of restoring the house and Mansion's beginnings, the house stood derelict for more than a decade. Things fell apart, plants and trees overgrew, but traces remained of the former owner-residents' home, as did political insignia on the walls left by militia who temporarily occupied the house during and after the Civil War, and the technical markings of Imad's hired engineers as they assessed the villa's structural viability.

When I began fieldwork from Mansion in 2013, new residential high-rises already existed in Zoqaq and on Mansion's street, Abdel Kader. Numerous others were coming up in its visible and audible vicinity, interspersed by older and lower modern-era buildings, derelict or partially inhabited manors in disrepair, as well as schools and religious institutions in more maintained structures. The price of a new apartment space on land such as Mansion's was worth \$3,000 to \$4,000 per meter-square (Ramco 2014). In 1999, when Mansion's current owner, Imad, bought the property and the plots adjacent to it, prices were significantly lower. "It went for a pittance," lamented Hiba, one of the former inheriting owners, without recalling the exact amount, a plausible hyperbole nevertheless, given that land prices more than doubled between 2008 and 2012) in Zoqaq (De Guzman 2019). As her family lost its former wealth and status, fragmenting across continents, Imad's businesses thrived, enabling his purchase. Shared with me by a real estate broker I shadowed for a period during

fieldwork, the Arabic proverb pertaining to property sales: “Congratulate the buyer, and pay condolence to the seller,”⁵ adequately captures Hiba’s affect, the social value of accumulating real estate for financial growth and the primacy of private ownership as means of land tenure and hence access to place in the city. Beirut’s state-and-market driven privatization and commodification of land, has not only marginalized lower-income dwellers from the city, but increasingly its professional, educated and creative middle classes.

Commons law existed in the Mashreq region under the Ottoman Empire, and was defined as state or municipal land that a community could benefit from according to legal or traditional relations. It was eradicated under French Mandate in Lebanon in 1930 with the Real Estate Ownership Law No. 3339. Although Mansioners do not habitually refer to their initiative as a commons (in Arabic *mashaa*) or commoning, their practices, ethos and discourses, as well as the conditions that undergird the collective’s existence align well with their definition; commoning in particular. In what follows, I elaborate on Mansion’s commoning by detailing the terms of the borrowing arrangement with Imad, as well as the everyday practices and ethos of Mansion. Rather than constituting a commons, outside the purview of state or market, yet governed by structured institutions as reported from Western European contexts (Ostrom 1990), Mansion (re)produces and governs itself through the idiom of urban commoning. It does so by maintaining ideological opposition to and practical solutions against the grain of neoliberal policies of capture, dispossession and exploitation, yet its primary condition of possibility - “benevolent surplus” - was facilitated by these very policies. As such, it is neither “at peace” with capitalism (Kalb 2017) nor a compromise from the ‘real’ anti-capitalist struggles of commons of yore (Linebaugh 2014), yet neither is it autonomous from existing social, economic and political systems (Kip 2015). Mansion’s commoning happens in the shadows of the state and under the wings of the market, even if in spite of them both, by its struggle to: a) delay through adaptive reuse the demolition of yet another old property to make way for elite dwellings and speculative real estate, b) redistribute value and services through a social welfare and informal gift system, c) self-organize and self-govern through participation and consultation, and d) open up a private property for wider public use. It is an ongoing experiment in dwelling by other means under

“overbearing” conditions, those “seemingly unmoving and non-negotiable circumstances and forces, which materialize on the level of spatial arrangements, violent conflict and dominant discourses, as well as hegemonic political and economic regimes”, impinging upon everyday life (Kanafani and Sawaf 2017, 4). It does this all the while striving to keep the house, its primary resource. It is therefore a precarious endeavor, much like urban commoning initiatives across the world (Harvey 2012; Parr 2015). Faced with its own challenges and shortcomings, Mansion has significantly evolved since its inception, growing its influence within the fields of urban activism, and cultural and knowledge production. With increased if still discrete visibility, Mansion has encouraged comparable initiatives to sprout beyond its immediate networks and instigated public debate about ways to make life in the city sustainably livable, even while making it so for a slew of grassroots organizations and political activists. Other significant transformations that unfolded between 2019-2021, but which lie outside the scope of this paper, call for new interpretations of Mansion’s conditions of possibility and precarity in its modes of urban commoning.

A Gentlemen’s Agreement: An Asymmetrical Compatibility

The establishment and continuity of Mansion has depended on a compatibility in social position, and an incompatibility in the material conditions, between Imad and Ghassan. Who Imad is and who Mansioners are has affected the likelihood and tenacity of the agreement between them, enabling this unusual deal of lending property to non-kin - initially total strangers - to reproduce itself beyond Mansioners’ own expectations.

In his late 40s, Ghassan is an architect by training, and the youngest of five sons born to a German mother and a Lebanese father. In their mountain town, his uncle and father owned property where they cultivated various produce and raised animals. However, Ghassan grew up in Beirut, then studied architecture at the American University of Beirut, and experienced much of the Lebanese Civil War and its aftermath in Beirut’s mainly middle-class neighborhood of Hamra. His narrative of life in war-torn Hamra is replete with anecdotes of

duress under conditions of violence and shortages of basic amenities, which are made bearable only by intense social relations. The value of neighborly sharing and support that bisected the ideological and identitarian lines of warring factions, had forged strong and lasting solidarities, he said in line with a familiar public discourse on the collectivity of war-time sociality. Before Mansion, Ghassan and colleagues ran a cultural space out of an old apartment they rented in another gentrifying fringe neighborhood of Beirut, but were evicted when the owners decided to sell it for development. In search of a new space, Ghassan scouted the city for an abandoned property for affordable artists' studios and workspace. For his part, Imad is in his 60s, has an export-import trade, and pursued occasional real estate ventures, mostly buying property for speculation but occasionally also developing them in partnership with his brother. A successful merchant, he also enjoys solid political connections, from his father's side as well as his mother's, both of whom come from a lineage of upwardly mobile families who gained significant wealth and power in Lebanon over the past three-quarter century. His father's lineage sought higher education and professionalizing in liberal trade, acquiring in the process social status and public positions that were influential in real estate and urbanization in the country. Having grown up in Zoqaq al Blatt with his natal family before the Civil War, he moved there as an adult and continues to live in a duplex apartment right across the street from Mansion. On the two occasions when I met with Imad, and based on the accounts of Mansioners and others who had met him, he is a discrete, soft-spoken yet willful man, who is patiently involved in the minutiae of his business endeavors and properties. Some have observed that he practices a more old-school liberal rather than neoliberal approach in his enterprises, evidenced by a respect for state regulation and lament over its near-total disintegration, albeit in a context where state deregulation can enable growth for those capable of harnessing it.

"I found Imad by not looking for him," Ghassan told me, laughing, in a conversation in late 2014. In his search for an art space, Ghassan had his heart set mainly on old abandoned or underused properties that were not too derelict so they could still be made habitable. He found that most owners were difficult to approach directly. "Whenever I found a place and tried to contact the owners," he continued, "I was always led to their lawyer," relaying the

general caution, suspicion and sometimes secrecy that surround real estate dealings, given the occurrence of several fraudulent enterprisers (Kanafani 2017b, 65, 152-153). He had not met a single owner on his quest until in 2012, while he walked past Mansion for the nth time admiring the place, a neighbor directed him to Imad's house across the street. Feeling at once lucky to have "reached the owner" and with little to lose, Ghassan made his proposal bold: seeing that the house had been abandoned for several years, and that property prices were so prohibitively high to his social milieu, he told Imad he wanted to borrow the place free of charge to set up space for artists to work together and be close to Beirut's city center and its activities. In return, he promised the collective would rehabilitate the house gradually and enough for use, needing nothing from Imad except his permission bring his plot back to life again in a neighborhood that was still recovering from decades of decline. After about three months of thought, and to Ghassan's utter if pleasant surprise, Imad accepted, and thus was born an agreement between the two men that continues today.

The initial agreement between Imad and Ghassan was verbal, propelled by periodic meetings to negotiate extensions. This was followed by a written agreement that was effective for one year, subsequently left un-renewed, and then renewed for a year again in late 2019, ahead of negotiations over a new contract in 2021. Neither the initial document nor its renewed version constitutes regular rental contracts or include any financial exchange between Mansion and Imad. Ghassan said his precise role in the first document he signed with Imad was *shaghil* (literally "one who makes use of" or "works" a space), thereby rendering it "a place" (*makan*) in contrast to a ruin or *anqaadh* (rubble), the municipal-level bureaucratic status of abandoned property. Accordingly, Ghassan was to use and work the house in order for the house not to fall apart or be subject to trespassers, looters or vandals. Mansioners can therefore use the place for their own personal professional practices, for non-profit public events, but not commercial ventures, nor for any significant fund-raising.⁶ In the absence of any formal rental contract, the occupancy of Mansion is not registered with the Beirut Municipal Council nor taxable by the Ministry of Finance as inhabited property, such that according to Ghassan, and contrary to the informal agreement between him and Imad, Mansion is in fact marked as 'rubble' in municipal files. For that reason,

Mansioners were allowed to make only sufficient and necessary repairs on the house, but no conspicuous renovations that draw too much attention to it, suggesting the house is in use and taxable by the state.⁷ Despite his cautionary meticulousness, Imad has been noticeably hands-off with Mansion's day-to-day affairs, preferring to remain low-profile as Mansion's owner and left out of the collectives' public communications, and requesting only that Mansion respect a set of rules and conditions, while making good of Ghassan's intent to make "something" of the place.

Many Mansioners attribute the fluidity and informality of this agreement to the mutual confidence and respect that grew early on following Ghassan's encounter with Imad, and continues to define to some extent the fate of the community's access to its primary material resource: the house and its surrounding gardens. Till today, this is a rare example in Lebanon of borrowing real estate between people who have no relation of kith or kin to one another, nor prior acquaintance, which might normally incentivize this sort of mutual confidence. The respect and trust between Imad and Ghassan, and subsequently with other Mansioners who inherited a variant of their relationship when Ghassan emigrated to France in 2019, extends from the compatible social and cultural capital that both parties enjoy within Beirut society (Bourdieu 1990). While Imad exceeds Ghassan and other Mansioners in age, finances and power, working within a profit-driven sector, some Mansioners also come from comfortable and/or landed classes. "We are not financially precarious as individuals. We must admit this enables our disinterest in financial profit," Sandra reasoned, while we talked about Mansioners' distinction from other villa squatters in Zoqaq, and developers she had met who were puzzled at the missed opportunity of Mansion's non-profit agenda.⁸ While Imad can lay claim to his cultural capital through higher education, proximity to the world of arts and culture, Mansioners derive theirs from their education and from their immaterial labor in culture and activism. While Mansion's space manifests some of the markers of such distinction through both minimalism and a bohemian aesthetic associated with upward mobility in gentrifying neighborhoods (Lloyd 2014), Imad's appeared in his appreciative consumption of high-end art and artifacts. His office is minimally designed with first grade finishing, combining both plush and modern furnishings, and decorated with

choice art pieces and traditional carpeting, revealing the distinction of his blended western-and-ethnic aesthetic choices (Deeb & Harb 2013, Bourdieu 1984). His proclivity for preserving and displaying beautiful things, at the intersection of the modern and vernacular, evidently parallels his enchantment with “The Yellow House” as vestige of the neighborhood’s past that is worth keeping - till now - otherwise he might have already demolished.

The two parties inhabit overlapping social milieus and Mansioners constitute a match for Imad, not just in cultural capital but in terms of social capital, namely the ability to access resources through their social connections (Bourdieu 1984). Although the two parties did not enter their agreement through any prior personal acquaintance or relation, over the years it has become clear that Mansioners and Imad in fact have common friends and acquaintances. This has helped cement Imad’s confidence that Mansioner’s are legitimate users of his property - rather than potential abusers, their visibility and reputation imposing upon them the morality of good guests who do not overstay their welcome, Mansion’s moral and social debt to Imad for the gift of using his house. This collateral if asymmetrical class compatibility, however, does not translate into complicity by way of shared interests or aspirations. Meanwhile, Mansioners’ professional labor contributes to the reproduction of the urban creative class, civil society and academic milieus, whose production Imad values, by his own admission, and acts upon this value by supporting the initiative even when he is not entirely sure what they are up to. Yet despite expressing a dislike of the status quo⁹, for much of his career, he was a beneficiary of it, thriving in the existing mercantile order or unbridled accumulation_, which Mansion and its close allies oppose, promoting sustainable reuse and the redistribution of wellbeing by opening up urban spaces that are underused.

When I asked Imad directly why he accepted to lend his house, he told me, “I want to be useful to the city.”¹⁰ Without contesting the sincerity of Imad’s claim, several Mansioners identify his primary motive as one of convenience. As Mansioners actively use and maintenance the house, saving the property from dereliction, Imad can speculate on the property value. This leaves Imad the option to renovate the still-salvageable house at a later

time, if he chooses. Moreover, by agglomerating Mansion's property with the ones surrounding it which he and his brothers own as well, and by leaving Mansion standing as a low-rise structure, he is permitted by construction law to develop surrounding plots with additional build-up, exponentially increasing profits.¹¹ Such a large and costly building venture, would also be risky in Lebanon's stagnating real estate economy since 2010, and its boisterous and dusty construction would also disrupt the peace on Abdel Kader Street, where he himself enjoyed residing. Ultimately, his financial stability enabled him to wait and do nothing, while offering up an opportunity to patronize culture and art.

Without any legal rights, Mansion's total dependency on Imad's willingness to continue doing so, puts them in a perpetually precarious and uncertain position. This is exemplified by the most important term of the borrowing agreement, one that Imad reiterates, namely that he retains the absolute prerogative to evict Mansioners and reclaim the house at any time, on a short-to-medium notice. While agreeing to approximate - out of social decency - the three-month eviction notice that Lebanese rental law stipulates, he has also been open to negotiations for extensions. Since the initial agreement, Imad has in 2016 raised the question to Ghassan of whether, why and for how long Mansion still needs the house, at which points Ghassan negotiated extensions each of three years. In 2018, when Imad became aware of Ghassan's and Sandra's imminent move to France, and was reluctant to lose Ghassan as point of contact, he asked Mansion to relocate elsewhere by the end of that year. However, in 2020, other Mansioners were able once again to win the initiative more time. These quasi-eviction notices habitually propelled the collective into an existential crisis, with multiple meetings and consultations dedicated to discuss a way forward. What happens to Mansion as collective if the space is lost? Are the terms of this agreement replicable elsewhere? What "traces" can Mansion leave behind so that others can attempt similar social experiments? While unsettling Mansion, this precarity and with it Mansioners recognition that the agreement is "not indefinite", is reassuring to Imad that his lending is safe. Established as Mansion's absolute if undemonstrative patron, he remains open to negotiating extensions, as long as it remains convenient for him to do so.

I have called this agreement a ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ not only because it is one founded and maintained primarily on personal trust and a spoken agreement, but also to signal its underlying patriarchal nature, as initially and literally a pact ‘between men’. Until mid-2019 when a new governance system redistributed roles and powers between Mansioners, Ghassan was the symbolic father of Mansion and representative of the collectivity. It was he who was most often summoned to speak on its behalf to any significant public, such as the media, or foreign delegations visiting the house, as well as to brokering with neighbors. More importantly, for the majority of Mansion’s existence, he was exclusively in a position to negotiate with Imad any needed approvals for interventions on the house, or discuss the terms and extension of Mansion’s mandate. Notwithstanding his propensity for social liaising, Ghassan gained such legitimacy from having struck first contact with Imad and played a pivotal role in founding the project, while relying on a significant pool of friends and colleagues to build the collectivity and physical space up to what it has become. Until late 2020, he was the sole Mansioner who Imad agreed to speak to, despite the willingness of others to meet with him. Elsewhere, I argued that the prevalence of men’s control over real estate dealings, obscures the wills, influences and actions of women and junior male kin in affecting decisions about shared family property (Kanafani 2017b, 72 -77). In Mansion, the two women obscured are Imad’s wife and Ghassan’s partner. A painter and an art aficionado, Imad’s wife was often spotted inconspicuously attending Mansion’s earliest public events, leading some Mansioners to wonder whether she played a part in convincing Imad to continue lending the house to Ghassan after the initial agreement. A French performance artist and social worker, Sandra was among the diverse set of essential if publicly less recognized participants to dream up and establish Mansion as a deliberate collective, as well as keeping its social, artistic and logistical wheels daily turning.

“What is Mansion?”: Actions and Articulations of a Common Ethos

Clearly in the context of Lebanon where squatting laws do not exist, Mansion’s relationship with Imad is indispensable for its existence, because without free access to property, this

particular community of urban dwellers could never afford such spacious real estate in which to operate. Yet the role Mansion plays in Beirut's cultural and activist milieu depends primarily on a set of practices and shared ethos: perpetual "healing" of a space that might otherwise be derelict or demolished; its explicit leniency with money in the face of overbearing financial stringency; its deliberate openness to a wide public in the face of closure; and its participatory governance within a patriarchal feudal state. These multi-scalar spatial interventions, characteristic of urban commoning (Kip et al 2015) are constituted by an "ethos of care", or the ethics of economic, ecological and political collaboration and solidarity that increasingly drives spatial struggles within various neoliberal urban contexts (Özkan and Baykal Büyüksaraç 2020). After the initial period of clean-up and moving in, taking the first couple of years to encompass the vast house, this ethos evolved gradually and adaptively, becoming a conscious strategy.

Once Ghassan gained access to the house, he and Mansion's core group of founders spent time and modest out-of-pocket funds to make the house livable to a modicum. To earn Mansion a secure place in the neighborhood as new-comer, including access to vital and often scarce amenities, it was necessary for Ghassan to establish trust and respect with neighbors, particularly the 'big men' from the Amal Movement who have sway on Zoqaq al-Blatt and what takes place there. In addition to repairing broken windows and doors, this initial set-up required a confluence of maneuvers to connect the house to basic infrastructure, electricity, running water and internet, and perpetual follow-up to ensure they keep running. Since the disruption of reliable electricity during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), the Lebanese government never restored provision of 24-hour power but only disbursed intermittent supplies depending on geographic location and fuel shortages, requiring residents to supplement their needs through private generators.¹² When Mansioners moved in, the house had its own state power line but needed generator power to have ongoing electricity. Securing the former involved Ghassan deploying personal connections to dodge bill collectors who saw an opportunity to extort bribes in the paradox of Mansion's status as inhabited 'rubble'. The former demands ongoing renegotiation over exorbitant prices and frequent cuts due to overload with generator owners. Mansion's water

was sourced from the adjacent commercial parking lot, which Imad co-owns with his brothers, and where he pays the annual water bill. Meanwhile, internet was chronically unstable for Mansion' first five years due mostly to the unavailability of affordable provision that could meet its high demand, which was better met when the house got a landline for more affordable DSL internet. Mansion's habitability has not altered its status as 'rubble' or resolved the contradiction, leaving it in a legal limbo that calls for renewed negotiations with public agents whenever the house needs significant work.

Financial constraint, the rundown condition of the house and Imad's prohibition of a total overhaul meant that Mansion's initial adaptive reuse could not occur in one fell sweep, but made continuous maintenance and repurposing acquire an ethical value. Strictly speaking, a Mansioner is one who pays for studio or office space the equivalent of \$100 and \$250¹³ depending on the room size and the number of users. Such contribution goes towards the house's basic running costs, maintenance and modest emergency enhancements fund. Much like their policy towards public users of the space, the monetary contribution system is lenient and adapted to people's individual and fluctuating financial capabilities. But determining who becomes a new member when space is available has partially depended on whether they will be present and involved in maintaining and managing the space, with those who are not, either feeling the need to leave or being asked to. "Every day I came to work to find something that didn't work that I had to deal with, like a broken toilet flush - very basic things. It was tedious and a waste of my time," said one former studio occupant who was there early on, at a time - dubbed internally "Mansion Phase 1" - when the project's collective ethos was not yet defined. Core founders frequently recall the physical and affective labor, the patience and accumulated daily efforts, that initially went into salvaging Mansion and subsequently keeping it habitable. Particularly at the initiative's beginnings, it involved revamping ones chosen work-space, such that as people joined, Mansion became gradually more habitable, one part and function after the other. While this maintenance summons an active involvement in the materiality of the house _by necessity (Ingold 2010), it also rendered such labor an ethical condition for collective belonging. Indeed, continued acceptance is contingent on the willingness to clean, tidy, organize, plant,

repair, recycle, cook and share meals regularly, or make punctuated enhancements on the space. It has also hinged on the exchange of favor, friendships, and the barter of used commodities (e.g. clothes, equipment, furniture etc.) in a gift economy that extends to outside users. Giving the place taking precedence over taking from it.

In their attempt to practice an alternative to the city's privatization and monetization, Mansioners have unanimously defended the right of members of the general public to enter the house and garden to work or hang out free of charge. The principle is that a spacious, pleasant place should be shared and available to everyone. Since Mansion was created, it has been open to and welcomed a growing and mutating set of users, who were either colleagues, friends, acquaintances, or total strangers from local, regional or international contexts; and the occasional neighbor. They include artists, activists, academics, students, designers and the occasional vetted cultural or humanitarian organization. They occupy various positions on a sliding scale between sheer enchantment with the house's heritage aesthetics and active participation in Mansion's mission, passing through curiosity over the collective's urban politics and practices. They punctuate Mansion's online calendar with workshops, exhibitions, dance performances, fashion shows, puppet shows, lectures, debates, yoga classes, theater rehearsals and plays, meetings, and film screenings. To use any of the common spaces for this, they pay anything from nothing to a contribution in kind or cash that depends on their capabilities and financial means. Thus, the same welfare system that applies in the case of Mansioners' monetary contributions applies to outside users, marking Mansion's financial leniency toward financial profit. Yet, Mansion's openness does not just constitute the unconditional ability for anyone to use the house and garden, which they technically can during ordinary circumstances¹⁴ between more or less standard working hours, and to participants or spectators in special events outside these hours. Indeed, Mansion is relatively unknown, unused and somewhat unrecognizable in its vicinity, having no sign marking its exterior, although it maintains friendly relation with a few. The active entanglement in the production of common space as avenue for social and political change that it thrives on, appeals more to users with similar social and cultural position than

the general public, increasingly locked into the stringent timetables of exploitative labor and consumerism.

Thus, Mansioners' friends, visitors and public users are encouraged to practice basic principles of care for the space, with signs pinned up throughout the house explaining how and why. They are invited to clean and tidy up after themselves, do their own dishes, abide by the trash recycling system, minimize water usage during shortages and show consideration for other users. Such an ethos also extends towards Mansion's neighbors, through relations of reciprocity over scarce utilities or collaboration over shared spaces. This expectation, even among Mansioners themselves, sometimes has patchy outcomes and needs periodic reminders. Rubbish or used kitchenware left lying around in common spaces, or broken infrastructure that is left unaddressed by ones who find it, for example, summon grievances and require redress, especially when the work of tidying or repairing falls upon some Mansioners more than others. Periodic inequality in the distribution of labor and hence of benefit, points to the threat of abuse or misuse of the common resource (the house), what Hardin has termed "the tragedy of the commons" and argued threatens the continuity of all commoning practices (Hardin 1968). In late 2014, I witnessed an instance of the threat of such 'tragedy.' Noticing the material and social neglect of Mansion's common spaces, some wondered whether the retreat of others to their personal studios to attend to professional work was distracting from their involvement in collective practice. Meanwhile, those retreating defended their retreat by the need to attend to the pressures of their work, at a time when the "collective" was not a tangible experience for them.¹⁵ The misalignment ushered in "Mansion Phase 2," with increased expectations from all remaining members to be involved, which in turn helped define a more deliberate agenda of collectivity. As Mansion's began attracting more users, including Mansioners with large social and political networks, balancing misuse and care of the space became more delicate. Voluntary and spontaneous intervention in the house's material, social and affective relations were not ideal for handling the house's growing public demand; nor indeed for ensuring the collective's continuation in the face of perpetual evictability and the imminent emigration of Ghassan and Sandra to France in spring 2019. Mansioners' ability to manage and coordinate

what, how and by whom things get done when they leave became a central concern, instigating an elaborate in-house conversation about governance and sustainability in the face of precarity - “leaving a trace” in the words of Sandra and others. According to Sandra, a second impetus for this conversation was to take their departure from Mansion as an opportunity to dig more deeply into the initiative’s political ambitions and aspirations.

In November 2018, Mansioners organized a two-day workshop to brainstorm together the collective’s practical and ethical mission, and how the place should run going forward. Spearheaded by Sandra, who dubbed it, “Mansion’s Becoming”, the workshops involved focus group discussions around four main questions: what are Mansion’s shared values? What everyday practices and behaviors reflect (or challenge) these values? What activities and events could be introduced to promote these values? What can individual Mansioners commit to *doing* (feasibly, sustainably) to further this goal? These were then synthesized to produce a new distribution of responsibility by subcommittees for each function within Mansion: maintenance and repair, public activities, Mansioner and new member affairs, and the artist residency program. Prior to this transition and since Mansion’s inception, major decisions and their implementation were the prerogative of Ghassan (and intermittently Sandra). As the mastermind of the project and sole counterpart in the relationship with Imad, Ghassan was Mansion’s symbolic and practical figurehead. Despite this centralization, both he and Sandra practiced a consultative mode of leadership in conjunction with other Mansioners. Autonomous initiatives that Ghassan and particular Mansioners took got weaved into the rhyme and reason of the space. A morning coffee break in the kitchen that _unfurls into an extended conversation in a passageway, then bleeds into an impromptu collective meal, which becomes the kernel of “Mansion Kitchen,” a weekly lunch that Ghassan and Sandra prepared and opened up to the public at a symbolic fee. While distracting from the efficiency of people’s individual work outputs, this “ongoing risk of too much socializing,” as one Mansioner described it, constitutes the slow, leisurely and sometimes haphazard qualities of Mansion’s collectivistic modus operandi. Yet, while this routinized some in-house practices, other important group decisions and projects stalled, responsibility for them either forgotten or unfairly relegated. In addition to regularizing its

practices and unifying its discourse, the new governance system reversed the roles between Mansioners and Ghassan. While the former took on all managerial and executive duties, became remote consultants, and Imad agreed to negotiate terms of extension with new representatives from Mansion. Becoming more deliberately organized and internally coherent consolidated the collective's social contract, and with it a growing visibility and credibility in the city, and with it a renewed sense of sustainable purpose in the face of precarity.

Mansion's free of charge, open yet unpolished and make-shift environment stands in stark contrast to other profit-oriented co-working start-up tech hubs and entrepreneurial "incubators" in Beirut, which began mushrooming around the city center in the mid-2010s, boasting state-of-the-art facilities. In places like Beirut Digital District or Antwork, users pay between 200 and 300 US dollars for a full month of access in return for individual or shared work space that is quiet, sanitized, air-conditioning and professionally securitized, with stable infrastructure and purchasable food and drink options. While also remaining somewhat marginal to the mainstream Lebanese culture scene, having no legal status or donor funding for the house as such - although some Mansioners' organization do - Mansion's model aligns with a small set of grassroots activist and creative spaces. Striving for particular agendas of ethical practice and discourse against the grain, within their own spatial, social and professional domains, none however exist at the intersection between borrowing and dereliction as primary conditions of possibility and precarity. This particularity has afforded Mansion the rare if tenuous exemption from the financial burden of rent, sustaining its presence through modest means yet demanding physical work and the chance to experiment with a non-exploitative, egalitarian and participatory environment.

That said, Mansion was not impervious to a particular form of structural inequality, which prevails in Lebanese society across classes and beyond, namely the relegation of its most heavy-duty maintenance work to hired migrant workers. While Ethiopian women were hired for routine housekeeping two years into Mansion's existence, Abed, a Syrian worker has been a stable hire since 2015 for major cleaning and arduous manual work. He was also

asked to be available for cleaning studios in exchange for extra fees from studio holders. Before his hire, Mansioners debated at length whether outsourcing this labor is commensurate with collectivistic and autonomous social relations. But when a rotational cleaning system repeatedly failed, they decided that keeping Mansion as clean and tidy to suit Mansioners' and public users' hygienic and aesthetic sensibilities would take more time and effort than they could collectively expend. Such labor competed with their responsibilities managing Mansion's cultural activities, and their own professions, homes and families. His hire did not foreclose the involvement of several Mansioners who have the skills and bent to continue their manual work on the space, independently or alongside Abed, while assigning and coordinating his tasks. Moreover, the same welfare system applicable to all Mansion users was also extended to him. So while Lebanese labor law indentures migrant workers to Lebanese sponsors while denying them equal rights, facilitating their exploitation, Mansion consciously compensates Abed's work conditions to more equitable pay and hours that can sustain his and his family. Abed is also invited to social gathers, common meals and all meetings (attending several), and Mansioners welcome his opinion and personal initiative over what and how he performs his duties. Against the grain of alienation, these practices affirm his mutual respect, favor and friendship with Mansioners, and the principles of justice and equality they try to consciously and consistently apply. Yet his presence invariably reflects the hierarchy that exists between material labor and the immaterial labor of cultural production, and the difference in social positions of those who perform them (Susen and Turner 2011). This chimes with understandings of commoning, as arising within capitalism and increasingly consisting of immaterial production like "information, communication, knowledge and affects" (Hardt and Negri 2009: viii, cited in Parr 2015: 85). This reality warrants the recognition that Abed's hire is one of Mansion's essential if less publicly known conditions of possibility, without which it could not accomplish the role _that it is dedicated to playing in the city.

Conclusion: Speculating on a Speculation

In this paper I discussed the ways Mansioners' ethical practices and discourses of openness, welfare, egalitarianism, and adaptive reuse, have crafted a loose if recognizable commoning space against the grain of an overbearing neoliberal spatial regime in Beirut. Through arduous first steps of rendering a derelict villa habitable, and the subsequent everyday labor of maintenance, use and governance, Mansioners harnessed and transformed social relations within and through the materiality of the house, refining an ethos of care and defining the contours of collectivity. I have also shown that despite the power asymmetry between them, the social positions of Imad and Mansioners are compatible enough to account for the tacit confidence the owner entrusts in this unusual arrangement. Indeed, the rarity of someone entrusting his private property to strangers has been the subject of much wonderment and wondering, among Mansioners themselves and people in allied networks.¹⁶ Yet to understand the conditions that enable Mansion's urban commoning, I looked beyond the singularity of Imad's intentions, at the broader material and social conditions that enable such intent and thereby occasion Mansion's experiment. I have proposed that his avenue for accumulation of both financial and cultural capital, is well captured by the notion of "benevolent surplus," which constitutes the primary condition of possibility for Mansion's existence. I have argued that because Mansion's evictibility is one of the main terms of the borrowing agreement, precarity is Mansion's essential condition of possibility.

In the context where private ownership is the dominant form of tenure over urban space and dwelling, the landowner who can wait – the one we "congratulate" – gains a triple convenience out of this arrangement: his house is retained from total dereliction by Mansion's dwelling and routine repairs; he speculates on his property as he earns a seat among the cultural patrons of the city. Imad's timely purchase followed by rapid rise in land prices, and the stability of his businesses puts him in a position to acquire land but have no urgent need to activate it in the market, all the while retaining the prerogative to make

significant returns on his investment at some moment of his choice in the future. As he temporarily suspends the property from the market, having abandoned the idea of living in it himself, Imad is in the comfort zone of desiring “to be useful” to a cultural project in the city. The lending gives him social status, in as much as he does not need returns either in public recognition (preferring to remain discreet) nor profit. In Bourdieu’s terms, supporting artistic and cultural production constitutes an espousal of a non-utilitarian position, which translates into the status gained by being useful to an otherwise “useless” trade (Susen and Turner 2011, 198). As such the benevolence of his position is seemingly a disinterested interest, its benefits in status and domination are concealed by the “obfuscating fiction” of altruism and doing good (Silber 2009, 175). Mansion as property is thus surplus capital to him, in excess of his immediate needs but a prime opportunity for financial and cultural capital accumulation.

While subject to Imad’s benevolence, the borrowing leaves Mansion without financial debt in a context where real estate is solidly intertwined with national and global financial institutions, with debt as their centerpiece (Parr 2015). However, the gift of debt-free access to urban space, comes at a dear price: Mansion is in a perpetually precarious position that its primary resource – the physical house and garden – may be reclaimed and lost to them at any moment. We know from Mauss that gifting comes with calculation and debt of one form or another, that there is no free gift, no matter how concealed in benevolence, codes of generosity or discourses of good will (Mauss 195; Conk 1986). In a context of public deregulation, increased commodification of habitats and common resources, and widening socio-economic gaps (Traboulsi 2014), lending property generates the shackles social debt, reestablishes the uneven relations that undergird precarity, while elevating the giver’s position of power. Imad’s lending of Mansion consolidates land tenure and cultural production through patriarchal patron relations, which have legacies in Beirut’s neo-feudal history. Merchant surpluses were and are still expended towards male-dominated forms of patronage of arts and philanthropy in education and culture, domains deemed worthy of support for a modernizing state project (Souaid 1997; Hage 1989).

Mansion's commoning after the commons happens under the wings of the market, and in the shadow of the state, attempting a nuanced understanding of the relationship this case has to either. While a rent-free and debt-free existence puts Mansion under the wings of the market, and Imad's absolute power to evict, while accepting to negotiate, gives him state-like qualities, in the shadows of which Mansion exists. The transition of Arab states - Lebanon included - from entitlements under post-independence welfarism, to philanthropy and charity under neoliberalism, puts civil rights increasingly at the mercy of private interests, redefining our understanding of statehood (Obeid 2015). The collusion of public and private interests in driving neoliberal urban policy in Beirut, casts the middle- to lower-income urban dweller as an obstacle to private ownership and profit from real estate, instating eviction as central mode of sovereignty (Bekdache 2015). Increasingly, residents of Lebanon encounter the Lebanese authorities in the guise of private individuals and citizens, with enormous powers (Kassamali 2019)¹⁷, such as the figure of employee of migrant or informal labor, or landlord. Arguably, even Mansioners' efforts to negotiate extensions and Imad's openness to such negotiation, echo the encounter among Lebanese citizens as between them and the state's own institutionalized informality and extra-legality (Hage 2018, 97-99), rendering negotiability an essential if unpredictable encounter with the state (Kanafani 2017a, 145). Mansion's precarity through evictability exists within the state-sanctioned vulnerability of non-ownership status in the city, and likely bolsters Imad's willingness to negotiate extensions. For, so long as Mansion remains in the position of dependent and "benign" cultural initiative, and its collectivistic agenda and ethical practices remain unthreatening to the supremacy of private ownership, then the lending is a safe and convenient move for him: precarity as possibility.

Mansion's ethnographic site has parallels with other post-colonial contexts of the southern hemisphere, including sweeping urbanization, rapid commodification of habitats and resources, minimal social welfare and widening socio-economic gaps. It shares with other Arab contexts at least, a fraught relationship with neglectful and authoritarian states (Obeid 2015). This region can play a more central role in the global debate - intellectually and politically - on the prospect of commons and urban commoning as alternative to the status

quo. There is a need to look at commoning again and more closely to inform this scholarship and practice, from the specifics of the region, the parameters of possibility, constraint and imagination. Political deadlock, crony capitalism, state corruption and neglect of social welfare, the Covid 19 pandemic, and the devastating blast at Beirut port on August 4, 2020 have piled crisis upon crisis onto this small and disproportionately troubled land. With a huge public debt, Lebanon's economy eventually began its downward slide in the winter of 2019-20 reaching full velocity in 2021. Until the Thawra or Lebanese Revolution of October 17, 2019, a voice championing the notion of common good remained too faint to be heard in mainstream public discourse and to constitute a precedent in public consciousness. In conjunction_ with_ rising social movements of the Arab Spring (2011), and increasingly after the Thawra, ongoing activism and social movements constitute a valuable bedrock for the practice and ethics_ of sustainable and just forms of life, which commoning represents.

Mansion and several of its activist members and their networks have been forerunners in the push for change well before and during the Thawra, inspiring others while honing in their objectives and strategies, often using Mansion's common spaces as public venue for meeting and organizing. Through public discussion fora, focus group consultations and informal conversation, several Mansioners have tried to take stock of the collective's conditions of possibility, and how Mansion's experience might be harnessed to _instigate durable change beyond its own specificity. Is borrowing space a realistic, replicable or indeed desirable model for change? How does one collectivize under the perpetual threat of eviction? What can Mansion do to shed its precarity? The history of communities subsisting on shared common resources far exceeds that of the history of hoarding them to the benefit of the few. According to Linebaugh, private property constitutes theft from the commons, rather than commoning being an encroachment upon private property (2014). With its accumulated experience, Mansion is well-placed to grapple with these crucial questions beyond their relevance for its own locale and the convenience of its temporary arrangement.

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Endnotes

¹ At the time, this was equivalent to 50 US dollars.

² Private development has fast been filling up urban space, earning Beirut a reputation as one of the most densely populated cities with one of the smallest ratios of green spaces per capita. One report claimed 50 per cent of Lebanon's population lives in Beirut, where each inhabitant has access to less than one meter-square of green space (Nahnoo 2012: 2)

³ French meaning permitted to do everything.

⁴ The former owner-resident family are reputed to have hosted extravagant gatherings of Lebanese high society, as well as more intimate meals with prominent politicians, who met to negotiate pivotal agreements of the day (Interview, Beirut, September 10, 2014).

⁵ In Arabic, *hanni el shari, wu 3azi el baye*³.

⁶ Imad agreed to suspend this condition in 2019 when, faced with imminent eviction and closure, Mansion applied for and received a significant solidarity grant from the Culture Resource and The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture.

⁷ Interview with Ghassan, Mansion, January 10, 2014.

⁸ Interview with Sandra and Ghassan, Mansion, May 215, 2014.

⁹ Relayed from Mansioners' meetings with Imad, his office, September 17, 2019.

¹⁰ Interview with Imad, his office, July 24, 2014.

¹¹ In one precedent of such a real estate advantage on the exclusive Surssock Street, the preservation of an old and well-maintained residential-palace-turned-events-venue enabled developers to build one of the highest rising buildings on Beirut's skyline atop an adjacent plot and hovering above the palace gardens.

¹² Such informal arrangements are prevalent enough to have become either legalized or tolerated by the state at various moments in Lebanon's post-war history. Generator electricity costs are subject to the fluctuating market prices of fuel, and frequently set outside - and against - state regulation. For more on this topic, see Abi Ghanem 2017.

¹³ Before the 2020 Lebanese economic crash and hyperinflation, and based on the 1515 Lebanese Lira (LL) to \$1 exchange rate, these figures translated to approximately LL150,000 and LL340,000, and well within the Mansioners' financial means.

¹⁴ Extraordinary circumstances which disrupted public access to Mansion included lockdowns following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Beirut port explosion of August 4, 2020.

¹⁵ Fieldnotes, Mansion Meeting, November 13, 2014.

¹⁶ Mansion forum. DATE. Following Thawra.

¹⁷ Kassamali shows demonstrates this in the case of the sponsorship system (kafala), which governs the presence and labor of migrant workers to Lebanon, and where employers have near-absolute powers over the lives and fates of employees, enabling significant abuses of freedoms and rights. The landowner's ability to evict, which Bekdache discusses in more detail.

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