

Between Planning and Informality: The Emergence of Hybrid Urbanism in Lebanese Cities

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ABSTRACT

Urban development in Lebanon presents a complex case where formal planning frameworks coexist with widespread informal urban practices. This paper examines the emergence of hybrid urbanism in Lebanese cities by analyzing the interaction between planning institutions, market forces, and informal urban development. The study adopts a qualitative analytical approach based on urban planning literature, institutional analysis, and the examination of urban development patterns in Lebanon. The findings indicate that urban growth in Lebanon is shaped by multiple structural factors, including conflict-induced migration, real estate dynamics, institutional fragmentation, and limited regulatory enforcement. These factors contribute to the formation of hybrid urban systems in which formal planning regulations operate alongside negotiated development practices and informal construction processes. The spatial consequences of this hybrid condition are visible in the fragmented urban morphology of Lebanese cities, characterized by mixed land uses, peri-urban expansion, and coastal urbanization. The study argues that conventional planning models based on strict regulatory control are insufficient to address the realities of urban development in Lebanon. Instead, more adaptive and context-sensitive planning strategies are required to respond to the hybrid nature of urban governance and spatial transformation. By analyzing the Lebanese case, this research contributes to broader debates on urban informality and hybrid urban systems in cities of the Global South.

Keywords: Hybrid urbanism, urban informality, Urban planning in Lebanon, Urban governance, urban development, spatial transformation

INTRODUCTION

Urban development in Lebanon represents a complex and distinctive case within contemporary urban studies. While formal planning institutions and regulatory frameworks exist, the spatial growth of Lebanese cities has largely evolved through a combination of regulated and unregulated processes. This interaction between formal planning systems and informal urban practices has produced an urban structure that differs significantly from conventional models of planned urban development.

In traditional planning theory, urban development is often understood through a clear distinction between formal planning systems and informal urban settlements. However, scholars have increasingly argued that this binary perspective fails to capture the complexity of urbanization processes in many cities of the Global South, where formal regulations and informal practices frequently coexist and interact in shaping urban space (Roy, 2005; Roy & AlSayyad, 2004; Watson, 2009). Informality in such contexts should not be interpreted solely as the absence of regulation, but rather as a mode of urbanization embedded within broader social, economic, and political dynamics (Simone, 2004; Yiftachel, 2009).

Lebanon provides a particularly illustrative case of these dynamics. The country possesses an established planning framework that includes zoning regulations, building codes, and planning institutions such as the Directorate General of Urban Planning. Nevertheless, urban development often unfolds through practices that bypass, reinterpret, or negotiate these regulatory mechanisms. These processes are frequently driven by real estate markets, political patronage networks, demographic pressures, and limited enforcement capacity within planning institutions (Fawaz, 2009; Harb, 2010).

The resulting urban landscape is characterized by spatial heterogeneity, regulatory ambiguity, and fragmented urban patterns. These characteristics are particularly visible in metropolitan Beirut and its surrounding suburban areas, where rapid urban expansion has been shaped by both formal development projects and informal construction practices. Studies have shown that urban growth in Lebanon has occurred largely in the absence of comprehensive territorial planning, leading to patterns of urban sprawl, coastal urbanization, and the conversion of agricultural land into built-up areas (Verdeil, Faour, & Velut, 2007; UN-Habitat, 2021; World Bank, 2020).

These conditions suggest that Lebanese cities cannot be adequately understood through conventional planning models that separate formal and informal urban development. Instead, urban growth in Lebanon reflects a **hybrid urban condition**, where institutional planning frameworks coexist with adaptive urban practices and market-driven development processes. In such systems, the production of urban space results from the continuous interaction between regulatory institutions, economic actors, and local communities.

Understanding this hybrid urban structure is essential for developing planning strategies that are both realistic and context-sensitive. Rather than approaching informal urban development solely as a planning failure, it is necessary to examine the structural mechanisms through which formal planning systems and informal urban practices coexist and shape the urban environment. By analyzing the interaction between planning regulations, socio-economic drivers, and informal urbanization processes, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of urban development dynamics in Lebanese cities.

The main objective of this study is therefore to explore the emergence of **hybrid urbanism in Lebanese cities**, with particular attention to the relationship between formal planning systems and informal urban development. The study seeks to identify the key drivers behind this hybrid urban structure and to examine its implications for urban governance and future planning strategies in Lebanon.

Research Questions

In light of the complex interaction between formal planning institutions and informal urban practices in Lebanon, this study seeks to investigate the dynamics that shape the emergence of hybrid urban systems in Lebanese cities. The research is guided by the following central questions:

1. What are the defining characteristics of hybrid urbanism in Lebanese cities?
2. How do formal urban planning regulations interact with informal urban development practices in Lebanon?
3. What socio-economic, political, and institutional factors contribute to the persistence of hybrid urban development in Lebanese cities?
4. What spatial consequences does the interaction between formal planning and informality produce in the urban fabric of Lebanese cities?
5. What implications does the hybrid urban condition have for future urban planning and governance in Lebanon?

These questions aim to explore not only the existence of informality in Lebanese urban development, but also the mechanisms through which it interacts with formal planning systems to shape the spatial structure of cities.

Research Objectives

Based on the research questions, the main objective of this study is to examine the emergence of hybrid urbanism in Lebanese cities and to analyze the relationship between formal planning frameworks and informal urban development processes.

The specific objectives of the research include:

- **Analyzing the structure of urban development in Lebanese cities**, with particular attention to the interaction between planned and unplanned urban growth.
- **Examining the role of planning institutions and regulatory frameworks** in shaping urban development in Lebanon.

- **Identifying the main drivers of informal urban development**, including socio-economic pressures, political dynamics, and real estate market forces.
- **Exploring the spatial consequences of hybrid urban systems** on the organization and morphology of Lebanese cities.
- **Providing insights for more adaptive and context-sensitive planning strategies** capable of addressing the realities of urban development in Lebanon.

Through these objectives, the research seeks to contribute to the broader discussion on urban informality and hybrid urban systems in cities of the Global South.

Structure of the Paper

This paper is organized into several sections in order to systematically analyze the emergence of hybrid urbanism in Lebanese cities.

1. The **first section** introduces the research problem and outlines the main research questions and objectives. It also highlights the relevance of studying hybrid urban systems in the Lebanese context.
2. The **second section** presents a review of the relevant literature on informal urbanism, hybrid urban systems, and urban governance in developing cities. This section establishes the theoretical foundation for understanding the interaction between formal planning and informal urban development.
3. The **third section** introduces the conceptual framework of hybrid urbanism, which is used as an analytical lens to examine the Lebanese urban context.
4. The **fourth section** provides an overview of the urban planning framework in Lebanon, including the main institutions, regulations, and policies that govern urban development.
5. The **fifth section** analyzes the patterns and drivers of informal urban development in Lebanese cities, focusing on the socio-economic and political factors that influence urban growth.
6. The **sixth section** discusses the emergence of hybrid urban systems in Lebanon by examining the interaction between formal planning mechanisms and informal urban practices.

Finally, the **seventh section** presents the discussion and concluding remarks, highlighting the implications of hybrid urbanism for urban planning and governance in Lebanon.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Urban development in many contemporary cities, particularly in the Global South, has increasingly been characterized by complex interactions between formal planning systems and informal urban practices. Traditional urban planning theories often conceptualized cities through formal regulatory frameworks and institutional planning mechanisms. However, a growing body of literature has highlighted the limitations of this perspective, emphasizing that urban development frequently occurs through a dynamic relationship between formal governance structures and informal socio-economic practices (Roy & AlSayyad, 2004; Watson, 2009). This section reviews the relevant literature on informal urbanism, hybrid urban systems, urban governance in developing contexts, and the specific characteristics of urban development in Lebanon.

Informal Urbanism in Contemporary Cities

Informal urbanism has become a central theme in urban studies, particularly in discussions concerning cities of the Global South. Early research on urban informality often framed informal settlements as marginal or illegal spaces resulting from rapid urbanization and inadequate housing policies. However, more recent scholarship has shifted toward understanding informality as an integral component of urbanization processes rather than simply a deviation from formal planning systems (Roy, 2005).

Roy (2005) argues that informality should be understood as a mode of urbanization rather than merely a sector operating outside state regulation. Informality, in this sense, emerges through the ways in which state institutions selectively enforce or suspend regulatory frameworks. This perspective challenges earlier interpretations that considered informal urban development primarily as a consequence of poverty or institutional failure.

Similarly, AlSayyad (2004) emphasizes that urban informality represents a complex socio-spatial phenomenon shaped by economic pressures, political structures, and institutional flexibility. Informal urbanization is therefore not solely associated with low-income settlements but may also involve various forms of regulatory negotiation, land speculation, and adaptive urban practices.

Other scholars have highlighted the role of informal economies in shaping urban development. Portes, Castells, and Benton (1989) examined how informal economic activities interact with formal economic systems, particularly in developing countries. These interactions often influence patterns of land use, housing development, and urban expansion.

The scale of informal urbanization has also been emphasized by Davis (2006), who describes the global proliferation of informal settlements in rapidly urbanizing regions. According to Davis, the expansion of informal urban areas reflects structural inequalities in global economic systems as well as the inability of planning institutions to accommodate rapid demographic growth.

Together, these studies demonstrate that informal urban development is not merely an anomaly within urban systems but rather a structural feature of urbanization processes in many parts of the world.

Hybrid Urban Systems in Urban Theory

The concept of hybrid urban systems has emerged as an analytical framework to explain the coexistence of formal and informal processes within urban environments. Instead of viewing cities through a strict division between regulated and unregulated development, hybrid urbanism acknowledges that urban space is often produced through the interaction of multiple regulatory and social mechanisms.

Simone (2004) highlights the importance of everyday urban practices in shaping cities, arguing that urban life in many developing contexts is characterized by flexible networks and adaptive strategies that operate alongside formal institutional systems. These dynamics create urban environments where formal and informal structures are deeply intertwined.

Yiftachel (2009) introduced the concept of “gray spaces” to describe areas that exist between legality and illegality within urban systems. These spaces often emerge where state institutions tolerate certain forms of informality while maintaining the authority to regulate or intervene when necessary. This concept provides a useful lens for understanding the ambiguous regulatory conditions that characterize many urban environments.

Watson (2009) further argues that planning theory must adapt to the realities of cities in the Global South, where informal urbanization often represents a dominant mode of spatial production. Rather than attempting to impose rigid planning models derived from Western contexts, planners must develop more flexible approaches that acknowledge the hybrid nature of urban systems.

The hybrid urban framework therefore emphasizes the interaction between institutions, markets, and communities in shaping urban development. This perspective is particularly relevant in contexts where regulatory enforcement is uneven and where urban growth is driven by multiple competing forces.

Urban Governance and Planning in the Global South

Urban governance plays a crucial role in shaping the relationship between formal planning systems and informal urban practices. In many developing countries, planning institutions operate within complex political and economic environments that influence their capacity to regulate urban development.

Healey (2007) highlights that urban governance involves multiple actors, including state institutions, private investors, and civil society organizations. These actors interact within institutional frameworks that shape the implementation of planning policies and urban development strategies.

Harvey (2012) also emphasizes the role of economic forces in shaping urban development, particularly through the influence of real estate markets and capital investment. In many cities, market dynamics can significantly influence urban growth patterns, often operating independently from formal planning frameworks.

Scott (1998) provides a critical perspective on state-led planning systems, arguing that highly centralized planning approaches often fail to account for the complexity of local socio-economic conditions. As a result, informal practices frequently emerge as adaptive responses to rigid or ineffective regulatory systems.

These studies suggest that urban governance structures significantly influence the emergence of hybrid urban systems, particularly in contexts where planning institutions face challenges related to enforcement, political pressures, or institutional fragmentation.

Urban Development and Informality in Lebanon

Urban development in Lebanon reflects many of the dynamics identified in the broader literature on hybrid urban systems. Despite the presence of formal planning institutions and regulatory frameworks, urban growth in Lebanon has often occurred through a combination of planned and unregulated development processes.

Fawaz (2009) examines the transformation of Beirut's urban periphery, highlighting how neoliberal economic policies and real estate development have influenced patterns of urban expansion. The study demonstrates how market-driven development and informal practices have contributed to the spatial restructuring of metropolitan Beirut.

Harb (2010) further explores the socio-spatial dynamics of urban development in Beirut, emphasizing the role of community networks, political actors, and economic pressures in shaping the urban landscape.

Verdeil, Faour, and Velut (2007) provide a comprehensive analysis of Lebanon's territorial structure, illustrating how urban expansion has transformed the country's spatial organization over the past decades. Their work highlights the rapid growth of built-up areas along the Lebanese coastline and in major metropolitan regions.

More recent reports by international organizations have also documented the challenges associated with urban governance and planning in Lebanon. The World Bank (2020) and UN-Habitat (2021) note that urban development in the country has been characterized by fragmented planning policies, weak regulatory enforcement, and increasing pressure on infrastructure and environmental resources.

These studies collectively indicate that Lebanese cities exhibit many of the characteristics associated with hybrid urban systems, where formal planning institutions coexist with informal urban practices and market-driven development processes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This study adopts a **qualitative analytical research approach** in order to examine the emergence of hybrid urban systems in Lebanese cities and to analyze the interaction between formal planning institutions, market forces, and informal urban development processes. The research focuses on interpreting the structural dynamics that shape urban development rather than measuring quantitative indicators. Such an approach is particularly suitable for investigating complex urban phenomena where institutional, socio-economic, and spatial factors interact simultaneously.

The qualitative approach allows the study to explore how planning regulations, market dynamics, and informal practices coexist within the Lebanese urban system and contribute to the formation of hybrid urban environments.

Literature Review Method

The research is grounded in a comprehensive **review of urban planning and urban studies literature** related to urban informality, hybrid urban systems, and governance structures in cities of the Global South. Key theoretical contributions from scholars such as Roy (2005), Simone (2004), Watson (2009), and Yiftachel (2009) provide the conceptual foundation for understanding the relationship between formal planning frameworks and informal urban development processes.

Through this literature review, the study establishes the theoretical framework necessary to analyze how urban informality interacts with planning institutions and market forces in shaping contemporary urban development.

Institutional Analysis

The research also incorporates an **institutional analysis of the urban planning system in Lebanon**. This component examines the structure and functions of planning institutions, regulatory frameworks, and governance mechanisms that influence spatial development in the country.

Particular attention is given to the roles of the Directorate General of Urban Planning, municipal authorities, and development institutions such as the Council for Development and Reconstruction. By examining these institutional structures, the study seeks to understand how planning regulations are implemented, interpreted, and sometimes negotiated within the Lebanese urban governance system.

Spatial Interpretation of Urban Development Patterns

A spatial interpretation of urban development patterns in Lebanese cities forms another key component of the methodology. This analysis focuses on identifying the spatial consequences of the interaction between planning regulations, market forces, and informal urban practices.

Existing territorial studies, planning reports, and urban analyses are used to examine patterns such as urban sprawl, peri-urban expansion, coastal urbanization, and mixed land-use development. These spatial patterns provide important insights into how hybrid urban systems manifest physically within Lebanese cities.

Conceptual Synthesis

Finally, the research integrates the findings from the literature review, institutional analysis, and spatial interpretation into a **conceptual synthesis** that explains the emergence of hybrid urbanism in Lebanon.

This synthesis allows the study to develop an analytical framework that connects theoretical perspectives on urban informality with the specific institutional and spatial context of Lebanese cities. Through this approach, the research contributes to a broader understanding of how hybrid urban systems emerge in cities of the Global South.

Conceptual Framework: Hybrid Urbanism

Urban development in many contemporary cities cannot be fully explained through traditional planning frameworks that assume a clear separation between formal planning systems and informal urban growth. Instead, urban environments increasingly reflect a complex interaction between regulatory institutions, market forces, and everyday urban practices. In this context, the concept of **hybrid urbanism** provides a useful analytical framework for understanding how formal and informal processes coexist and shape the production of urban space.

Hybrid urbanism refers to the condition in which urban development emerges through the interaction of multiple regulatory, economic, and social systems rather than through a single centralized planning structure. In such systems, formal planning regulations, informal urban practices, and market-driven development operate simultaneously, creating a dynamic urban environment characterized by negotiation, adaptation, and institutional flexibility.

The concept draws on broader discussions within urban theory that challenge the traditional distinction between formal and informal urban development. Roy (2005) argues that informality should not be understood simply as the absence of planning but rather as a mode of urbanization that exists within the regulatory logic of the state itself. In many contexts, planning institutions selectively enforce regulations, allowing certain forms of informal development to persist while maintaining the authority to regulate urban space.

Similarly, Simone (2004) highlights how everyday practices and social networks contribute to shaping urban environments in ways that operate alongside formal planning institutions. These interactions create urban spaces

that are neither fully planned nor entirely informal, but rather represent hybrid systems produced through continuous negotiation between multiple actors.

Another relevant concept is the notion of “**gray spaces**”, introduced by Yiftachel (2009), which describes urban areas that exist between legality and illegality. These spaces emerge when state institutions tolerate or selectively regulate informal development, producing ambiguous regulatory conditions that allow hybrid urban structures to develop.

Within this framework, urban space is produced through the interaction of three main components:

- **Formal Planning Systems**, including planning institutions, zoning regulations, building codes, and urban policies.
- **Market Forces**, particularly real estate investment, land speculation, and economic pressures that drive urban expansion.
- **Informal Urban Practices**, including unauthorized construction, regulatory negotiation, and community-driven urban development.



Figure 1: Spatial Structure of Hybrid Urban Systems in Lebanese Cities

Source: Author, adapted from concepts of hybrid urbanism discussed in Roy (2005), Simone (2004), and Watson (2009).

The interaction between these components generates a hybrid urban environment in which the boundaries between formal and informal systems become blurred. Rather than functioning as separate domains, these systems influence each other continuously, shaping the spatial organization and governance of cities.

In the context of Lebanon, the concept of hybrid urbanism provides a useful framework for understanding the dynamics of urban development. Although the country possesses a formal planning framework and regulatory institutions, urban growth has often occurred through processes that involve regulatory negotiation, informal construction practices, and strong market-driven development. These conditions have produced urban landscapes characterized by fragmented spatial structures, mixed land-use patterns, and flexible regulatory interpretations.

By adopting the hybrid urbanism framework, this research aims to analyze how formal planning institutions, informal urban practices, and market forces interact to shape urban development in Lebanese cities. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of urban growth patterns and provides insights into the challenges facing urban governance and planning in Lebanon.



Figure 2: Conceptual Model of Hybrid Urban Systems

Source: Author.

Urban Planning Framework in Lebanon

Urban planning in Lebanon operates within a complex institutional and regulatory environment shaped by historical developments, legal frameworks, and evolving governance structures. Although the country possesses formal planning institutions and regulatory mechanisms intended to guide spatial development, the implementation of planning policies has often been constrained by administrative fragmentation, political influence, and limited regulatory enforcement. Consequently, the Lebanese planning system frequently operates through a combination of formal regulatory frameworks and flexible implementation practices.

Historical Evolution of Urban Planning in Lebanon

The origins of modern urban planning in Lebanon can be traced back to the French Mandate period (1920–1943), when the first comprehensive planning regulations were introduced. During this period, planning policies

focused on regulating land subdivision, building construction, and urban expansion in major cities such as Beirut and Tripoli (Verdeil, Faour, & Velut, 2007).

Following independence, Lebanon gradually expanded its planning legislation in order to regulate urban development and manage rapid urban growth. The most significant regulatory framework was established through the **Urban Planning Law of 1983**, which remains one of the principal legal instruments governing urban planning in the country (Verdeil, 2016). This law defines procedures for zoning regulations, building permits, and the preparation of master plans.

Planning Institutions and Governance Structure

Urban planning in Lebanon involves multiple public institutions that share responsibility for regulating development activities.

The **Directorate General of Urban Planning (DGUP)** is the main national authority responsible for preparing planning policies, reviewing development proposals, and approving master plans. Operating under the Ministry of Public Works and Transport, the DGUP plays a central role in regulating land-use planning and spatial development across the country.

Municipalities also play an important role in the planning process. Local authorities are responsible for issuing construction permits, supervising building activities, and implementing zoning regulations within their jurisdictions. However, the capacity of municipalities varies significantly, and many local governments face financial and administrative limitations that reduce their ability to effectively enforce planning regulations (Harb, 2010).

Another key institution is the **Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR)**, which has played a major role in planning infrastructure and reconstruction projects since the end of the Lebanese Civil War. The CDR has been responsible for coordinating large-scale urban reconstruction and development programs, particularly in Beirut and other major cities (Fawaz, 2009).

Planning Regulations and Urban Development Policies

Urban planning regulations in Lebanon are primarily implemented through zoning laws, building codes, and development permit procedures. These regulations are intended to control building density, land use, building heights, and infrastructure requirements in urban areas.

Master plans and zoning schemes are commonly used planning tools designed to guide spatial development within municipalities and urban regions. These plans define land-use categories such as residential, commercial, industrial, and public spaces while establishing development regulations for each zone.

Despite the existence of these planning instruments, urban development often occurs through processes that partially bypass formal regulatory mechanisms. Administrative delays, complex permitting procedures, and limited enforcement capacity can create conditions that encourage informal construction practices.

Institutional Limitations and Planning Challenges

One of the most significant challenges facing the Lebanese planning system is the limited capacity of regulatory institutions to enforce planning regulations. In many cases, unauthorized construction occurs without effective monitoring or regulatory intervention. Informal development practices therefore become embedded within the urban development process (Fawaz & Peillen, 2003).

Institutional fragmentation also contributes to planning challenges. Responsibilities for urban planning are distributed across multiple public agencies, including national ministries, municipalities, and development agencies. The lack of coordination between these institutions often results in overlapping responsibilities and inconsistent planning decisions (Verdeil, 2016).

Economic pressures further complicate the planning environment. Real estate development represents one of the most significant sectors of the Lebanese economy, particularly in major metropolitan areas. Private developers frequently influence urban growth patterns through market-driven development projects that may exceed the limits established by planning regulations (World Bank, 2020).

Political dynamics also play an important role in shaping planning outcomes. Urban development decisions may be influenced by political negotiations, local power structures, and clientelist networks, which can lead to selective enforcement of planning regulations or the regularization of informal developments.

Implications for Hybrid Urban Development

The interaction between formal planning regulations, institutional limitations, and market pressures has produced a planning environment in which urban development frequently occurs through negotiated arrangements between planning authorities, private investors, and local communities.

These conditions create fertile ground for the emergence of **hybrid urban systems**, where formal planning frameworks coexist with informal development practices. In Lebanon, urban growth therefore reflects the interaction between regulatory institutions, market forces, and adaptive urban practices.

Lebanese cities and for evaluating the capacity of planning institutions to guide sustainable urban development.

Informal Urban Development in Lebanese Cities

Urban development in Lebanon has been significantly shaped by informal urbanization processes that operate alongside formal planning frameworks. Although the country possesses regulatory mechanisms intended to guide land use and urban development, a considerable portion of urban growth has occurred through practices that partially bypass or reinterpret these regulatory systems. Informal urbanization therefore represents a fundamental component of the Lebanese urban landscape and reflects the broader hybrid urban condition observed in many cities of the Global South (Roy, 2005; Watson, 2009).

Informal urban development in Lebanon takes multiple forms, including unauthorized construction, incremental housing expansion, informal land subdivision, and the adaptation of existing buildings beyond legally permitted limits. These processes are not merely the result of regulatory failure but rather emerge from the interaction of demographic pressures, economic dynamics, political conditions, and institutional limitations (Roy & AlSaiyyad, 2004; Simone, 2004). In the Lebanese context, informal urbanization has been strongly influenced by historical conflicts, migration patterns, real estate dynamics, and the structure of urban governance.

Conflict-Induced Migration and Urban Concentration

One of the most significant drivers of informal urban development in Lebanon has been **conflict-induced internal migration**. Repeated conflicts, particularly the Israeli invasions and military operations in Lebanon (1978, 1982, 1993, 1996, and 2006), generated large waves of displacement that significantly altered the country's demographic geography. Populations from southern Lebanon, border regions, and rural areas migrated toward major urban centers in search of safety, employment, and housing opportunities (Fawaz & Peillen, 2003; Harb, 2010).

Beirut and its surrounding suburbs became primary destinations for these displaced populations. The southern suburbs of Beirut in particular experienced rapid demographic expansion during and after periods of conflict. As displaced families sought immediate housing solutions, construction often occurred through incremental and informal processes that operated outside formal planning systems. Over time, these areas developed into dense urban environments characterized by mixed land uses, high population densities, and limited infrastructure provision (Harb, 2010).

The Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) also contributed significantly to internal migration and spatial reorganization. Large segments of the population relocated from rural and peripheral regions toward urban centers, accelerating the urbanization process. These demographic shifts increased demand for housing and

urban services at a rate that planning institutions were often unable to manage effectively (Verdeil, Faour, & Velut, 2007).

More recently, regional conflicts have continued to influence urban demographics. The Syrian crisis that began in 2011 resulted in the arrival of a large number of refugees in Lebanon, further increasing pressure on urban housing markets and infrastructure systems (UN-Habitat, 2021). These conflict-related migrations have therefore played a central role in shaping patterns of informal urban development in Lebanese cities.

Economic Pressures and Real Estate Dynamics

Economic conditions also play a crucial role in shaping informal urbanization patterns in Lebanon. The Lebanese economy has historically been heavily influenced by the real estate sector, which represents a major source of investment and capital accumulation. Real estate development often responds primarily to market demand and speculative investment rather than to long-term spatial planning strategies (World Bank, 2020).

In metropolitan areas such as Beirut, rising land prices and housing costs have significantly reduced the accessibility of formal housing for many households. As a result, informal construction and incremental housing expansion frequently emerge as practical responses to housing shortages and economic constraints (Davis, 2006).

Real estate speculation has also contributed to the transformation of urban land use patterns, particularly in coastal regions and peri-urban areas. Private developers often influence urban growth through large-scale residential or commercial projects that reshape urban landscapes and increase pressure on infrastructure and environmental resources (Verdeil, 2016).

The interaction between market forces and planning regulations frequently produces urban environments in which formal development projects coexist with informal construction practices. This coexistence reflects the hybrid nature of urban development processes in Lebanon.

Urban Sprawl and Peri-Urban Expansion

Another important dimension of informal urban development in Lebanon is the rapid expansion of urban areas beyond traditional city boundaries. Urban sprawl has become a defining feature of Lebanese metropolitan regions, particularly along the coastal corridor extending from Tripoli to Tyre and within the Greater Beirut Area.

Remote sensing studies and spatial analyses indicate that Lebanon's built-up areas have expanded significantly over recent decades. Much of this expansion has occurred through the conversion of agricultural land, open spaces, and natural landscapes into residential and commercial developments (UN-Habitat, 2021; Verdeil, Faour, & Velut, 2007).

Peri-urban areas surrounding major cities often represent zones where planning regulations are less strictly enforced. These areas therefore become locations where informal construction and irregular land subdivision can occur more easily. The resulting urban patterns frequently display fragmented spatial structures characterized by dispersed development, mixed land uses, and irregular infrastructure networks (Watson, 2009).

Transportation infrastructure also plays a role in facilitating urban expansion. New highways and road networks increase accessibility to peripheral areas, encouraging suburban development. However, the absence of comprehensive territorial planning strategies often leads to inefficient land use patterns and increased environmental pressures.

Informal Construction and Regulatory Flexibility

Informal construction represents one of the most visible expressions of urban informality in Lebanon. Unauthorized buildings, vertical extensions beyond permitted heights, and the subdivision of land without official approval are common features of many urban neighborhoods.

These practices often emerge in response to regulatory constraints, administrative delays, or economic pressures. Property owners and developers may initiate construction before obtaining official permits or may exceed legally permitted building densities in order to maximize land value.

In many cases, such irregularities are later addressed through processes of administrative negotiation or legal regularization. Authorities may retroactively approve certain constructions or modify planning regulations to accommodate existing development patterns. This process reflects what Yiftachel (2009) describes as “**gray spaces**”, where urban development exists between legality and illegality.

Rather than operating entirely outside the planning system, informal construction often functions within a flexible regulatory environment where formal rules coexist with negotiated implementation practices. These dynamics contribute to the emergence of hybrid urban systems in which the boundaries between formal and informal development become blurred.

Spatial Consequences of Informal Urban Development

The cumulative effects of informal urban development have significantly influenced the spatial organization of Lebanese cities. Urban landscapes increasingly display patterns of spatial fragmentation, mixed land uses, and heterogeneous architectural forms.

Planned development projects frequently coexist with informal construction, producing urban environments that combine structured planning with spontaneous development processes. These spatial patterns often result in irregular street networks, limited public spaces, and uneven infrastructure distribution.

Infrastructure and public service provision can also be affected by these dynamics. Informal development often occurs without adequate planning for transportation systems, environmental management, or public facilities, placing additional pressure on existing urban infrastructure (World Bank, 2020).

Nevertheless, informal urbanization also reflects the adaptability of urban communities in responding to economic and institutional constraints. As Simone (2004) notes, informal practices often represent creative strategies through which urban residents navigate complex governance systems and respond to rapidly changing urban conditions.

In Lebanon, informal urban development therefore represents not only a challenge for planning institutions but also a fundamental component of the hybrid urban structure that characterizes many Lebanese cities.

Hybrid Urbanism in Lebanese Cities

Urban development in Lebanon reflects a complex interaction between formal planning regulations, market forces, and informal urban practices. Rather than operating as separate systems, these elements interact continuously to shape the spatial structure and governance of Lebanese cities. This interaction produces what can be described as **hybrid urbanism**, a condition in which formal planning institutions coexist with informal development practices and negotiated regulatory arrangements.

Hybrid urban systems emerge when formal regulatory frameworks are unable to fully control urban development processes, allowing informal practices to operate alongside official planning mechanisms. In such environments, urban space is produced through the interaction of multiple actors—including state institutions, private investors, and local communities—each influencing the development process through different forms of authority and agency (Roy, 2005; Simone, 2004).

In the Lebanese context, hybrid urbanism is particularly visible in metropolitan regions such as Beirut, where planning regulations formally structure urban development but are frequently reinterpreted through economic pressures, political negotiations, and informal construction practices. These dynamics produce urban landscapes characterized by regulatory flexibility, spatial heterogeneity, and mixed governance arrangements.

Interaction Between Formal Planning and Informality

One of the defining characteristics of hybrid urbanism in Lebanon is the continuous interaction between formal planning regulations and informal urban practices. Planning institutions establish zoning laws, building codes, and development procedures intended to regulate urban growth. However, the implementation of these regulations often occurs within a context of institutional constraints and socio-economic pressures.

Informal construction practices frequently emerge in response to regulatory complexity, administrative delays, or housing shortages. In many cases, developers and property owners initiate construction before obtaining official permits or exceed permitted building densities and heights. These practices may later be addressed through administrative adjustments or legal regularization processes.

This dynamic reflects a flexible regulatory environment in which planning rules are not always rigidly enforced but may instead be negotiated or adapted to accommodate development pressures. Roy (2005) describes such conditions as an “urban informality regime”, where the state plays an active role in defining which forms of informality are tolerated and which are regulated.

In Lebanon, the interaction between formal planning systems and informal practices therefore creates a hybrid regulatory framework where urban development occurs through a combination of official planning procedures and negotiated implementation practices.

Market Forces and Hybrid Urban Development

Real estate markets play a central role in shaping hybrid urban development in Lebanon. The Lebanese economy has long been influenced by real estate investment, particularly in high-value urban and coastal areas. Private developers frequently influence urban growth through large-scale development projects that respond to market demand rather than to comprehensive planning strategies.

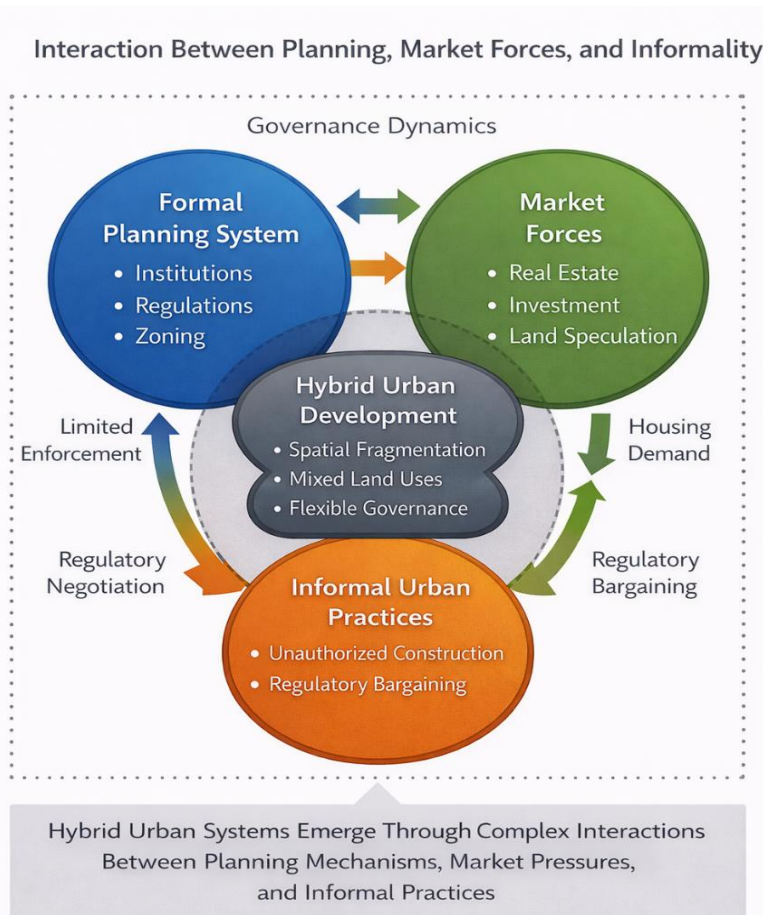


Figure 3: Interaction between Planning, Market Forces, and Informality

Source: Author.

The strong influence of the real estate sector often results in development patterns that exceed the regulatory capacity of planning institutions. Developers may seek regulatory exemptions, negotiate planning adjustments, or influence zoning decisions in order to maximize the economic value of urban land.

These processes illustrate how market forces interact with planning regulations to shape urban development outcomes. Rather than being entirely controlled by planning authorities, urban growth often reflects negotiated relationships between public institutions and private investors (Fawaz, 2009).

Such interactions contribute to the emergence of hybrid urban systems in which formal regulatory frameworks coexist with market-driven spatial transformations.

Political Dynamics and Urban Governance

Political structures also play a significant role in shaping urban governance in Lebanon. Urban planning decisions are often influenced by political negotiations, local power structures, and clientelist networks. These dynamics can affect the implementation of planning regulations and influence the regularization of informal developments.

In some cases, informal construction practices are tolerated or later legalized through political mediation. Such practices reflect broader governance dynamics in which urban development becomes embedded within complex political relationships between state institutions, local authorities, and community actors (Harb, 2010).

Institutional fragmentation further contributes to these governance dynamics. Planning responsibilities are distributed among multiple public agencies, including the Directorate General of Urban Planning, municipalities, and development authorities such as the Council for Development and Reconstruction. The lack of coordination between these institutions can create gaps in regulatory enforcement and facilitate informal development processes (Verdeil, 2016).

These governance conditions reinforce the hybrid nature of urban development in Lebanon, where formal institutions operate alongside informal networks and political mediation processes.

Spatial Manifestations of Hybrid Urbanism

The interaction between planning regulations, market forces, and informal practices produces distinctive spatial patterns in Lebanese cities. Hybrid urban environments often display heterogeneous urban morphologies characterized by mixed land uses, irregular building patterns, and fragmented urban structures.

Planned residential developments frequently coexist with informal housing expansions, producing neighborhoods where formally approved buildings stand alongside structures that exceed regulatory limits. Urban growth in peri-urban areas often reflects incremental development processes in which buildings are constructed gradually over time without comprehensive planning coordination.

The coastal corridor of Lebanon illustrates another manifestation of hybrid urban development. High-value real estate projects coexist with older informal settlements and unregulated land-use changes, creating complex spatial environments shaped by both market dynamics and informal practices (Verdeil, Faour, & Velut, 2007).

These spatial patterns highlight how hybrid urbanism influences not only governance structures but also the physical organization of cities.

Empirical Illustrations of Hybrid Urban Development in Lebanon

The hybrid urban dynamics described above can be observed in several Lebanese urban contexts where formal planning systems coexist with informal development practices. One prominent example is the **southern suburbs of Beirut (Dahiyeh)**, which experienced rapid urban expansion during and after the Lebanese Civil War. Large waves of internal migration from southern Lebanon and border regions resulted in dense urban development characterized by incremental construction, mixed land uses, and flexible regulatory implementation. Over time,

these areas evolved into complex urban environments where informal construction practices coexist with formal planning interventions and infrastructure projects (Harb, 2010; Fawaz, 2009).

Another example can be observed in the **peri-urban expansion of the Metn district**, particularly in areas located along the metropolitan fringe of Beirut. Rapid population growth and increasing real estate demand have encouraged residential expansion into formerly rural or agricultural areas. In many cases, development occurs through fragmented planning processes where formally approved projects coexist with irregular land subdivision and incremental housing construction. This pattern reflects the hybrid interaction between market-driven urban growth and planning regulations that are unevenly enforced.

Hybrid urban patterns are also visible in **Tripoli**, Lebanon's second-largest city, where informal housing development has expanded in several neighborhoods due to economic pressures and housing shortages. Informal extensions, unauthorized building additions, and incremental construction have gradually reshaped parts of the urban fabric. These development processes often emerge alongside formally planned urban structures, producing heterogeneous spatial environments that combine regulated and unregulated urban forms.

Finally, the **coastal corridor between Beirut and Jounieh** illustrates another manifestation of hybrid urban development. This region has experienced intense real estate investment and large-scale commercial and residential projects over the past decades. However, these formal developments coexist with older informal settlements, irregular land-use changes, and fragmented planning decisions. The resulting coastal urban landscape reflects the interaction between strong market forces, planning regulations, and adaptive development practices (Verdeil, Faour, & Velut, 2007).

These examples demonstrate how hybrid urbanism is not merely a theoretical concept but a tangible reality within Lebanese cities, where formal planning frameworks interact continuously with informal practices and market-driven development processes.

Implications for Urban Planning

The emergence of hybrid urban systems in Lebanon raises important questions for urban planning and governance. Traditional planning approaches that rely on strict regulatory control may be insufficient in contexts where informal practices and market forces strongly influence urban development.

Urban planners may therefore need to adopt more flexible and adaptive planning strategies that acknowledge the realities of hybrid urban environments. Such approaches could involve greater collaboration between planning institutions, local communities, and private sector actors in order to develop more inclusive and responsive planning policies (Watson, 2009).

Understanding the dynamics of hybrid urbanism also provides an opportunity to rethink the role of planning institutions in shaping urban development. Rather than attempting to eliminate informality entirely, planning systems may seek to integrate informal development processes into broader urban governance frameworks.

In the Lebanese context, such approaches could contribute to more sustainable urban development strategies that address both the institutional limitations and socio-economic realities that shape urban growth.

DISCUSSION

The analysis presented in the previous sections demonstrates that urban development in Lebanon cannot be adequately understood through conventional planning models that assume a clear distinction between formal planning systems and informal urban development. Instead, the Lebanese urban landscape reflects a hybrid urban condition in which formal regulations, market forces, political dynamics, and informal practices interact continuously to shape the production of urban space.

This hybrid condition illustrates the limitations of traditional planning frameworks that rely primarily on regulatory control and centralized planning institutions. In Lebanon, urban development often emerges from negotiated relationships between planning authorities, private investors, and local communities. As a result, the

urban environment evolves through complex interactions rather than through strictly controlled planning mechanisms.

Interpreting the Lebanese Hybrid Urban Model

The Lebanese urban model reflects many characteristics commonly observed in cities of the Global South, where rapid urbanization, economic pressures, and institutional limitations create conditions in which informal practices become embedded within the urban development process (Roy, 2005; Watson, 2009).

However, the Lebanese case also presents specific characteristics that distinguish it from other contexts. One of the most important factors shaping hybrid urbanism in Lebanon is the role of historical conflicts and migration patterns. Internal displacement caused by wars and military conflicts has contributed significantly to the concentration of population in major cities, particularly Beirut and its suburbs. These demographic shifts accelerated urban expansion and increased pressure on housing markets and urban infrastructure (Fawaz & Peillen, 2003; Harb, 2010).

At the same time, the Lebanese planning system operates within a fragmented governance structure in which multiple institutions share planning responsibilities. This institutional fragmentation reduces the capacity of regulatory authorities to enforce planning regulations consistently, allowing informal development practices to emerge alongside formal planning mechanisms (Verdeil, 2016).

Economic dynamics also play a central role in shaping the hybrid urban model. The strong influence of real estate investment and land speculation in Lebanon often drives urban development patterns that exceed the regulatory capacity of planning institutions. As a result, market forces frequently shape urban spatial structures more strongly than formal planning policies (World Bank, 2020).

These interacting factors—conflict-induced migration, institutional fragmentation, and real estate dynamics—collectively produce an urban environment characterized by regulatory flexibility and negotiated development practices.

Hybrid Urbanism and Urban Governance

The emergence of hybrid urban systems in Lebanon raises important questions regarding the role of planning institutions and the nature of urban governance. Traditional planning approaches often assume that planning institutions possess the authority and capacity to regulate urban development through legal frameworks and spatial planning instruments. However, the Lebanese experience demonstrates that urban development is frequently shaped by multiple governance actors operating within complex political and economic environments.

In such contexts, urban governance becomes a process of negotiation rather than strict regulatory control. Planning institutions must interact with private developers, local communities, and political actors in order to influence urban development outcomes. These interactions often lead to flexible implementation of planning regulations or the regularization of informal development practices.

This governance model aligns with broader discussions in urban theory that emphasize the need for more adaptive and context-sensitive planning approaches. Watson (2009) argues that planning systems in rapidly urbanizing regions must move beyond rigid regulatory frameworks and instead develop strategies capable of responding to the dynamic realities of urban development.

Similarly, Simone (2004) highlights the importance of recognizing the role of everyday urban practices in shaping cities. Informal development processes often represent adaptive responses by urban residents and developers to institutional constraints and economic pressures.

In Lebanon, acknowledging the hybrid nature of urban governance may therefore provide opportunities for developing more realistic planning strategies that integrate formal regulations with existing urban practices.

Implications for Urban Planning in Lebanon

The findings of this study suggest that urban planning in Lebanon must adapt to the realities of hybrid urban development. Attempting to eliminate informal urbanization entirely may not be feasible given the structural factors that contribute to its persistence, including housing shortages, economic pressures, and institutional limitations.

Instead, planning institutions may need to adopt more flexible and inclusive approaches that recognize the role of informal practices in shaping urban development. Such approaches could involve improving coordination between planning institutions, strengthening municipal planning capacities, and promoting participatory planning processes that involve local communities.

Comprehensive territorial planning strategies could also help address issues related to urban sprawl, infrastructure provision, and environmental sustainability. By integrating spatial planning with economic and social development policies, planning institutions may be better equipped to guide urban growth in a more sustainable and equitable manner.

Furthermore, strengthening regulatory transparency and reducing administrative complexity may help improve compliance with planning regulations while reducing incentives for informal construction practices.

Ultimately, understanding the dynamics of hybrid urbanism provides an important foundation for developing planning strategies that respond to the complex realities of urban development in Lebanon.

CONCLUSION

Urban development in Lebanon reflects a complex interaction between formal planning frameworks, market forces, political dynamics, and informal urban practices. This research has examined how these factors collectively contribute to the emergence of hybrid urban systems in Lebanese cities. Rather than representing separate or opposing processes, formal planning mechanisms and informal urban development frequently coexist and interact, producing a spatial and governance environment characterized by flexibility, negotiation, and institutional adaptation.

The findings of this study demonstrate that urban growth in Lebanon cannot be adequately explained through traditional planning models that assume strict regulatory control over urban development. Instead, Lebanese cities display characteristics of **hybrid urbanism**, in which formal planning regulations operate alongside informal practices and market-driven development processes. This hybrid condition emerges from the interaction between institutional limitations, economic pressures, political structures, and demographic transformations.

One of the key drivers of hybrid urban development in Lebanon is **conflict-induced migration**, which has historically reshaped the country's demographic and spatial structure. Waves of displacement caused by wars and military conflicts have contributed to rapid population concentration in major urban centers, particularly Beirut and its surrounding suburbs. These demographic shifts increased pressure on housing markets and infrastructure systems, often leading to informal construction and incremental urban expansion.

Economic dynamics also play a central role in shaping urban development patterns. The Lebanese real estate sector has become a dominant force in urban growth, particularly in coastal regions and metropolitan areas. Market-driven development frequently influences spatial transformations in ways that exceed the regulatory capacity of planning institutions, reinforcing the hybrid nature of urban development processes.

Institutional fragmentation further contributes to the emergence of hybrid urban systems. Urban planning responsibilities in Lebanon are distributed among multiple public institutions, including national planning authorities, municipalities, and development agencies. This fragmented governance structure often reduces the effectiveness of regulatory enforcement and creates opportunities for informal development practices to emerge within the urban planning framework.

The spatial consequences of these dynamics are clearly visible in Lebanese cities. Urban landscapes increasingly display fragmented spatial structures, mixed land-use patterns, and heterogeneous urban morphologies. Planned development projects coexist with informal housing expansions, peri-urban sprawl, and market-driven urban transformations. These spatial patterns illustrate how formal planning and informal practices interact in shaping the physical structure of cities.

The findings of this research highlight the need to reconsider the role of urban planning in contexts characterized by hybrid urban development. Rather than attempting to eliminate informality entirely, planning strategies may need to recognize the structural conditions that give rise to informal urbanization and develop more adaptive planning approaches. Strengthening coordination between planning institutions, improving municipal planning capacities, and promoting participatory planning processes may contribute to more effective urban governance.

Furthermore, integrating territorial planning strategies with economic and social development policies may help address challenges related to urban sprawl, infrastructure provision, and environmental sustainability. By acknowledging the hybrid nature of urban development, planners and policymakers may be better equipped to design policies that respond to the realities of urban growth in Lebanon.

Finally, this research contributes to broader debates in urban studies regarding the relationship between planning institutions and informal urbanization in cities of the Global South. The Lebanese case illustrates how hybrid urban systems emerge through the interaction of institutional, economic, and socio-political forces. Future research could further explore comparative perspectives on hybrid urbanism in other regional contexts and examine how planning policies can better respond to the complex dynamics of contemporary urbanization.

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