

# Enacting Public Space

## History and Social Practices of Beirut's Horch al-Sanawbar\*

Fadi S. Shayya\*\*  
[blackche@yahoo.com](mailto:blackche@yahoo.com)

### ABSTRACT

*After its landscape-rich (re)design in 1995 and in the name of protecting it from 'uncivilized behavior', the Municipality of Beirut controlled and restricted access to about two-thirds of Horch al-Sanawbar, based on certain frequenters' social practices, employing strategies of fencing and regulating. Today, only about one-third of Horch is open to the public. However, Horch frequenters continue to manifest their practices and desires despite of fences and regulations, and disregarding landscape 'museumification'.*

*This paper investigates the history of Horch al-Sanawbar and documents current social practices in its different parts; then, it attempts to correlate history and social practices of Horch to better understand it as a public space, based on literature from Sandercock and Cupers and Miessen. The main argument is that previous and current usages of Horch reveal the ability of people, through history, to negotiate their practices in controlled public spaces and under different types of control. Enacting public space becomes, then, a product of city residents' desires throughout time.*

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\*\* Architect and Graduate Student of Urban Design at the American University of Beirut.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the context of post-war reconstruction during the mid 1990s, Beirut's only big park Horch al-Sanawbar<sup>1</sup> regained some of its livelihood and public character when old and new Beirutis revisited the (re)designed park. Since then, the Municipality of Beirut (MoB), owner of park land, experimented with different strategies of fully or partially opening Horch trying to provide for public use and preserve the newly-designed landscape<sup>2</sup>. Today in 2006, less than third of Horch is open for all frequenters while the rest of it is fenced-off and accessed upon 'special permission' from the mayor of Beirut.

While the municipality's concern for preserving the landscape of Horch has some justification, adopted municipal strategies and regulations do not accommodate for different groups' practices, which are the main and original reason for Horch al-Sanawbar being a public park of such importance. To elaborate its public dimension, this research traces the story of Horch al-Sanawbar "the twin of Beirut" [1] to uncover how it evolved through time as a pine forest, a park, and a public space. Then, the research focuses on observing and documenting current, diverse social practices of Horch in relation to the 1995 (re)design and the consequent fencing.

## METHODOLOGY

In this research, tracing the story of Horch is an act of uncovering its history's multiple layers that reveal the interaction of different events that make the Horch we know. From rulers who developed it, to armies that abused it, to authorities that claimed it, to publics who appropriated it, to the city that integrated it, today's Horch is the complex end product of more than the sum of all these events. It is in this historical context that current practices in Horch and the 1995 (re)design are observed and analyzed then compared to each other to derive the conclusions of this study.

Almost no data about current practices in Horch is available except for some descriptive literature on its history, some newspaper articles on its events, and technical data on its (re)design. In addition to researching the previously mentioned resources, field observations and interviews are privileged to document diverse groups' practices and the municipality's strategies and regulations of control in Horch. Observations of different parts of Horch were carried out at different times such as day/night and weekday/weekend while in-depth interviews were conducted with identified key informants such as municipality staff, guards and frequenters of Horch.

## FRAMEWORK

Seeing the city as a socially interactive body rather than a top-decision designed artifact, Leonie Sandercock argues that "local communities have grounded, experiential, intuitive, and contextual knowledges" [3] manifested in

different forms and practices. Planners-whether decision makers, consultants, or technical advisors-can use these 'knowledges' to politicize and broaden their planning scopes and practices to provoke and accentuate cities of memory, desire, and spirit [3]. In this sense, the city becomes a total of "*multiple publics*" or "*a heterogeneous public*" [3] that require planners to have a keen and delicate understanding of these publics intricate practices and ways of living. It is Sandercock's 'city of desire' that is of interest to this research where decisions such as how to (re)design a public park relative to diverse social practices versus planners and decision makers visions are investigated within concepts of public space. But, what is public space?

While it has been acknowledged as "a fundamental programme for society...the *space of encounter*...a platform for representation", Kenny Cupers and Markus Miessen contend that public space has traditionally been conceptualized in different meanings and definitions that are "often overlapping and vague" [2] and that use the "*rhetorics of loss*" [2], where through a social lens, public space loses "heterogeneous coexistence" while politically it loses "solidarity and political co-operative action" [2] such as a (re)designed public park for 'civilized people' who respect it. However, Cupers and Miessen argue for dropping traditional, rigid definitions of *public* and *space* and instead looking at *public* as "being more than one public, to draw attention to the contemporary multiplicity of different groups and discourses" [2] and *space* as places with "tiny moments and memories" [2].

So, how did the MoB, together with the designers of Horch, answer for the diverse social practices in Horch through the 1995 (re)design? And, how did the municipality conceptualize public space through the strategies of control, that is fencing and regulations?

## HORCH AS FOREST

According to Anis Freihat, Beirut gets its name from the Phoenician word 'Beriet' or Egyptian word 'Barût' that translates to 'Sanawbar' (pine) in Arabic [1]. This explains the association of Beirut with its unique pine forest or 'Horch Beirut', pronounced as 'Horch Beirut' by Muslim Beirutis since long ago [1]. Historically, travelers' notes date the development and organization of Horch back to Crusaders, Emir Fakhreddean al-Ma'ani II, and the Ottomans; these notes speak of the beautiful visual stretch at the southern entrance of Beirut that helped stop crawling sand dunes from the south west due to south-westerly winds and provided Beirut with fresh air full of pine's pleasant smell [1]. Interestingly, the notes describe how new pine trees of Horch were always planted in ordered rows (grid like) to allow for easy circulation and uninterrupted visual continuity of the horizon, especially with Emir Fakhreddean II [1]. Nevertheless, Horch suffered throughout history from frequent abuse of its timber especially by armies to build ships and weapons such as Crusaders, Mamluks, Ottomans, and Allies in WWI and WWII (106, 107).

<sup>1</sup> Horch al-Sanawbar is the Arabic name for 'the pine forest'

<sup>2</sup> Author's interview, Abdelmonim el-Ariss, Mayor of Beirut, Beirut, December 1, 2005

Lately, Horch was bombed and burnt out by Israeli jet fighters during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The feature recurrent event of Horch, which is probably what made Horch famous and public throughout its modern history, was ‘Horch el-Eid’ on the occasion of ‘Eid al-Adha’<sup>3</sup>. It was when large numbers of people gathered in Horch to joyfully celebrate the occasion of Muslim pilgrims coming home from Holy Mecca after fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. At the time Beirut was still within its walls, Muslim Beirutis gathered in ‘Sahet Asour’-what we know today as ‘Riad al-Solh Square’-to celebrate ‘Eid al-Adha’; but with the walls gradually torn down since the 1840s, the city sprawled outside its intramural boundaries and festivities were relocated to Horch al-Sanawbar with all activities of recreation, sports, and folklore [1]. Literature is not clear about when ‘Horch el-Eid’ ceased or was stopped before Horch officially became a park in the 1960s<sup>4</sup>. However after the end of Civil War in 1990, a local community based organization (CBO) ‘Shabibat el-Huda’ continued to organize ‘Horch el-Eid’ until they were banned by the MoB during the (re)design process.



**Figure 1. An old Postcard titled “The Pine Promenade” showing the density of the old Pine Forest that became today Horj al-Sanawbar. Source: Serof, 1999.**

### HORCH AS PARK

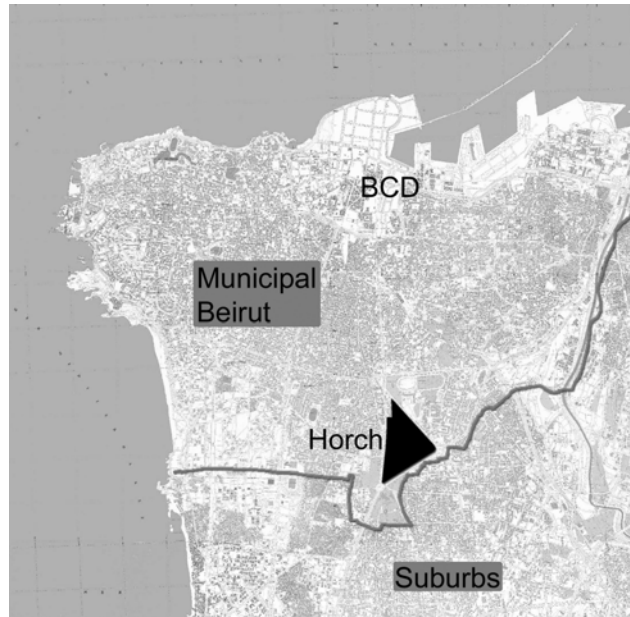
Since the 1840s, Ottoman rulers in Beirut observed Horch al-Sanawbar-that is the pine forest-as a public entity, under Ottoman administrative authority, physically bounding and controlling the sprawl of the city [1]. On the other hand, people and municipalities of Beirut claimed administrative authority and ownership of Horch as it actually belonged to and served the people of Beirut; indeed, the forest became municipal property in 1878 [1]. In the early 1960s, Sami al-Solh, Prime Minister then, issued a decree observing Horch as a park

<sup>3</sup> ‘Eid al-Adha’ is celebrating the occasion of Muslim pilgrims coming home from Holy Mecca after fasting during the holy month of Ramadan

<sup>4</sup> Lebanon has passed through many disturbances such as WWI, WWII, and the 1975 Civil War where ‘Horch el-Eid’ supposedly ceased during these hard times

to be fenced<sup>5</sup> for protection against harm and abuse (stealing timber) while maintaining its main role as a public space [1]. Since then, Taha al-Wali contends that the fence separated between Beirutis and their gatherings and festivities, and a major characteristic and tradition of Muslim Beirutis ceased to exist [1].

Large parts of the pine forest were taken to become the Hippodrome and ‘The Pine Residence’ in the early 1900s, ‘Al-Shohadaa Cemetery’ in 1958, ‘Rawdat al-Shaheedin Cemetery’ in the 1970s. Moreover, the opening of new streets produced some leftovers of the remaining forest land that are subject to conflict and appropriation. From a pine forest over 1,250,000 m<sup>2</sup> in 1696 [1], to a park over 800,000 m<sup>2</sup> in 1967 (≈ 5% of municipal Beirut area) [1], today, Horch al-Sanawbar is lot [1925], only 255,000 m<sup>2</sup> triangular park at the southern boundary of municipal Beirut inscribed within Omar Beyhum St, 22<sup>nd</sup> November Av and Abdelnasser Av. It lies along the axis of the old airport road amidst areas of Mazraa, Tareeq el-Jdideh, Kaskas, Sabra, Ghobeyri, Chiyah, Furn el-Chebak, and Badaro while it is separated from Ras el-Nabaa by the Hippodrome.



**Figure 2. Location of Horj in Beirut. Source: Lebanese Army/IFPO Archives, 1998; Illustrations: Author, 2006.**

As it officially became a park and in attempts to make it a modern park fit of Beirut’s international recognition, Horch al-Sanawbar witnessed different (re)design proposals: transforming it to ‘Beirut’s International Thematic Garden’, a 1965 proposal by architect Malek Basbous; (re)designing it as a public park with recreational and cultural activities, a 1969 proposal by architect Alfred al-Murr; and, building a 400m tower similar to ‘Eiffel Tower’ in Paris, a 1972 proposal [1].

<sup>5</sup> The 1960s fence is the current stone and worked iron fence that still surrounds Horch prior to the new fence that the municipality plans to install

After burning out by the 1982 Israeli Invasion and in the context of post-war reconstruction in the 1990s, the MoB, headed by Mayor Mohammad Ghaziri then, regarded Horch's (re)design and reopening as "symbolically essential of Beirut restoring its past glory", which is clear in the brochure motto "Horch al-Sanawbar fi Qalb Beirut al-Ghad" [The Pine Forest Park Inside Beirut of Tomorrow], where Horch constitutes "a link between North and South Beirut and, further, between city and nature" [4].

### HORCH (RE)DESIGNED

In this context of reconstruction, architects and designers Jacques Sgar (French), Pierre Nehmé (Lebanese), and Effie Papadakis won the (re)design competition of Horch that was sponsored by 'Conseil Regional d'Ile-de-France' for 9,000,000 F, organized by 'Conseil d'Amenagement Urbain de la Region d'Ile -de-France', and managed by 'Agence des Espaces Verts de la Region d'Ile -de-France'; the Lebanese company 'Enterprise Generale' (Layoun-Karam-Batal) executed the project under the supervision of the Lebanese 'Council for Development and Reconstruction' [4]. The (re)design was (almost fully) completed and officially handed over to the MoB in 11 June 1995.



Figure 3. Brochure. Source: MoB, 1995.

The brochure published upon completion promotes the new landscaping concept of Horch as symbolically resembling diverse Lebanese natural topography of hills and plains [4]. The (re)design provides three main gates for pedestrian access, almost at the mid of each side of the triangular park, that open into a spacious interior conceptualized and designed as ten major zones including pathways, fountains, birds' cage, children's play area, amphitheatre and car parking. Services such as guard houses and toilet rooms are accommodated in small structures. There are about 4,500 pine trees, 900 other trees and more than 22,000 different types of bushes, plants and flowers [4].

Horch has been closed since then to protect the developing trees and plants<sup>6</sup>. At a certain time, it was open for public on Friday afternoons as part of a trial period to observe the interaction between frequenters and the new landscape. Soon, the municipality analyzed that frequenters are only affecting Horch negatively by harming the developing trees and plants and excessively littering the park. So, the municipality decided to divide

and fence Horch into two parts. It was until January 1999 that part of Horch was open to the public, which I call 'open Horch'; the other part is closed for public and accessed upon special permission from the mayor of Beirut, which I call 'closed Horch'. Fences of steel bars, wire mesh, and barbed wire or natural trees and bushes separate between both parts and their frequenters, which creates a kind of social segregation and different views of what a public place like Horch is or how it should be.

### HORCH AS PUBLIC SPACE

Interviews with current frequenters of Horch reveal different views of public space grounded in-but not limited to-practices, income, class, age, and gender experiences. One group values Horch that includes everyone whose practices are respectful of 'social norms' such as jogging, sports, picnics, play, and sometimes couple meetings. Another group addresses insecurity in Horch since they stigmatize it as *shaabi* (popular) where 'bad practices' are related to low income groups and lower social classes; thus, some prefer a 'more secure' place not open to all such as 'closed Horch'<sup>7</sup>. Another group looks at Horch as a hidden place away from the city such as teenagers craving cigarettes or couples

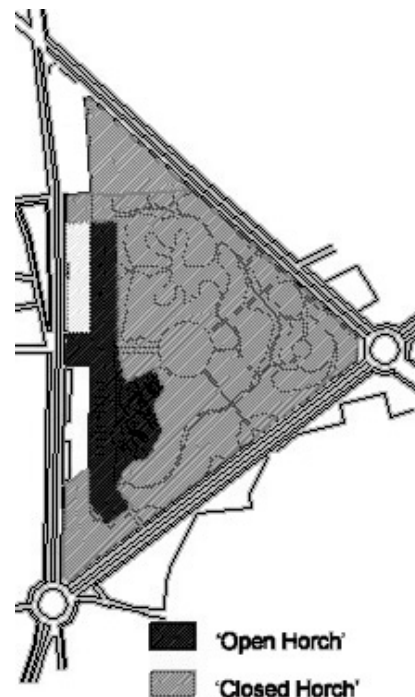


Figure 4. 'Open' and 'Closed' Horch. Source: Author, 2006.

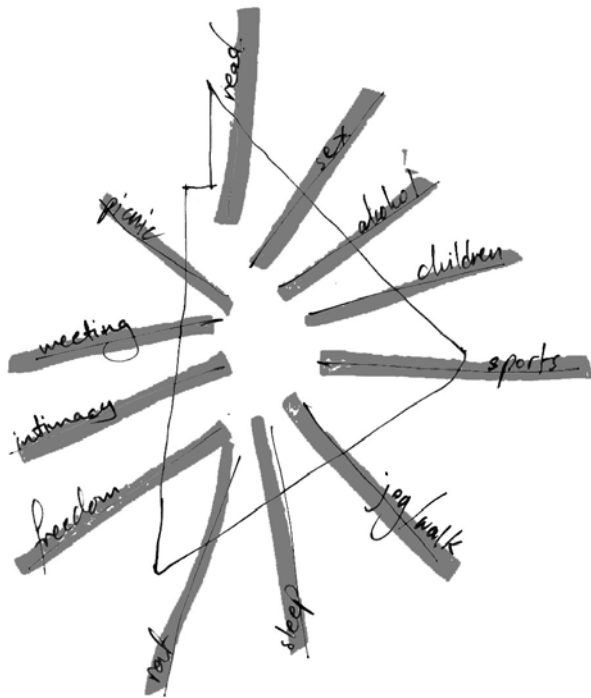
desiring intimacy or sex. Another group search for security in places like Horch-and sometimes they do not find it-such as women suffering from verbal and physical harassment.

On the other hand, Abdelmonim el-Ariss, mayor of Beirut, views Horch as a 'beautiful park' that can

<sup>6</sup> Author's interview, Abdelmonim el-Ariss, Mayor of Beirut, Beirut, December 1, 2005

<sup>7</sup> Author's interview, Ghadia Faour, previous Horch frequenter, Beirut, November 21, 2005

accommodate people who respect it. He speaks of “intolerable practices” of people harming the landscape and littering Horch that was conceptualized and designed as a place for “respectfully and neatly enjoying nature”<sup>8</sup>. One clear example of el-Ariss’s view is when he sets the designed children play area in the park as the example of how things should be compared to the old “messy and chaotic” ‘Horch el-Eid’<sup>9</sup>. The mayor’s discourse on Horch frequenters’ practices is voiced by some staff at The Gardens Department of MoB<sup>10</sup> who consider current Horch a ‘beautifully designed park’ often used by “uncivilized people”<sup>11</sup>.



**Figure 5. Diverse Desires and Practices in Horch. Source: Author, 2006.**

In addition to frequenters and MoB, other groups in the city appreciate Horch as a place for learning and recreation such as student groups who visit Horch to learn about trees and plants, ‘Shabibat el-Huda’ CBO who used to organize ‘Horch el-Eid’ on the occasion of ‘Eid al-Adha’, and ‘The Gathering for Open, Public Spaces and Gardens in Beirut’ that is a civil society gathering defending existing and promoting new open, public places and gardens in empty land lots in Beirut<sup>12</sup>. These diverse views of Horch, along with how frequenters appropriate space are the actual lens through which this research observes Horch’s spatial context.

### ‘OPEN HORCH’

Through observation, it is clearly noticed that ‘open Horch’ attracts people from the nearby neighborhoods of Tareeq el-Jdideh, Kaskas, Sabra, Chatila, Ghobeyri, Chiyah, and Badaro where it is common-but not general-to see that many of them are of low-income socioeconomic groups. The correlation between physical attributes of ‘open Horch’ and its frequenters’ practices can be considered as one hypothesis explaining the municipality’s fencing and regulating logic.

The major part of ‘open Horch’ is a wide walkway with compacted gravel ground-similar to all pathways in the park-that is supposed to endure walking and jogging. Besides orderly and moderately-dense planted trees, the walkway has three small circular pools along its centerline, a few concrete benches on both sides, and a small amphitheatre at the end. In the southern half, a number of exhibition panels interrupt the linear pedestrian flow of the walkway along its centerline. Directly at the southeastern side of the walkway is the children play area extending the same rough-ground characteristics of gravel surface, concrete dunes, and sand pools with a built-in, shaded seating area and some palm trees. In the middle of the walkway, there is one guard room housing two day-guard-shifts (6:00 am to 6:00 pm) while at its southern end there is a small structure that houses 4 toilet rooms (2 male / 2 female).

Here is the hypothesis that these spatial attributes of rough-ground surfaces (gravel, sand, and concrete), heavy duty furniture (concrete benches and built-in seating), and moderately-dense greenery (some trees and hardly any grass) put forward the walkway and the children play area to be fenced off the rest of Horch and become ‘open Horch’. This way, this part of Horch can be opened for all with heavy-duty performance, minimum maintenance, and almost no guarding, which supports the idea of the municipality about keeping frequenters from harming the designed landscape.

In the walkway and on adjacent sidewalks, frequenters walk or jog during mornings and evenings or on sunny weekends; they try to avoid late evenings and nights mainly for the lack of lighting and security personnel inside Horch and for women to avoid harassment. Moreover, many frequenters prefer to walk or jog in ‘open Horch’, even if it is crowded, instead of using adjacent sidewalks where their activities are often interrupted by race horses walked by trainers from the nearby Hippodrome or where women are often verbally harassed again<sup>13</sup>.

Since frequenters need to sit, the three circular pools’ concrete edges become seats in the middle of the walkway complementing the few benches on the sides, which are appropriated by couples who want to keep a low profile especially at both ends of the walkway. As for couples looking for a more ‘private’ place, the built-in, shaded seating in the children play area becomes a place for intimacy during weekdays when no children are

<sup>8</sup> Author’s interview, Beirut, December 1, 2005

<sup>9</sup> Author’s interview, Beirut, December 1, 2005

<sup>10</sup> The Gardens Department of the Municipality of Beirut is the body responsible for supervising and maintaining municipal green areas

<sup>11</sup> Author’s interview, Maya el-Rahbani, Agriculture Engineer, Beirut, November 24, 2005

<sup>12</sup> an-Nahar Newspaper digital Archives, 2005

<sup>13</sup> Author’s interviews, Ghadia Faour and Mona Fawaz, previous Horch frequenters, Beirut, November 21, 2005

playing. However, since the area of ‘open Horch’ is small, some of these couples are frequently interrupted by other frequenters such as old women who complain about the couples to the guards<sup>14</sup>.



**Figure 7. The children play area in ‘open Horch’ as seen from ‘closed Horj’ through the separating fence. Source: Author, 2006.**

As for weekends and holidays, children play on concrete dunes and in sand pools while their parents watch them from that same seating area. Naturally, children do not restrict themselves to this play area, but actually run and play all over ‘open Horch’, in the parking area, and sometimes they sneak to ‘closed Horch’.

A complementary part of ‘open Horch’ is the parking area that many frequenters appropriate as the freest public part of all Horch. It is originally designed as one of two car parkings, so it is not regulated, furnished, or landscaped, which features it to include diverse practices and activities that municipal regulations ban inside Horch. There, families park their cars and spread their picnic arrangements while their children play ball and bicycles nearby. People enjoy barbecue and argileh (water pipe) while street vendors sell light snacks and children’s toys. For example, argileh is not allowed inside Horch since it may cause a fire according to municipal regulations; however, what the municipality has missed is that argileh is a social practice where families and friends’ gather and discuss social, political, and other issues. In addition to becoming a park, the parking also becomes a place for some people to practice driving since few other places are available for this purpose.

The other car parking of Horch has been transformed to the ‘municipal public sports courts’ in August 2003, due to the fact that there are no public sports courts in Beirut. These sports courts are seldom empty, except during morning hours and heavy rainy days. Any group can form teams and register at the courts’ office in Horch where usually it is hard to find an empty slot before a couple of days or a week. The courts are designed in

<sup>14</sup> Author’s interview, Abdallah, Horch guard, Beirut, November 22, 2005

miniature sizes so that the previous parking area can accommodate a maximum number of football, basketball and tennis courts that are enclosed within a high wire-mesh fence that is enclosed in turn within another fence



**Figure 6. Parking becomes park where people enjoy barbecue and argileh that are banned inside Horch. Source: Author, 2006.**

around the courts’ area to protect the players and the courts.

### ‘CLOSED HORCH’

On the other hand, ‘closed Horch’ represents almost all of the green area of Horch. It consists mainly of wide grass lawns and dense tree groups slightly denoted by curvy, gravel pathways and a major circular plaza with a timber platform and kiosks in the center-originally designed as a cafeteria. As previously mentioned, this part of Horch is closed to the public under the excuse that trees and plants are still developing while it is ‘formally’ accessed<sup>15</sup> upon ‘special permission’ from the mayor of Beirut<sup>16</sup>, which is usually acquired through interpersonal links<sup>17</sup>.

Since it is restricted to special permission holders, the number of ‘closed Horch’ frequenters is little compared to the number of ‘open Horch’ frequenters. They usually walk or jog along the gravel pathways and around the circular plaza while some of them, especially children, enjoy the grass lawns. The timber platform in the plaza serves as a stretching and relaxing area for joggers. In this context, ‘closed Horch’ is almost empty and clean, so during daytime, its few frequenters enjoy the serenity and security they talk about while the place that promises “endless promenades” [4] is almost empty. However, what is most interesting about ‘closed Horch’ are not formal practices but informal ones.

While its emptiness and landscape seem poetic, ‘closed Horch’ with its dense tree groups and lack of guards

<sup>15</sup> It happens sometimes that some people claim-with a serious tone-a connection to the mayor or some other important person that the guard can not question, and hence, he lets these people in to ‘closed Horch’

<sup>16</sup> Author’s interview, Abdelmonim el-Ariss, Mayor of Beirut, Beirut, December 1, 2005

<sup>17</sup> Author’s interviews, Ghadia Faour and Mona Fawaz, previous Horch frequenters, Beirut, November 21, 2005

becomes an isolated place in the city where socially pressured' desires and practices such as sex or drinking alcohol are set free. This group of people jumps over or sneaks through broken parts of the fence and barbed wire to contest closed Horch in secret<sup>18</sup>. Such interaction of spatial context and social behavior is amazing proof of how people always contest or appropriate public space in one way or the other.

### CONCLUSION

In the light of this research's historical account of Horch al-Sanawbar and its socio-spatial analysis of the 1995 (re)design, it is clear how "multiple publics" [3] have always contested and appropriated the public space of Horch with diverse desires and practices to have their "tiny moments and memories" [2] that matter most in spite of different types of control.

Understanding the history, and thus the story, of Horch al-Sanawbar of how it came to be the pine forest then the park that has always protected and served Beirut despite all harm and abuse, and how Beiruti's contested it as a public space of their city is important to correlate to old and contemporary social practices in Horch, and thus see how it is enacted as an open, public space.

As for the 1995 (re)design, it is not the purpose of this research to criticize it from a design point of view, although this has been highlighted throughout the text. What is more important is the accessibility of all Horch frequenters to and interactivity of their diverse practices with Horch's different parts in the context of the 1995 (re)design or any other (re)design. For Horch al-Sanawbar is a public space for all, not a park for 'civilized people' or a museum for landscape, and as it has been historically illustrated, it can only be sustained through its public and their practices.

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<sup>18</sup> During field work, I ran into a group of men drinking alcohol while listening to the race results through sound projectors from the nearby hippodrome, and it happened that I grew a beard that made me look (according to the circle of people around me) as an affiliate of Hezbollah [The Islamic Resistance]. One of those men ran to me admitting his drinking problem and asking for my discretion about what I have seen thinking (too) that I am an affiliate of Hezbollah.