

Project of Beirut Municipality Public Libraries

On the request of Assabil: Friends of the Public Library



Report 2: Sassine Library

BY
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Executive Summary

Sassine Square constitutes one of the most prominent social, political and economical focal points in Beirut because of its importance on various levels. It houses very important and renowned commercial and leisure centers attracting large amounts of visitors from all over the area.

Through out history till our present times, The Square serviced its location for a specific political background “The Beiruti Christians” that clearly demarcated Sassine square’s identity and attributed to it a symbolic meaning.

Sassine’s nature as a strategic point of work, leisure and residences allow this mixture of old timers living in rented or owned apartments next to the new generation of high income groups who want to live in a lively neighborhood near any part around Beirut.

Sassine Square constitutes a major pedestrian and vehicular public space in Achrafieh Beirut, an economic and social focal point for the city. Sassine, Achrafieh is a very walkable community; residents rely much more on walking, and going up stairs even among elderly groups. In spite of the differences in level in the geography of the area, Sassine Square is easily accessible to all neighborhoods because of the shortcuts and ‘back’ stairs leading to it

Most schools in the neighborhood are prominent religiously-based schools which attract students from outside the Sassine area because of the more elderly nature of the neighborhood and of their Christian education.

While Sassine is an attraction point for various social groups on different levels, the spatial constraints of the site of the new library make it limited in terms of the amount of books it can hold, the reading space it can provide, or the activities it can initiate. Therefore, we propose that the library narrows down its target group to one user group, and be designed as such. In order to address this, the report proposes various scenarios of potential user groups for the new library, and recommends program orientations accordingly.

- 1) Elderly residents: Residents of Sassine are old timers, elderly who have developed a sense of community from living in the neighborhood for 30-40 years. Other than the Church, there is not really a public space where residents meet. Assabil library could provide residents with such a secular space.
- 2) School students: The library can also serve as a study space/ reading area for students after school hours. Exposure of students to the public library during school hours will train them to the idea of using a public library even if they don’t live in the neighborhood.

A Library in Sassine Square: Introduction

Background:

As part of a program to build a network of public libraries in Beirut, Assabil, the Friends of the Public Library Association in collaboration with the Municipality of Beirut is planning to build a neighborhood library in the Sassine Area. Two public libraries have already been established in Bachoura (Nov 2001) and Jeitawi (nov 2004). The ten new locations will either be renovated spaces (such as the Bachoura library) or new buildings (such as the Jeitawi one), depending on the location provided by the Municipality of Beirut. The Sassine Library will be a new structure located in Sassine Square.

This study aims to provide a vision of the Sassine library in relation to its context and location on the urban, sociological, and architectural levels. Based on quantitative and qualitative data analysis, the study will identify the potential user groups of the library, define the area that the library will serve, and present recommendations regarding the size, location, opening hours, type of books, languages, activities and programs, and possible advertising strategies. Given the vision of the libraries as neighborhood/local facilities, the study is based on the assumption that the main potential users are those who already have a presence in the area and who might benefit the most from the library: Residents and visitors of the Sassine area (coming for cultural activities and/or coffee shops), school students, university students, and cultural and religious groups in churches.

Data Collection:

The quantitative data was obtained from the Statistics department of the Ministry of Education's Research and Development Institute. The data, collected in 2004, gives information on the schools in the neighborhood (including their type, location, number of students and teachers). Quantitative data on the demographics of the Sassine neighborhood (income, gender, education, age, household types) was not available. Given a limited budget and time, we resorted instead to a limited number of interviews and a physical survey of the area. A total of thirty interviews were conducted with a randomly selected sample of people from the identified pool of potential library users. The purposes of the interviews were twofold: to evaluate the willingness of residents and visitors of the Sassine neighborhood to use the public library if built and to develop an overall picture of their concerns and needs. The sample interviewed should not be considered representative of all user groups and was not methodologically selected as such. Rather, people interviewed were used as key informants to get a feel of the area.

Main Findings:

The study shows that having a library in Sassine is a great asset to the neighborhood on many levels. First, most people interviewed within the Sassine area, residents, school principals, university students, and visitors showed interest in the idea of having a public library within the extremities of Sassine square. Second, a survey of schools (private and public) in the neighborhood has shown that all private schools are willing to take their children outside of the

school during school hours for activities, trips or possible events. They were also very welcoming to the idea of the library in Sassine Square.

Third, there is a sense of community among the old time residents who constitute the majority of the residents in Sassine area. There is not really a community space where residents meet. But most residents meet in the church every Sunday which makes Sassine's library a new secular place for meeting due to the easy accessibility to the library location from all neighborhoods.

However, several concerns were raised regarding the users of the public library because Sassine's nature as a focal point in Achrafiye attracts a lot of visitors whereas most of the residents consist of elderly groups and the schools are serving mostly children from outside the neighborhood because they are renowned for their education and their Christian nature.

The potential users for the Sassine library are:

1. Residents of Sassine are old timers, elderly who have developed a sense of community from living in the neighborhood for 30-40 years. Other than the Church, there is not really a public space where residents meet. The planned public library could provide residents with such a secular space.

2. The library can also serve as a study space/ reading area for students after school hours. One of the main objectives of public libraries is to introduce the habit of visiting public libraries into the lives of people. Exposure of students to the public library during school hours will train them to the idea of using a public library even if they don't live in the neighborhood.

3. Visitors of the Sassine Square on a daily basis which are outnumbered and can not be specific targets for the Sassine's library because of size restrictions.

The study is divided in four sections: A- A Library in Sassine Square: Introduction, B- Context of Sassine Library, C- User Groups of the Sassine Library, and D- Suggestions and Recommendations.

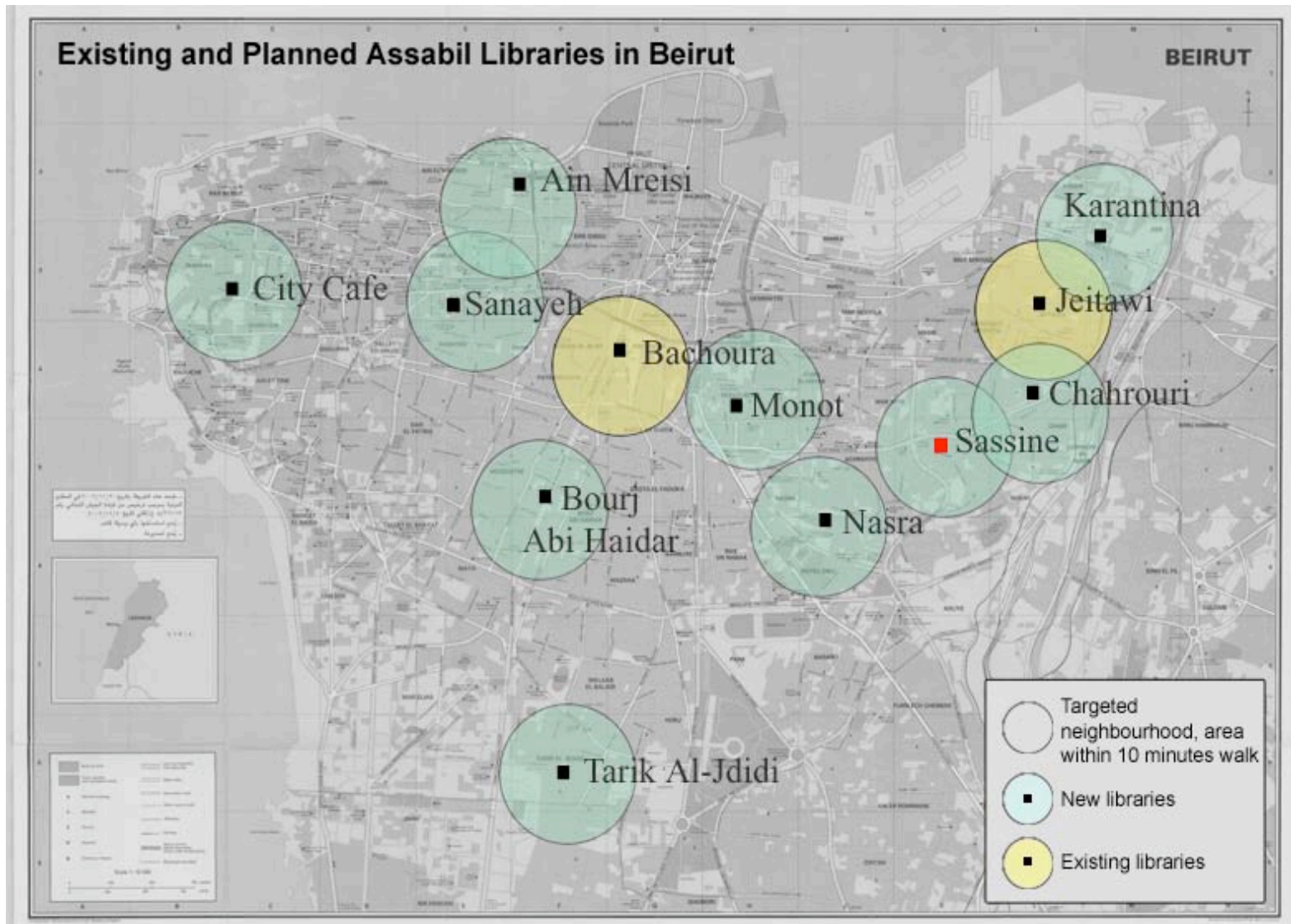


Figure 1: Public Libraries in Municipal Beirut

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