

Public Urban Stairs as Social Infrastructure: The Case of Vendôme Stairs, Beirut

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ABSTRACT

Urban stairs are integral to pedestrian infrastructure in some neighborhoods on the sloped side of Beirut. Typically designed for people to easily navigate their urban environment, public urban stairs are spatially vertical connectors to different neighborhoods and intricately linked to the social and cultural practices of the inhabitants. By being solely pedestrian and a car-free space, urban stairs play a critical role in providing socially inclusive spaces in between buildings. While they provide calm spaces in a dense fabric, residents of the surrounding potentially build up a strong Sense Of Place (SOP), a multi-dimensional concept that essentially embodies bonds between people and the physical environment. This paper explores Vendôme stairs, one of the many stairs in Mar Mikhael – Beirut, as a case study that matches the multidimensional SOP concept and thus contributes to the social infrastructure of the city. The Vendôme stairs play a vital role in navigating the city and were heavily affected during Beirut's port explosion in August 2020. In tandem between the physical and social aspects, the paper focuses on two interconnected layers of the case study, by collecting data, observing and mapping both spatial and behavioral patterns. The study aims at understanding and bringing evidence of the significant meaning and attachment of the residents to their urban space, through the various subdimensions of the SOP.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Vendôme stairs, one of the landmarks in Beirut, are part of the numerous staircases' network in the city, that have long been, and still are, primary pedestrian connectors as well as famous shared public urban spaces. Vendôme stairs link Mar Michael Street up to Geitawi Street within the Achrafieh neighborhood that sits on the highest hill of the capital. Considered part of Beirut's heritage, the stairs stand still as a witness to the turbulent history of the city and to the historic memories of its inhabitants. Beyond its historic and functional values, this paper explores the deeper connection between the Vendôme stairs

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and the community around it, a sense of place that have been forged and reinforced through time. The research's topic contributes to the literature that sheds light on the potential role of urban stairs, a space often overlooked, as a social infrastructure as important as other planned urban public spaces. The selected case study is examined through the lens of the SOP concept and framework.

Sense of Place (SOP) is a multi-dimensional concept rooted in disciplines that closely investigate human-space bonds, notably human geography, environmental psychology and urbanism, among others. The term itself is associated with well-known terms such as 'Genius Loci' (Norberg-Schulz, 1980), 'topophilia' (Tuan, 1974), 'insiderness' (Relph, 1976), 'place attachment' (Low and Altman, 1992), all of which refer to strong connections between people and particular settings. Renown authors on SOP such as Tuan (1974) Relph (1976) and Seamon (1982) commonly suggest that the SOP concept relies equally on two main features: (1) the physical unique characteristics of a space and (2) the meanings, affections and happenings experienced by people in that space. In other words, a space only becomes a place when its favorable environmental features are coupled with positive meaningful experiences of people (Shamai, 1991; Cross, 2001; Nanzer, 2004; Seamon, 2021; Erfani, 2022; K'oyoo, 2025).

Studies that measure and assess SOP usually follow two main strategies: the first is considering SOP as one dimension with several indicators to assess, and the second is to sub-divide SOP to different dimensions and assess each dimension separately. The multi-dimensional strategy results in a deeper understanding of the SOP aspect of a particular setting as well as in a more nuanced SOP assessment. This case study adapts the multidimensional strategy of SOP's assessment, following the tripartite model suggested by Jorgensen & Stedman (2001). This model investigates SOP by looking into the affective (place attachment), cognitive (place identity) and behavioral (place dependence) dimensions. Place attachment, place identity and place dependence are three sub-dimensions to the more general SOP concept that are often measured and assessed in relevant literature (Williams et al., 1992; Deutsch and Goulias, 2009; Nielsen-Pincus et al., 2010; Boerebach, 2012; Dameria et al., 2020). These three SOP dimensions are the main filters by which this case study is explored in this paper; as they constitute the most relevant framework for the case of Vendôme stairs in terms of context, history, evolution, surrounding community and contemporary use.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper investigates the Vendôme stairs structured around the theoretical framework that defines the three dimensions of SOP: place attachment, place identity and place dependence. The analysis and reading of this case study focuses on both the physical and social indicators for each one of the three SOP dimensions (Figure 1). The methodology follows a mixed-method approach where quantitative data is mostly gathered for the physical aspect of the Vendôme stairs, relying on personal mapping and observations. As for the qualitative method, it depends on both in-depth interviews with owners of adjacent properties and brief conversations that authors conducted with users of the stairs. All data are then arranged according to the adapted SOP model. Therefore, the gathering and analysis of information are based on both, primary and secondary sources: empirical studies such as mapping, observations and interviews and existing studies such as previous publications and newspapers' articles.

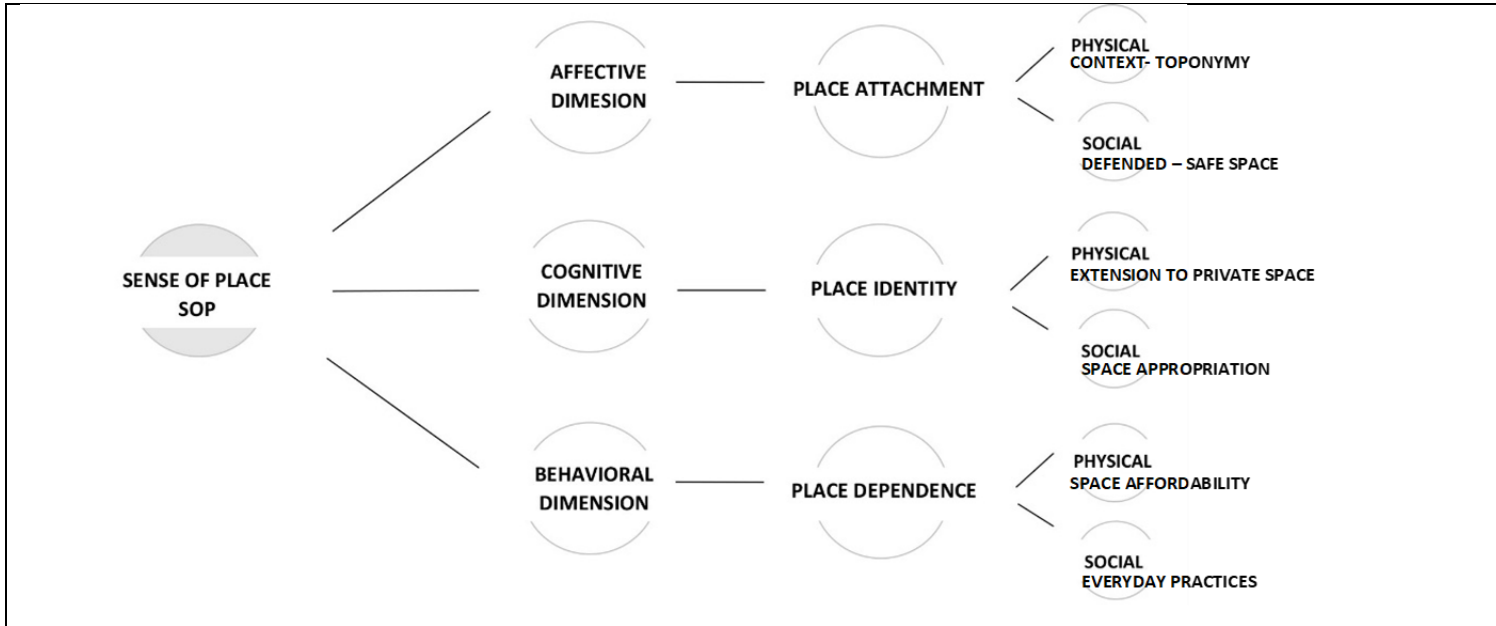


Figure 1. SOP Diagram by authors

3. PLACE ATTACHMENT

Place attachment is a concept that involves the emotional feelings one builds towards a particular space (Proshansky, 1978; Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001; Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001; Brown & al., 2015; Seamon, 2021; Hawthorne et al., 2022), an “emotional involvement with places” (Hummon, 1992, p. 256). This concept focuses on how strongly people feel towards a certain physical setting, thus, by definition, it deals with the **affective dimension** that contributes to the SOP or to the lack of it (Fried, 2000; Manzo, 2005). Authors on place attachment suggest that bonds can be forged between people and settings (Williams, 1992) as well as between people and people, in specific settings (Kyle and Graefe, 2005). Consequently, both the physical and the social contexts of a space are considered to be closely related to feelings of attachment. Moreover, the close connection between people and their environment whether it is because of the physical or the social context, is essentially dependent on time. The long-term experience enhances familiarity that increases feelings of security and comfort (Giuliani, 2003; Nielsen-Pincus et al., 2010).

Time is an essential component that strengthens the place attachment towards a space. In the case of the Vendôme stairs, the background of toponymy reveals a historical intertwined relation between families, community and the stairs. While unfolding social and urban historic narratives, toponymy in this context is a concept interconnected with the sense of place by revealing the way people engage, behave and connect with this space through time. The Vendôme stairs has had several toponymies or placenames since their genesis. They date back to the Ottoman era, and probably they were not initially designed as stairs, but their traces appear in the early maps of the 20th century. In 1909, with the introduction of electricity, five tramway lines were inaugurated in Beirut (El Wali, 1993, p.187), one of which connected the city center to Nahr and Daoura through the Rue Gouraud and Rue an-Nahr¹, the street located at the bottom end of the stairs. The traces of the stairs can be seen in the map from 1922 (Figure 2) as “*Sentier de la Gare*”, a French designation indicating its role as an alleyway leading to the train station, ‘Gare’ meaning station. The stairs also appear as ‘*Montée Gebailé*’ in the 1936 cadastral map of (Figure 3), ‘Montée’ meaning an upward slope in French and reflecting the hilly topographic nature of the area, and ‘Gebailé’ referring to the notorious and influential family figure, *Sheikh Younes*

¹ The tramway warehouse was situated along Rue An-Nahr, close to the current location of EDL (Electricité Du Liban), in proximity to the stairs.

Nicolas Gebaily. The stairs are still designated as part of the 'Younes Gebaily' street on the current cadastral maps. In addition, the stairs are widely known by various other names: Until almost a decade ago, the stairs were commonly referred to as *Vendôme Stairs*, named after the Cinéma Vendôme, formerly Olympia cinema which was built in 1952 on plot 633 (HousingMonitor, 2019). Unfortunately, Cinéma Vendôme was demolished in 2011 to make way for a tower, disregarding civic protests to preserve, despite its status as one of the three buildings on the same lot no. 633 listed as heritage architecture (The Executive magazine, 2011). Currently, the stairs are commonly referred to as *Geara stairs*, named after Mr. Marcel Geara who owns a private house along them. Informal sources suggest that he donated the land to the municipality, but this claim remains unsubstantiated. *Geara stairs* is the official name, according to municipal decision number 340 dated 13/3/2014, as indicated on the signage (Figure 4). The evolution of the stairs is closely entangled with that of the urban landscape and the urbanization factors. its toponymy provides insights into the historic evolution of the urban context reflecting narratives of the families and communities associated with it.

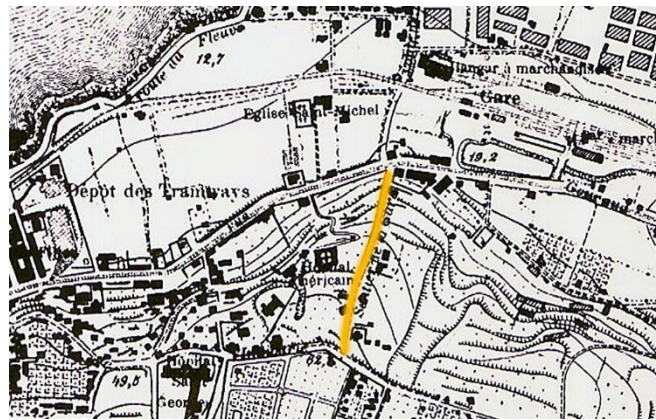


Figure 2. Sentier de la Gare, partial map. Bureau Topographique de l'Armée Française du Levant (1922), modified by authors



Figure 3. Montée Gebailé, partial map. Bureau Topographique des Troupes Françaises du Levant (T.F.L.) (1936), modified by authors

Another strong indicator of place attachment is the popular reaction to its threat of demolition in 2013. People gathered on the steps of the stairs as part of a collective mass mobilization, once rumor spread about plans to demolish it for new constructions in the neighborhood. As a matter of fact, the protests

protected it from demolition as citizens considered it an urban heritage and a cherished space integral to their daily life (Beirut Today, 2019). Moreover, On the 4th of August 2020, the port's explosion, numerous injured individuals gathered on the Vendôme stairs, which transformed into a safe zone for initial first aid before transportation to hospitals. The residents narrated how this place became a temporary refuge for the surrounding community to provide aid, care and support for each other.



Figure 4. Stairs Signage by authors

4. PLACE IDENTITY

Place identity has long been recognized in psychology as one of the main components of personal identity (Erickson, 1956). Introduced in environmental psychology, place identity is defined as an extension of the self (Proshansky, 1978; Berk, 2000), a self-perception associated with a milieu to the extent that the self is directly affected by it: for example, in a study by Wirtz and Harrell (1987) on the impact of change to the environment on people, home violation is directly associated with body violation. Consequently, place identity is essentially the **cognitive dimension** of SOP, by which people define who they are (Schultz and Tabanico, 2007; Lewicka, 2008; Bernardo et al., 2023). It acts as a "component of personal identity, a process by which, through interaction with places, people describe themselves in terms of belonging to a specific place." (Hernandez et al., 2007, p.1). Furthermore, this concept also includes the social construct related to identity which consists of the values, attitudes and nature of interactions associated with a space (Feldman, 1990). Thus, it enhances the sense of belonging of a group of people that commonly identify itself to that specific space (Nielson-Pincus et al., 2010).

In the aftermath of the tragic August 2020 port explosion², not only was the entire neighborhood significantly affected, but so were the stairs. Subsequently, the stairs underwent extensive rehabilitations efforts by NGOs in collaboration with UN bodies. Catalytic Action³, a local NGO, in collaboration with UN Habitat Lebanon undertook the design and rehabilitation of the Vendôme stairs, a project that was completed in 2022, based on a socially inclusive participatory approach. Given the close identification of the local community with the stairs, co-designing with them was crucial to address their needs and restore a significant part of the physically and mentally traumatized neighborhood. The new design

² On August 4th 2020, a massive explosion rocked the port of Beirut and caused massive destruction to several neighborhoods in the capital. The explosion, caused by hazardously stored ammonium nitrate, is rated as one of the most powerful non-nuclear explosions.

³ The codesigning process is documented on the website of Catalytic Action: BEIRUT'S PUBLIC STAIRS Beirut, Lebanon 2022 - Catalytic Action

consists of various seating areas spread along the stairs, with shading structures creating resting areas and facilitating social interaction. The inclusive design aims at addressing different ages of residents. Handrails are added for the elderly and playful multi sensorial furniture like speaking pipes and slides are well integrated to create play areas for the children. The resulting ensemble of urban furniture, canopies and details contribute to creating a socially inclusive environment. This initiative also facilitates the gradual re-opening of cafes and bars along the stairs. The buildings along the stairs are mostly residential ones and remained unchanged in the past few decades, except for Aya tower. The latter is the outcome of a building regulation which permitted the merging of multiple plots, after the civil war, aiming for a higher floor to area ratio (FAR), thus a higher exploitation factor⁴. These regulatory changes facilitated the construction of taller buildings and towers. In a similar vein, HAR properties, developers of Aya tower, purchased and merged plots number 633 and 1159 along the stairs. Despite all civic protests, they managed to destroy the three heritage listed buildings on lot no. 633, of which Cinéma Vendôme and built a multi-storey high tower (HousingMonitor, 2019). The ground floor of Aya tower consists of a single level pocket-like square, connected to the lively Mar Mikhayel Street. However, it is notably disconnected from the stairs by a wall, except for a secondary access to one of the retails upper levels (Figure 5). This design results in a clear boundary between the two spaces.

As for the ground floor/s of the various buildings located along the stairs, they consist of pedestrian entrances, narrow alleyways, private gardens, cafes, bars and restaurants. This diversity creates a direct connection between the buildings and the stairs, blurring the public-private boundaries and facilitating social interaction and transition (Figure 6). The various platforms act as social thresholds, with several physical elements spilling out from private residential spaces and cafes. The steps and landings of the stairs are occupied by private belongings such as small plants in pots, tree branches extending from private yards, motorcycle parking spots, hanging racks with clean laundry, small barbecue area, tables and chairs, curtains, storage space, wall graffiti and religious shrines (Figure 7). These spill outs indicate the extension of private spaces onto the stairs, transforming it into an in-between shared space, appropriated by the surrounding residents. These practices clearly reveal a sense of ownership over parts of the stairs by the nearby residents, an extension of their most private places that they occupy as they see fit, establishing a strong sense of mutual belonging between them and these stairs. In that regard, Hamza, a male café attendant in his late 20s at Strada café, pointed out that aunt Mimi, a neighbour in the adjacent residential building, enjoys the café's music, and sometimes misses it out when it is not playing. He also pointed out that the outdoor space on the platform is rented from the municipality at a higher cost compared to the café's actual rent. This physical marking of territory is further intensified by a sensory experience of smells and sounds emanating from the neighbouring houses; sitting on those steps, one can enjoy the smell of cooking and hear snippets of television, discussions, and music coming from nearby homes. This multitude of personalized spaces on the stairs makes it a hybrid shared space that is neither entirely private nor completely public; an urban element that blurs boundaries between these normally distinct private-public spaces in urban contexts. As such, the stairs are a clear extension of the self, where residents identify themselves to various sections of this vertical urban environment.

⁴ The law that governs the merging of adjacent plots of land is Law No. 646/2005, issued in the year 2005, also known as the "Law on the Regulation of Building Heights and Terraces".



Figure 5. Aya Tower and its Disconnecting Wall, by authors



Figure 6. Stairs Accessibility, visuals by students in Architecture Design VI course, fall 2020, modified by authors



Figure 7. Space Appropriation on the Vendôme Stairs, by authors

5. PLACE DEPENDENCE

Place dependence refers to the **behavioural dimension** of SOP. It stems from the affordability of a space to provide the best setting for certain uses and activities. It indicates the suitability of space for users to accomplish their goals and objectives (Altman and Low, 1992; Hay, 1998; Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001; Nanzer, 2004; Lewicka, 2008). Also, it is "considered as the perceived behavioral advantage of a spatial setting relative to other settings" (Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001, p.238), adding to its definition the notion of comparability to other spaces. This SOP dimension suggests a bond between settings and individuals that reinforces feelings of trust and comfort to successfully achieve one's daily activities (Kyle and Chick, 2007; Rollero and De Piccoli, 2010). It is purely a functional connection to space based on continuous experience, where people believe they can best practice their activities in this space.

This reading on place dependence explores the stairs beyond their physical characteristic, by revealing the various daily activities and social behaviors intertwined with their physical nature. Currently, the stairs connect the gradient topography, spanning an elevation difference of nearly 29 meters, linking Rue

Khazinein at its upper end to *Rue An-Nahr* at its lower end, famously and commonly known as Mar Mikhayel Street. Along the stairs' ascent, a dead-end road intersects it and links to one of its platforms. This feature highlights the stairs' importance as a vital pedestrian element, transversally across the hill, but also serving as a continuation to the Geitawi neighborhood. The stairs are steep and long, yet they have few platforms with various uses. On a hot and humid July morning in 2024, we informally approached individuals going up or down the stairs, asking them about their experience with the stairs in their current rehabilitated configuration after the explosion. We randomly addressed one lady ascending and another descending the stairs. Georgette, a woman in her 60s, has been living for 20 years in the neighbourhood along Saydet el Bzez, another nearby stair. She regularly uses the Vendôme stairs, as part of her daily practices, going up and down. After the 2019 economic crisis in Lebanon, she sold her car and since then relies on the stairs which lead to the public bus stop on the main boulevard. According to her, the renovated version of the stairs provides benches and shaded seating area, which are more comfortable than sitting directly on the steps. Unlike Georgette who navigates the stairs both ways, up and down, Anssara Khairallah, an 80 years-old lady, admitted that she only descends the stairs due to their steepness, despite living at the upper end. While pulling her shopping trolley, she explains how she incorporates the stairs into her daily activities, primarily for accessing the public bus stop. Since its inception, the stairs evolved informally through everyday use. According to local narratives, lemon trees were previously planted along the Vendôme stairs, which originally served as a pathway for donkeys to transport goods to the neighbourhood on either side of it. Gradually, they became integrated into the urban fabric as the main pathway for pedestrians heading to the train station and those using the tramway. During the civil war (1975-1990), this discreet vertical passage served as a clandestine route for transporting weapons while also protecting individuals from snipers. The stairs are used as a pathway and a destination, a place for all citizens, all ages, different activities by day and night, temporary cultural, artistic and social activities. In 2011, the artistic festival titled in Arabic "Nehna wel Amar wel Jiran," (meaning "the moon, the neighbours and us") was initiated by the performance art company 'Collectif Kahraba'. It aimed to strengthen community bonds and highlight the stairs as all-inclusive communal space. Residents actively hosted the festival, participating in food preparation and engaging in other activities. Additionally, in 2015, a live-painting performance took place on the fences that separated it from the new construction site of Aya Tower (Beirut Today, 2019). On several occasions, Vendôme stairs served as a space for protests. Likewise, the stairs served as a gathering place for protesters during the popular uprising in 2019. Away from the scrutiny of security forces, people could strategize and coordinate their plans before marching to downtown. The daily activities, everyday practices, patterns of behaviour, permanent uses and temporary events illustrate the social engagement and the connection between community and the stairs as a physical urban element.

6. CONCLUSION

Beyond its role as a navigation element in the city, Vendôme stairs proved over the years to be not only a shared urban space but also a cherished place to the close inhabitants and a go-to destination for the neighborhood's visitors. Both its physical characteristics and social happenings demonstrate a strong sense of place marked by place attachment, place identity and place dependence indicators. The results of the study show a strong emotional attachment to that place reflected through its historical evolution, its role as a place of refuge and comfort and its importance to its protective community especially during times of threat. In terms of place identity attributes, the appropriation of the space as an extension of neighboring private living spaces is evident through the observations, as well as through the residents' practices of managing, maintaining and taking care of that space. Moreover, a much diverse array of functions and uses is afforded by that space. Perceived as an in-between space, the Vendôme stairs not only connect streets together but also bond its surrounding community that depends on it, and offer them a safe, practical, pleasant and calm place in the midst of a bustling urban environment. The stairs in this case are much more than spaces of flow, as they become historical, cultural and social places in the city. This paper, through its case study, highlights the importance of such urban infrastructures that are often overlooked as mundane urban elements, therefore not commonly investigated in the SOP literature. As the case study reveals, the Vendôme

stairs are much more than simple urban connectors in the city; they foster a strong sense of place among residents, contribute to a safer, and a higher-quality of urban environment, and strengthen the human-landscape relationship between people and their surrounding landscape.

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Data availability statement

Not applicable.

Ethics statements

No potentially identifiable human images or data is presented in this study.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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