

Bourj Hammoud, sometimes called Lebanese Little Armenia, is a commercial, industrial and residential area in north-east Beirut. The Armenian population settled in Bourj Hammoud after the genocide in the Ottoman Empire in 1915. Early survivors were granted the right to build barracks on land which, at the time, was swamps and marshy lands. In just a few decades the Lebanese Armenians transformed themselves from a community of refugees to a fully integrated minority group.<sup>1</sup>

Today Bourj Hammoud is known for bustling trade and vibrant street life. Next to its predominantly Armenian population, Bourj Hammoud hosts many Syrian, Palestinian and Iraqi refugees, as well as migrant workers from Africa and Asia, making it one of the most diverse neighbourhoods of Beirut. The area's economy relies strongly on retail, with shops accounting for 83% of economic activity.<sup>2</sup> The largest segment of shops is food and groceries, followed by a variety of boutiques and beauty salons, and restaurants. Bourj Hammoud is also known for handmade jewellery, leather goods and tailors.

This vibrant commerce is mirrored on its streets — one shop is followed by another, with their colourful signs advertising for clothes, leather shoes, necklaces, and perfumes. Sometimes there are six or more shop signs stacked onto one building. Next to the signs, one can usually spot a few Armenian flags. The “Armenianness” is as well manifested through the shop names which often refer to modern-day Armenia and Armenian cities now in Turkey, such as Marash, Sis and Van. Armenians of Bourj Hammoud speak Western Armenian, a unique dialect now classified as an endangered language, and while many of the signs are in Armenian, often a mixture of two or three languages and scripts is used.

This interweaving of languages and alphabets can be seen as a manifestation of a hybrid diasporic identity. While Armenian national identity is drawn from multiple sources, diasporic identity further blends with a Lebanese culture that itself is influenced by French colonial rule and more recent Western cultural globalization. Therefore, while the signs capture the local character of a particular time and place, at the same time they reflect the cultural layers of different eras.

When it comes to production, the signs are often hand-crafted or created as unique pieces. There exists a rich variety of signs — while some draw from more classical sign-making traditions, many of them are made in the DIY spirit. The signs of Bourj Hammoud should not be viewed as single pieces only — together they become part of the urban fabric of the space.

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1 Abramson, S. (2013) Lebanese Armenians: a Distinctive Community in the Armenian Diaspora and in Lebanese Society. *The Levantine Review Volume 2 (2)*, p. 192.

2 UN Habitat (2017) *Neighbourhood profile & strategy: Bourj Hammoud, Lebanon*. Retrieved from: <https://data2.unhcr.org/ar/documents/download/59497>