

The controversial walls of Ouzai

BY ISABELLE RODRIGUEZ

Anybody who flies into Beirut is bound to come face to face with the slum of Ouzai upon exiting the airport. There, amidst 4 km² of abandoned constructions piled one upon the other and for the most part illegally built by displaced populations, is where Ayad Nasser grew up prior to becoming a wealthy real estate mogul in France. Ouzai is a neglected neighborhood with a bad reputation—violence, poverty, overpopulation—but it is also one that the young entrepreneur has never forgotten.

In 2015, as this sad Beirut suburb drowns in trash during the garbage crisis, Ayad uses his own funds to launch the project Ouzville, intended to embellish the daily lives of the slum's inhabitants and re-establish a sense of social connection in a "country neglected by the political class and the general population". With this project, Ayad Nasser hopes to give Ouzai a complete makeover, inviting artists from all over the world to create works on the walls of the neighborhood houses. More than 30 street artists have already participated—including Retna, Ethos and even Demsky – by creating works on some 140 facades.

Although the transformation of this poor urban zone into a colorful open-air museum has attracted its fair share of tourists—who until now have rather avoided the area—and given a small boost to the local economy, and although numerous inhabitants have volunteered out of sheer joy for the new life infused there, the project continues to provoke debate.

First on the part of the artists, since no political or religious messages have been allowed on the walls: "It's censorship," claims Lebanese artist Marwan Rechmanoui who laments the "showy" aspect of the urban transformation and what he considers is the lost spirit of street art under such conditions. But some inhabitants also remain confused as to why the money would be used in this way rather than to take care of other problems left unaddressed by local authorities, such as sewage and water treatment. Still others note that these embellishments occur on illegally built homes, in complete disregard for how the pretty colors cover up walls in disrepair or about to crumble.

Ayad Nasser, however, brushes the criticisms off: his project was first and foremost about getting a dialogue started, the first step in urban and social renewal and one that addresses a true need amongst locals. A few months after Ouzville, a similar project saw the day in Tripoli, also under his thumb, while many local or national initiatives were already underway to transform the most affected neighborhoods: Street artist Mohammed Al Abrash, supported by a branch of Société Générale, repainted the walls of school buildings, whereas the Ashekman duo unveiled a gigantic "salam" (Peace) painted on the rooftops with the help of the inhabitants, a giant graffiti that can be seen from the sky, extending across 80 buildings and several neighborhoods, to show the world a peaceful image of Lebanon.