



ENPI CBCMED CROSS BORDER COOPERATION MEDNETA:

“Mediterranean cultural network to promote creativity in the arts, crafts and design for communities’ regeneration in historical cities”



GAIA-h SWOT Seminar:
“Creativity and Regeneration in Mar Mikhael”

CONCEPT NOTE

Date: Thursday, July 17th

10:00 to 21:00

Venue: Brasserie du Levant, Mar Mikhael, Beirut

Objectives

In the past decade, the neighborhood of Mar Mikhael has witnessed a rise in the establishment and opening of creatively inclined businesses such as architecture and furniture and fashion design firms, galleries, and jewelry production (amongst many others). These firms have successively opened in an increasingly concentrated area in Mar Mikhael, forming what it commonly referred to as an “**Art, Crafts and Design (ACD) cluster**”ⁱ.

GAIA-Heritage has been surveying the evolution of this cluster since 2010 and today, within the **European Union Project MEDNETA**, GAIA-Heritage has conducted an extensive survey of the neighborhood’s creative economy and of its socio-economic environment. This study has included identifying and interviewing the sector’s principal actors, i.e. creative business owners, hereby referred to as “ACDs”. Results of the survey have revealed a series of issues facing the sustainability and longevity of the ACDs artistic, design and commercial endeavors, namely the rapid rise in real estate development projects, a growing recreational sector, and a



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lack of communal entente required for the exchange of ideas and innovationⁱⁱ.

As a segue from the initial analysis of the Mar Mikhael district, GAIA Heritage is hosting a day-long meeting between the neighborhood's ACDs, stakeholders, and MEDNETA partners on **July 17th, 2014**. Held according to a conference format, the meeting will include two roundtable discussions, and will provide opportunities for professional networking. Most importantly, the conference will allow for a much-needed exchange of best practices, transfer of knowhow between those creatives present, and an in-depth active debate on the strengths, weaknesses and threats to Mar Mikhael's creative district. The presence of stakeholders and decision-makers from the finance and urban fields and from the international community will offer opportunities of identifying answers to the reinforcement of the cluster and to turning Mar-Mikhael into a creative district that could become a pilot urban regeneration for other places in Lebanon.

The conference theme will further revolve around topics of urban planning, regeneration, and public space. Indeed, cultural districts are site-specific: therefore, a detailed exploration of the creative economy cannot occur without an understanding of its broader urban contextⁱⁱⁱ. This is particularly poignant in the context of Mar Mikhael, which has attracted considerable attention in recent years due to its traditional nature. In addition to the panel discussion, participants will be provided with the opportunity to meet with Mar Mikhael ACDs and look at various pieces from their lines of work.

The "Creativity and Regeneration in Mar Mikhael" conference will pose the following questions: **what is the creative economy's role in a traditional urban sector? What are the "best practices" for the maintenance of creative businesses in the context of a rapidly changing urban fabric? Is the emergence of a "public space" necessary for the strengthening of the economic competitiveness of creative products?** Discussions of this nature will allow conference attendees and presenters to adequately assess the existing situation for Mar Mikhael's creative sector- in addition to offering tools for improvement in order to render these creative businesses into competitive economic actors in the regeneration of urban places.



Setting

The use of the **Brasserie du Levant** is in itself symbolic of Mar Mikhael's urban history. A former brewery, the Brasserie constituted an economic motor of the neighborhood as a significant employer of local residents. Furthermore, the building was also the host of numerous festivals and public celebrations during the pre-war Lebanese apogee. The Brasserie thence embodies the popular and working class of the district, forming a monument to Lebanon's much celebrated urban past. It is now abandoned, presenting an ideal example of an industrial setting for an incubator of creative industries.

ⁱ John Newbigin, "The Creative Economy: An Introductory Guide", Creative and Cultural Economy Series/1, (London: British Council, 2010), 37.

ⁱⁱ Newbigin, "The Creative Economy", 49.

ⁱⁱⁱ Andy Pratt, "Creative Cities: The Cultural Industries and the Creative Class" Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography, (2008), 107.

