

# Micro, Meso, Macro

## Multi-scalar reappropriation of abandoned railways in Beirut, Paris and Queens (New York)

chemins de fer délaissés  
pratiques multi-scalaires  
appropriations informelles  
marche comme méthode(ologie)  
**abandoned railways  
multi-scalar practices  
informal appropriations  
walking-based research**

Les espaces urbains abandonnés sont étudiés comme lieux de convergence des pratiques quotidiennes, des interventions informelles et des agendas de planification concurrents. De nombreux travaux portent sur la capacité des appropriations collectives et participatives à contester les logiques descendantes d'aménagement. Les corridors ferroviaires délaissés se distinguent dans ce champ. Leur morphologie linéaire traverse différents quartiers et juridictions et leur matérialité conserve les empreintes des anciens réseaux de transport. Leur statut juridique se complexifie par la superposition d'affectation et de droits de passage mêlant intérêts publics et privés. Ces conditions produisent usage et conflit qui se déploient à plusieurs échelles : micro-appropriations par les riverains, des initiatives collectives à l'échelle méso et projections macro cadrant le corridor comme une infrastructure de transport future, un patrimoine industriel ou une promenade linéaire.

Cet article analyse comment les réappropriations multi-scalaires informelles et semi-formelles émergent sur trois corridors ferroviaires délaissés : la ligne Beyrouth-Bekaa, la Petite Ceinture parisienne et la branche Rockaway Beach à Queens, New York. Ancrée dans un travail de terrain qualitatif multisite mené entre 2021 et 2025, l'étude combine marches répétées, entretiens et analyse documentaire. Elle retrace comment les pratiques s'accumulent, se stabilisent ou entrent en conflit. À travers les trois cas, l'analyse montre que les chemins de fer délaissés persistent comme assemblages socio-matériels en état de suspension active, entre vacance et requalification, redéfinis par des pratiques et des revendications concurrentes. Plutôt que de s'interroger sur leur devenir, l'article examine comment les acteurs stabilisent des trajectoires en traduisant les pratiques locales dans des imaginaires et des cadres de gouvernance plus larges.

Abandoned and disused urban spaces have increasingly been examined as sites where everyday practices, informal interventions, and contested planning agendas converge. A growing body of scholarship has focused on how community-led and participatory appropriations can challenge top-down redevelopment and planning logics. Abandoned railway corridors occupy a distinctive position within this broader discourse. Their linear morphology cuts across neighborhoods and jurisdictions, and their material remnants retain the imprints of former transport networks. Their legal status is complicated by layered ownership, easements, and rights-of-way that entangle public and private interests. These conditions generate recurring patterns of use and dispute that unfold at multiple scales: micro appropriations by adjacent residents and informal occupants, meso-level initiatives such as cleanups, gardens, and organized walks, and macro projections that frame the corridor as future transport, heritage infrastructure, or linear parkland.

This article analyzes how multi-scalar informal and semi-formal reappropriations take shape across three decommissioned rail corridors: the Beirut-Bekaa line, Paris's Petite Ceinture, and the Rockaway Beach Branch in Queens, New York. Grounded in multi-site qualitative fieldwork conducted between 2021 and 2025, the study combines repeated walking-based observation with interviews and document analysis. It traces how practices accumulate, stabilize, and sometimes conflict across scales. Across the three cases, the analysis shows that abandoned railways persist as socio-material assemblages in a condition of active suspension: neither vacant nor fully redeveloped but continuously redefined through competing practices and future-oriented claims. Rather than asking what these infrastructures will become, the article examines how actors attempt to stabilize particular trajectories by translating local practices into broader imaginaries and governance frameworks.

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Abandoned railway corridors are often treated similarly to other residual and disused urban spaces. Within both planning and scholarship, they are often categorized as *friches* or brownfields awaiting formal transformation and reuse, or as “urban voids” or *terrains vagues*, providing informal spaces of un-planned potential (de Sola-Morales 1995; Adams, de Sousa, Tiesdell 2010; Gowda 2019).

This article argues that such framings overlook how these infrastructures continue to organize urban space, practices, and imaginaries long after their transport function has ceased. It proposes a multi-scalar framework to analyze abandoned railway corridors as “network ruins,” focusing on how their linear form and ambiguous legal status produce overlapping practices across scales. By doing so, it moves beyond project-based or end-state analyses to examine the ongoing processes of how these infrastructures are inhabited and negotiated over time.

Existing work on abandoned urban spaces has tended to emphasize indeterminacy and openness, notably through concepts such as *terrain vague*, understood as spaces of “indeterminacy” and “absence of function” (de Sola-Morales 1995, p.120), or as flexible sites for informal and temporary uses (Franck, Stevens 2006). In parallel, infrastructure studies have shown that networks do not simply disappear when they fall out of use, but remain operative as socio-material systems, as they continue to structure urban life beyond moments of breakdown (Larkin 2013; Graham, Thrift 2007). These literatures tend to frame such spaces either as open-ended voids or as latent systems awaiting reactivation, with limited attention to the prolonged and contested processes that unfold between these states.

This article shifts the analytical focus from transformation and end use to persistence and process. It proposes the concept of active suspension: a state where multiple uses, practices, and projections

coexist across scales, without stabilizing into a single dominant trajectory.

This condition of active suspension emerges from the unique spatial and institutional characteristics of abandoned railway spaces. Their linear morphology cuts across neighborhoods and jurisdictions, giving residents fragmented and uneven access to narrow slivers of land. Their material persistence maintains visible traces of past networks and heritage that continue to structure perception and use (Qviström 2012). At the same time, layered ownership, easements, and conditional rights make them difficult to fully reassign or transform. Together, these elements produce corridors that remain actively negotiated, sustaining overlapping and sometimes competing forms of occupation, management, and projection. In this perspective, abandoned rail spaces are viewed as socio-material assemblages, where heterogeneous human and non-human elements - actors, institutions, regulations, vegetation, and built remnants - jointly produce spatial conditions (Anderson, McFarlane 2011; Latour 2005). Indeterminacy is actively maintained through ongoing processes of negotiation, translation, and partial stabilization. Abandoned railways can thus be understood as what Qviström (2012) terms “network ruins,” where the material traces of infrastructure continue to organize spatial practices and imaginaries. The concept of active suspension highlights how these infrastructures remain operative without resolution through everyday use, collective action, and future-oriented projection.

To capture these dynamics, the article adopts a multi-scalar framework structured around micro, meso, and macro levels. This approach traces how everyday appropriations, collective initiatives, and strategic projections interact within the same spatial system, producing interdependent rather than separate regimes of use and meaning.

This article is guided by the following research questions: How do informal, micro-level appropriations and meso-level collective initiatives manifest across decommissioned corridors? How do these localized practices intersect and compete with macro-scale projections and governance frameworks? And finally, how does this ongoing negotiation between scales create a state of active suspension, and what does this condition mean for the long-term transformation of these infrastructures?

To empirically explore these questions, this article examines how multi-scalar dynamics play out in three urban sites where railways have been decommissioned and partially re-appropriated for other uses: Beirut's abandoned rail line, Paris's Petite Ceinture, and the Rockaway Beach Branch abandoned rail line in Queens, New York. In each case, informal practices on the rail lines begin at the micro level and progress to higher scales, with increasing temporal and spatial scope. However, each case develops differently, reflecting the social, political, and structural forces at work in these cities and among the relevant actors and stakeholders.

## METHODOLOGY

This article is part of my ongoing doctoral research, which uses a multi-site, qualitative approach to examine how abandoned infrastructures become sites of appropriation, transformation, and diverse uses and practices under different urban and institutional conditions. The research engages three contexts in which fieldwork has been conducted between 2021 and 2025: Beirut, Paris, and Queens (New York). The analysis presented here is grounded in primary field materials collected across these three sites, and develops these data into an empirical, case-based contribution. It also reflects different intensities of investigation; fieldwork was more intensive along the Beirut-Bekaa line and the Petite Ceinture, while a shorter research episode in Queens serves to sharpen key analytical contrasts.

Within this broader qualitative design, walking has structured my research both methodologically and analytically, offering an embodied and situated approach (Vergunst, Ingold 2016; Careri 2017; Twemlow, Cardoso 2024). Building on work in urban geographical research and ethnography that treats walking as both a “technique of the body” and an investigative tool, this approach foregrounds movement, trajectories, and perceptions as central to understanding how urban spaces are inhabited (Laugrand 2026; Lawhon, Pierce 2015). Ethnographic work emphasizes that walking gives access to embodied, multisensory knowledges and to the relations between bodies, environments, and memory (Laugrand 2026; Ghislotti lared, Torres De Oliveira 2017). In urban geography, walking has been framed as a key practice for producing local literacy and for making explicit the often-unreported observations that underlie qualitative research (Lawhon, Pierce 2015). In the tradition of the situationist *dérive* and psychogeography, walking approaches urban space through trajectories and lived environments rather than fixed points (Debord 1958). Neo-situationist and contemporary walking practices explicitly fuse walking and mapping to produce counter-cartographies of everyday urban life (Girault 2018; Gwiazdzinski 2019). Walking thus serves here as a tool for cartography as well, facilitating a situated engagement with the layered material, social, and affective dimensions of abandoned railway infrastructures.

Walking as a research practice is particularly suited to the linear morphology of urban rail corridors, as they can be followed continuously across neighborhoods, land uses, and administrative boundaries. As in other ruins, walkers must “learn” the space with movements that are unsettled and improvised, as one must “stoop, crouch, climb, slither, leap, swerve and pick” one's way through (Edensor 2008b, p.127). These fragmented, non-linear experiences resist authoritative

narrative representation of the “regulated city,” since ruins generate overlapping traces of industrial pasts, embodied perceptions, and ongoing processes of decay and renewal that unsettle linear understanding of space and time (Edensor 2008b, p.127). Yet unlike other industrial ruins, moving through abandoned rail corridors means moving through the city itself, not just an abandoned pocket of it. This creates an ambivalent experience of simultaneous estrangement from, and connection to, the urban fabric, which is especially useful in observing the tension between their role as marginal space and their role as structuring network. As Edensor writes elsewhere, the rail's “energy, noise and movement is summoned by the surrounding tranquillity, and the stilled networks, now cut off from urban flows, have been replaced by other routes through which matter and energy course” (Edensor 2008a, p.318).

Walking also enables simultaneous observation at multiple scales: close attention to material details such as fencing, vegetation, traces of passage, or improvised constructions (micro); patterns of access, adjacency, and conflict along segments (meso); and the broader territorial positioning of the line within metropolitan infrastructures and governance regimes (macro). Walking along the tracks reveals how structural remnants, property regimes, municipal projects, informal appropriations, ecological succession, and everyday practices intersect in situ. It makes visible how walls, bridges, encroachments, community gardens, security devices, and political signage coexist and compete within the same corridor. It is particularly effective for identifying informal uses and for understanding how human activity inhabits, diverts, or reinterprets the rails.

These methodological advantages were operationalized differently across the three field sites. In each city, the sections walked were defined by accessibility to the rails. For each segment, entry and

exit points were defined, informal accesses documented, and repeated walks were taken. Repeated walks allow the documentation of temporal variation, including seasonal growth, maintenance interventions, and shifting patterns of presence, anchoring analysis in direct, situated observation.

As noted above, the intensity and temporal span of the walks varied according to physical presence in each site. In Paris, I had easier access and could perform frequent repeated walks due to my close proximity to the Petite Ceinture. These walks included both open and closed segments across the city, with a focus on segments running through the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissements. Walks on these sections were repeated 5 times between 2021 and 2025. In Beirut, my presence was intermittent, and the walks were therefore more temporally concentrated across three fieldwork trips, with access limitations further narrowing visibility into some sites. The line itself is also more fractured, more restricted, and less visible, resulting in observations focused mainly on the small segments of track in the vicinity of the Mar Mikhael train station, where the greatest density of informal practices was found. Walks on these sections were repeated weekly for a period of 3 months of fieldwork over 3 years. In Queens, my short research stay prevented longitudinal data gathering and resulted in a much shorter and more limited study, rather than a full dissertation case. As a visiting research scholar, I conducted three walks along the Rockaway Beach Branch between January and August of 2023. However, despite this short duration, my stay coincided with an intense period of public debate about the future of the rail, which added a crucial layer of analytical clarity that took much longer to develop in the other studies.

Beyond repeated individual walks, fieldwork at the three sites also involved collective walking practices. Individual walks emphasized systematic coverage and documentation, while collective

walks with association members both in Paris and Beirut served as guided tours and walk-along interviews. More importantly, structured collective walks provided key insights into how different actors and stakeholders viewed the rail line, its place in the urban fabric, and their own role in determining its fate. For example, a nature walk along the Petite Ceinture emphasized the line's ecological and educational value as a wild bio-corridor, while a walk with a train heritage group emphasized its historical importance in the development of the city's economy.

For each of these sites, walking was complemented by literature review, archival research, semi-structured interviews, and walk-along interviews with a variety of stakeholders. Interview subjects included residents, community groups, and artists engaged in informal uses of abandoned rail space, civil society and advocacy groups, government officials, and other interested actors. In this article, interviews reflect the perspectives attached to informal uses and practices in abandoned rail spaces across the three cities, as well as the longer-term visions of different groups vying to define the formal uses of those spaces. In Beirut and Paris, these interviews were conducted with members of associations and NGOs (such as Train Train in Lebanon and the Promeneurs de la Petite Ceinture in Paris) as well as with representatives at the SNCF and the OCFTC. Formal interviews were complemented and triangulated with more informal conversations during walks with residents living along the line. These conversations were essential to understanding how rail preservation agendas, ecological management, and transitional urbanism coexist and occasionally pull the former rail spaces toward different futures. In Queens, interviews with Project Eden and QueensLink clarified the tensions between current meso-scale uses and projected futures. Collectively, these findings illustrate how diverse stakeholders translate site potential into competing urban imaginaries – whether as mobility assets, ecological resources, or

heritage landmarks.

These field materials are analyzed and interpreted in the context of existing research on the three sites, and in light of the broader theoretical work of urbanism scholars conceptualizing abandoned urban spaces more generally.

## A BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE THREE RAILWAY CORRIDORS

The following sub-sections present a brief historical background for each of the three rail corridors, situating its current condition within a longer trajectory of construction, decline, and partial re-use.

### The Beirut-Bekaa Line

Built in the late nineteenth century under the Ottoman Empire, the Beirut-Damascus railway was inaugurated in August 1895, linking Beirut to the Syrian city of Damascus via the Bekaa (Elefériadès 1944). Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the railway served as a strategic transport corridor for both passengers and goods. During the French mandate on Lebanon (1920-1943), a coastal extension was implemented to link Beirut to the north and the south. After Lebanese independence in 1943, management of the railway shifted to Lebanese public entities — Chemin de fer de l'État Libanais (CEL), then the Office des chemins de fer et du transport en commun (OCFTC) — but state disinvestment and competition from road transport precipitated a long decline (Boutros 2014). The civil war (1975-1990) caused severe damage and interruptions. By the late 1970s, passenger service had ceased, and the last regular freight service (cement from Chekka to Beirut) stopped in 1997 (Boutros 2014). Today, the network survives as a suspended, materially present remnant. The OCFTC and the Ministry of Public Works and Transport remain formal custodians, while NGOs such as Train Train, international organizations, local associations, residents, artists and

informal occupants all advance different forms of living in the space or projecting its future.

### The Petite Ceinture

The Petite Ceinture railway is a 32-kilometer loop around Paris that was completed in 1867, enabling a full rail circuit around the capital. Initially designed for freight circulation between major Parisian stations, it was later opened to passenger service (Carrière 2017). Despite a brief period of success, passenger operations ceased in 1934 following the expansion of the Paris metro network, after which the line reverted exclusively to freight use.

Freight traffic gradually declined during the twentieth century and disappeared by the 1990s. The infrastructure was subsequently left inactive, and vegetation progressively overgrew on the tracks and embankments. This ecological transformation marked a new phase in the life of the line, as portions of the corridor evolved into informal green spaces embedded within dense urban fabric.

Following this decline and partial transformation, debates regarding the future of the Petite Ceinture intensified from the 2000s, leading to framework agreements signed between the city of Paris and the *Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer* (SNCF) — specifically Réseau Ferré de France in 2006, later SNCF Réseau in 2015 —, the custodian of the railway. These protocols acknowledge the line's potential for various uses, from ecological corridors and linear parks to social and cultural spaces. While initially intended to preserve the possibility of future transport use (reversibility), they have facilitated the progressive opening of sections for public access, such as promenades and community gardens. A significant move toward opening several sections of the Petite Ceinture took place in 2016 when the city of Paris allocated a budget for participatory workshops along the line. It led to the reopening of various sections from 2017 onward as accessible green spaces for promenade, and

transformed sites of former stations (Ville de Paris 2017). Consequently, the Petite Ceinture operates today as a partially reopened circular corridor, embodying a complex interplay of heritage preservation, biodiversity attention, participatory initiatives, and hidden informal practices.

### The Rockaway Beach Branch

The Rockaway Beach Branch (RBB) of the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) operated from the 1880s until 1962 (George 1993). The line connected the LIRR mainline at Rego Park in central Queens to the Rockaway Peninsula, later extending toward the Far Rockaways. Initially serving both local and regional mobility needs, the branch experienced gradual decline due to competition from subway expansion and automobile travel that ultimately led to its closure in 1962 (George 1993). Following its shutdown, the corridor became increasingly overgrown and structurally degraded. Over the decades, multiple proposals have sought to reactivate the line, including transit plans linking John F. Kennedy Airport to Manhattan (Bethel 2015). Notably, these proposals often bypassed intermediate Queens neighborhoods, reinforcing local concerns about infrastructural exclusion.

In the early 2010s, community-led initiatives began advancing alternative futures for the corridor. These included proposals for linear park conversion by groups like QueensWay, and advocacy for local rail service restoration within Queens by QueensLink (Lehikoinen 2014; Vanshnookenraggen 2016; Duggan 2022). Since then, the Rockaway Beach Branch has remained the subject of ongoing debate regarding its long-term role within the metropolitan system. Today, it remains a contested linear space shaped by competing proposals, community initiatives, and unresolved questions about its role within the urban fabric.

The unique historical trajectory of each of these lines is inextricably linked to its social, political, and economic fate. Yet within each,

recognizable patterns also appear, particularly with respect to multi-scalar appropriation and projected uses.

## EMPIRICAL CONFIGURATIONS ALONG MICRO, MESO, AND MACRO SCALES

Despite their functional obsolescence, these infrastructures continue to shape their respective territories through their physical presence and morphology, their current control structures (such as fences, signs, etc.), and the vestiges of the former transport network (Qviström 2012). These interact with the individual and organizational actors on the line to form a socio-material assemblage (Latour 2005; Anderson, McFarlane 2011) that requires attention to multiple scales

and temporalities. To capture this complexity, this article adopts an empirical analysis structured around three different scales: micro, meso and macro.

### Micro Analogs

At the micro scale, informal reappropriation by individuals — trespassers and adjacent residents — is examined. Here, attention is directed toward situated and often subtle acts of appropriation. These are small-scale gestures that signal forms of presence, traces of care, or negotiations that illustrate what de Certeau (1984) describes as tactical practices: opportunistic actions within spaces structured by more powerful systems.

In Beirut, micro appropriations emerge along a 1-kilometer segment of the former Beirut-Bekaa line between Armenia Street and Independence Street, to Bani Kahfan and St Vartan streets (Fig.1).

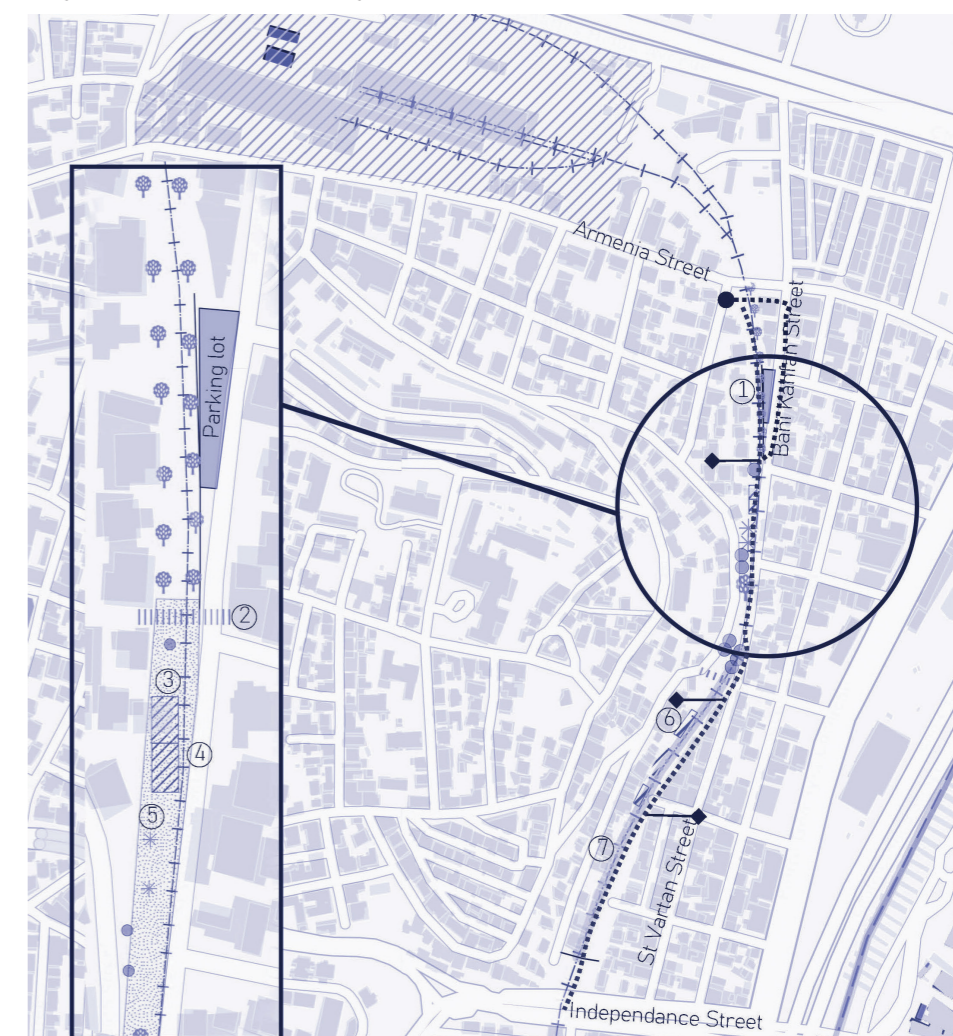


Fig.1 – Cartography of the situations, practices and access observed on the 1km stretch in Beirut on the abandoned railway. Map base extracted from ArcGIS, by the author.



Fig.2 – Examples of resident-led appropriations along the railway corridor:

(1) Section maintained by a private stakeholder, who planted trees and regularly clears the tracks. (2) Informal access to the railway via makeshift steps. (3) Spontaneous arrangement of chairs by residents (November 2021). (4) Informal installation of chairs and a table by residents (December 2021). (5) DIY bamboo fence enclosing a garden along the railway; the structure was observed during all site visits (August 2024). (6) Small protective structure for flowers cultivated by nearby residents; present throughout all visits (June 2024). (7) Tracks partially covered with base course material, with children observed playing on multiple occasions (November 2021). Photos by the author.

This portion, reached by a discreet set of stairs hidden next to a parking lot, is initially marked by recently planted shrubs and trees, maintained by a local resident and businessman who has taken over the upkeep of a 200-meter stretch of this track (Fig.2). Nearby, a 50-square-meter vegetable garden beside the rails has been planted and fenced off to mark that it belongs to the house.

Further along, chairs and other pieces of furniture sit directly on the rails, with the *occasional argileh* (hookah or water pipe) signaling a space of sociability at the thresholds of the dwellings. Several private electric generators are set directly on the tracks or just beside them. Further still, the rails disappear under fine gravel, transforming this segment into a linear parking area. In the final portion, it is common to see children actively

playing on the former right-of-way, and residents' plants and flowers grow on retaining walls protected by improvised bamboo mesh. The corridor here acts as a longitudinal inner courtyard, served by several staircases directly connecting the buildings to the railway platform. Overall, it is striking how the tracks have been absorbed into the everyday life of the neighborhood. These appropriations remain modest but have persisted throughout my field temporality: each time I returned to the site, they were still there.

In Paris, micro-appropriations on the Petite Ceinture unfold both on sections opened by the City and on officially closed segments. I was able to walk all of the opened sections of the entire Petite Ceinture, but the closed sections — which are legally prohibited from access — were easier to access in the 19<sup>th</sup>

arrondissement. Because of the presence of several informal entry points, it was easier to reach them and to walk them repeatedly, allowing me to understand their evolution across time. Opened segments around La gare/le Gore (Fig.3) are punctuated by chairs, seats and freely installed furniture. These uses add to the City's planned and standardized fittings (wooden benches, staircases, platforms), which homogenize the architectural language of the opened segments. Here, the rails function simultaneously as heritage, vintage decor, support for associative installations, and stages for everyday uses that exceed the script of the linear promenade.

More precarious forms of occupation are revealed at the micro scale on closed segments in the 19<sup>th</sup> arrondissement (Fig.4). On any given day, several

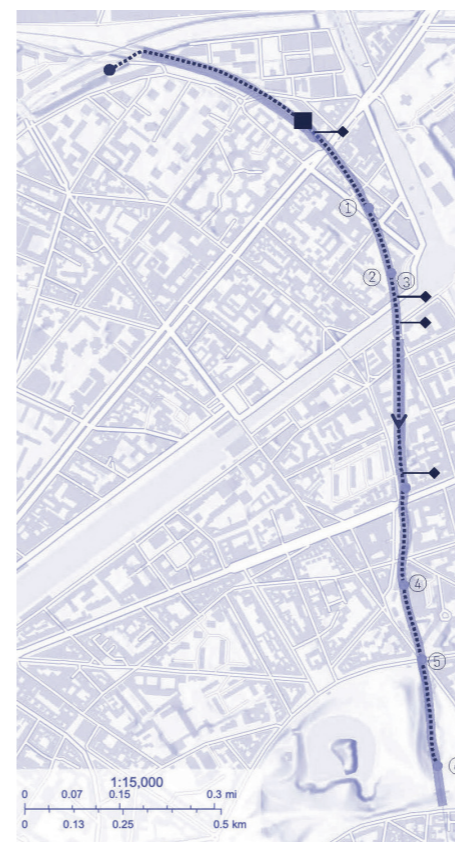


Fig.3 – Map of the repeated walks and informal access points on the Petite Ceinture in the 19<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. Map base extracted from ArcGIS, by the author.



Fig.4 - Traces of temporary habitation and informal occupation along the railway corridor: (1) Remains of objects indicating a long-term installation (March 2024). (2) DIY tent observed during all site visits (March 2024). (3) Concentration of objects suggesting habitation above or beneath them; encountered on two occasions in 2024 (March 2024). (4) All sorts of objects and informal habitat encountered on all site visits between 2021 and 2024 (March 2024). (5) Tents observed on two occasions in 2021 and early 2022; no longer present during site visits in 2024. (6) Open gate at a tunnel entrance, indicating possible appropriation within the tunnel (March 2024). Photos by the author.

bivouacs can be seen in the deep cutting beneath rue de Crimée in the Buttes-Chaumont Park, accompanied by the accumulated belongings of the bivouac makers. Further east, several shelters can be found installed on the infrastructure, hidden in plain sight. These makeshift shelters testify to a durable presence in an officially prohibited space. They are embedded in a landscape of discreet access points and repeated crossings, such as breaches in fences, low barriers easily stepped over, and other unofficial entry points clearly used by residents. Over the course of many walks, bivouacs appear and disappear in different places, while a few persist, and in some cases extend their footprint. These micro configurations signal a constant tension between closed sections and everyday uses. They coexist with formalized developments while introducing discreet deviations from the institutional scenography.

By contrast, in Queens, micro-scale traces are sparse (Fig.5).



Fig.5 – Retracing two walks taken in 2023 on the RBB in Queens and points of informal access to the railway. Base map extracted from ArcGIS, by the author.

Narrow footpaths and occasional seating indicate some residential use, while dense vegetation limits access for most of the space, making walking impractical (Fig.6, 7). At this scale, the corridor presents limited traces of use, raising questions about the conditions that discourage more present forms of individual reappropriation.

From each of these sites, the traces of micro-level appropriation simply register use and presence by various actors, rather than having a transformative effect. All of these gestures are reversible and low risk, and rely on limited, localized access to the space. They exemplify partial stabilization and temporary uses which do not foreclose the future possibility of other functions. Notably, almost none of these uses is formally permitted.

These observations align with interview data of residents along the tracks, who consistently frame their use of the space as provisional and opportunistic. None of these residents exerts a legal claim to the space – they merely use it for as long as they are allowed to do so.

These micro-appropriations can also be read as acts of care, since they sustain and make livable a shared urban environment, which fits broader scholarship on

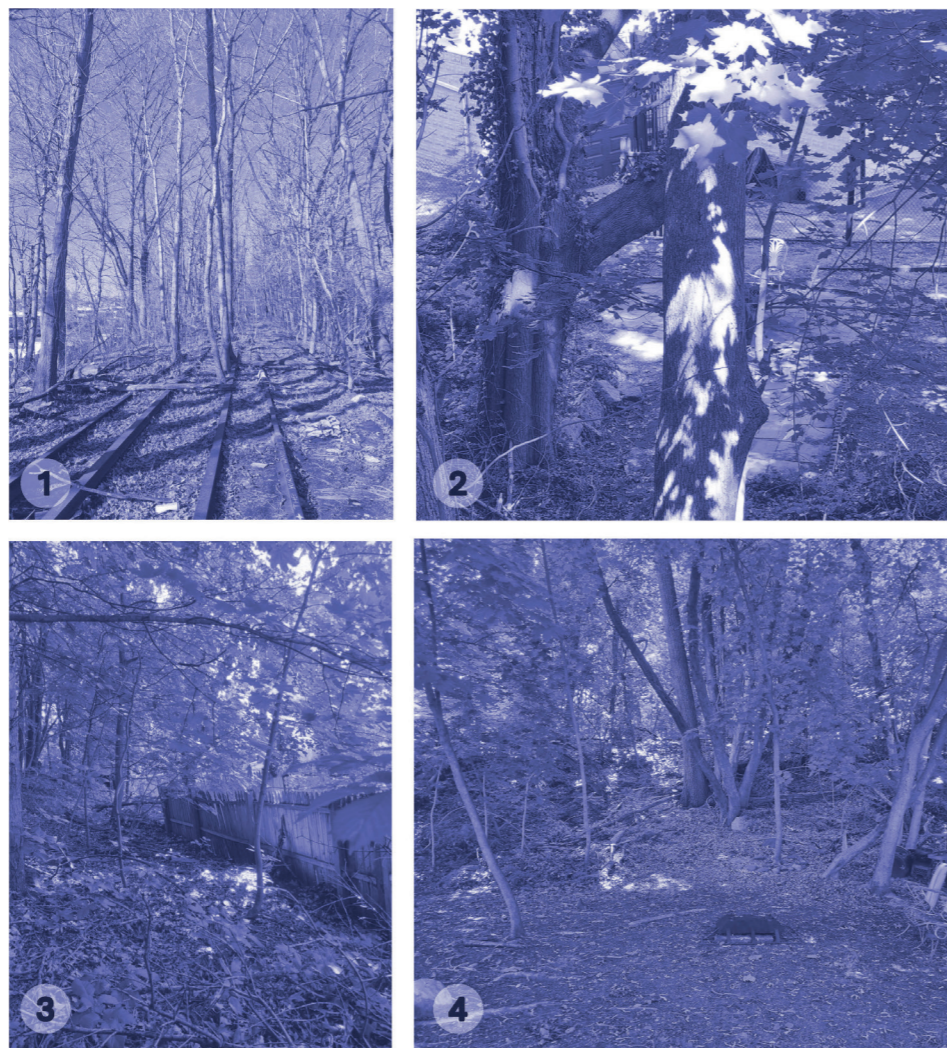


Fig.6 – Weak signals and traces of informal passage and appropriation along a section of the abandoned railway in Queens: (1) Discarded waste on the tracks (February 2023). (2) Chairs and a table arranged by users, with a small path carved into the railway embankment (May 2023). (3) Small bamboo fence constructed on the embankment (May 2023). (4) Informal installation of furniture and a grill on the embankment (May 2023). Photos by the author.



Fig.7 - Left to right: The plan of the Railway Trail in Baabda opened by Terre Liban Association. Stretches of the opened trail with the visible train tracks, and the old Baabda train station in the 2nd picture in the bottom row. Photos by the author, January 2026.

urban care as relational practices embedded in the city (Power, Williams 2020).

### Meso Analogs

At the meso scale, neighborhood and community uses become visible, where local initiatives, community gardens, or other forms of collective practices take place. This scale often reveals patterns of coordination or tension that extend beyond individual or neighborly acts. This is also the level at which informal community groups seek (and sometimes obtain) official sanction and permission for their projects.

On the Beirut-Bekaa line, meso-scale interventions become more visible outside of Beirut, more specifically in the Mount-Lebanon region. The Baabda line becomes a structured form of collective appropriation. A bottom-up initiative by the Terre Liban association mobilized residents and volunteers to clear accumulated waste, cut back dense vegetation and render segments of the former railway accessible for public use. They called it *Darb el Sekkeh* (literally, The Railway Path), and it connects the city of Baabda to its adjacent forest through the railway corridor (Fig.7). Portions of the line were reopened as a promenade,

accompanied by organized walks and public events.

The corridor becomes a shared ground temporarily stabilized through coordinated effort. Although initially this action started as an informal initiative, they had to seek official authorization to expand its scale. It eventually received approval from the OCFTC and was commended as a good way to preserve the space for future railway development. The initiative illustrates how initially bottom-up practices help legitimize unsanctioned uses, pushing them into mainstream urban discourse without fully transitioning into formal redevelopment.

At the same meso scale, however, other forms of occupation complicate the reading of collective appropriation. Along some segments of the network, the OCFTC has authorized quasi-formal “leases” of railway land to private actors for storage, workshops, parking, or small-scale commercial activities. These uses also stabilize portions of the corridor through maintenance, enclosure, and routine presence, operating at the meso-level to structure access and reshape adjacent urban relations. Yet their logics differ from community-led initiatives such as the Baabda trail. They are driven

primarily by individual or corporate incentives rather than community interventions. The tension between these modalities became an explicit controversy in Tripoli, in 2024 when bottom-up community groups successfully opposed one of these private leases that sought to use the rail space as a truck parking lot. Here, the meso scale appears not as a unified field of informal activation, but as a site of negotiation and conflict over who is entitled to appropriate, maintain, and define the future of railway land.

In Paris, meso-scale gestures emerged in the early 2000s through a neighborhood community garden. The Jardin des Ruisseaux was the first community garden developed on the embankments of the Petite Ceinture in the 18th arrondissement (Fig.8). It began with residents' simple determination to clear out the space that had become a repository for rubbish, and to care for it as a cultivation garden. It has since been formally recognized and approved by the city and still exists today.

Notably, the garden opened in 1998, six years before it was officially sanctioned by the joint agreement of the Paris municipality and the SNCF. Since then, the Petite Ceinture has been the subject of numerous community-led initiatives,



Fig.8 - Jardin des Ruisseaux on the Petite Ceinture in the 18th arrondissement. Photos taken by the author, July 2022.

community farms, and restaurants.

These developments started as collective, ground-up interventions, and were then absorbed into formal municipal frameworks as the city began requiring approvals. This transition is common at the meso scale: as ground-up interventions gain visibility and durability, they become subject to more formal procedures. These procedures also aim for a (municipally-led) participatory process, but are constrained by limited timelines, predefined funding mechanisms, and complex administrative requirements. This dynamic is visible in several reopened sections of the Petite Ceinture in the 15<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissements, where the city authorized selected collectives to employ participatory workshops to design future open sections. Although these initiatives mobilized residents and introduced new forms of placemaking, the time-bound nature of the process meant that several objectives set by those collectives were not met in the end.

Despite these constraints, other informal, temporary appropriations

still occur at the meso level. Collective walks, guided tours and organized events periodically reactivate segments of the rail corridor, without permanently determining their function. They act as interpretive practices highlighting competing understandings of the site, and emphasizing the interplay between institutional intentions and diverse public engagements. For example, immersive sound walks, guided heritage tours, botanical walks, and biodiversity-focused excursions have allowed interested individuals to explore the potential of the line, and invested associations to promote their vision of it.

In Queens, Project Eden exemplifies a meso-scale transformation of a disused railway segment into a formalized and actively managed community space (Fig.9). Originating 25 years ago on an abandoned stretch of former rail line, the site was initially a dumping ground for garbage and tires, described by participants as a “nothing hill of weeds”. Through significant community effort, volunteers cleared the site,

regraded the soil, and established garden plots, relocating them at one point to optimize sun exposure. This segment of the former line is now an official part of the NYC Parks Department, one of over 500 such community gardens across the city.

The garden operates with 18 dedicated gardeners, and new volunteers must complete 30 hours of labor before receiving a key and access to a plot, demonstrating a structured, yet community-driven, governance model for this specific segment. Leadership includes individuals with professional backgrounds, such as an architectural designer for the Parks Department, integrating local expertise with city-level understanding. The garden's interface with the broader urban context is shaped by its funding from local businesses, personal contributions, and city grants, as well as essential city provisions like compost and, soon, a direct water spot, replacing the laborious use of a distant fire hydrant. However, the garden's position as a segment of a former rail line also makes it a site of contention. The

community opposes a proposed rail restoration project to the Rockaways, citing concerns about noise, cost, and the destruction of their established green space and community hub. These external pressures highlight the meso-scale struggles over the future of linear infrastructure, where a thriving, locally governed segment faces the threat of reintegration into a larger infrastructure plan. The community's resistance underscores their view of this segment as a vital, productive ecosystem rather than a dormant piece of railway awaiting its original function.

The foregoing examples demonstrate the movement visible at the meso scale: practices evolve from individual use, to collective organization, to more formalized legitimacy. The result is a more stabilized form of use, which is still dependent on permissions and funding that could disappear. Moreover, these uses notably still do not completely foreclose competing uses. At the meso-level, actors must negotiate both with authorities, and with micro-level actors to maintain their configuration of the space.

Interviews with representatives of associations promoting meso-level interventions have emphasized both their tenuous legal status, and their need for constant physical presence to maintain their use of these spaces. Conversely, such actors are required by authorities (SNCF, OCFTC) to demonstrate that their interventions are entirely reversible, and will not hinder any potential use of the corridor for future rail transport.

### Macro Analogs

At the macro scale, infrastructure is considered in its entirety, as a continuous territorial linear figure traversing the city or, in the Lebanese case, connecting regions at a national scale. This scale makes visible grander visions of linear parks, revitalized railroads, or transport heritage projects, where the groups involved are united by a shared macro-level vision, rather than by local community. Macro-scale projections are

framed through future use, not present use: a strategic surface onto which actors inscribe plans, scenarios, and policy agendas. In this configuration, micro and meso-scale practices can be mobilized discursively to substantiate these larger visions. They are often cited as proof of demand, as evidence of latent public interest, or as a demonstration of feasibility. Practices that emerged locally are thus reinterpreted within broader narratives, serving to legitimize the macro-scale projections about what the railway could or should become.

In Lebanon, the NGO Train Train has played a central role in reinscribing the national railway network within public and political discourse. Through designed national masterplans, feasibility proposals, exhibitions and media interventions, they advance a specific projection for the future of the infrastructure, in response to the proliferation of diverse and fragmented proposals advanced over the years by international institutions. They defend and militate for revived public transport on the old railway right of way, and advocate for Lebanon's transport future by raising awareness of its railway's history. The railway is here framed as a latent national system whose future revival as a transport corridor must be coherently articulated and actively defended.

A similar dynamic appears in Paris, where two competing macro-scale projections exist. The Association pour la Sauvegarde de la Petite Ceinture et de son Réseau Ferré (ASPCRF) have, for more than three decades, advocated for the preservation of the Petite Ceinture as a continuous railway infrastructure with potential for transport reactivation. Through technical documentation, public statements and sustained dialogue with elected officials they have maintained a consistent presence in public debates on the future of the railway. While they have promoted awareness of rail heritage and recreational train rides on older stock, their primary objective is to preserve the infrastructural integrity of the line against irreversible

micro and meso projects, thereby ensuring the continued possibility of revived rail service. By contrast, the Promeneurs de la Petite Ceinture contribute to consolidating a macro imaginary centered on promenade continuity. Their motto is, the Petite Ceinture is “the biggest park in Paris” and must be all open for the promenade. By organizing walks such as “le grand tour de la petite ceinture à pied” an urban hike that circles around the petite ceinture, and peaceful acts of activism, they reinforce the perception of the railway as a continuous park for the benefit of the public.

The logic of competing futures also structures the debate in Queens, where macro-scale projection is organized around two alternatives spearheaded by two community-led associations. Queenslink advocates for the reactivation of the corridor as neighborhood transit light rail, positioning the line as a critical mobility infrastructure within the New York metropolitan system and proposing the embankments as open parks that can co-exist with rail service. Conversely, Queensway promotes its transformation into a linear park inspired by the famous High Line model in Manhattan. Each mobilizes studies, visualizations, public meetings, and political alignments to stabilize its preferred future. The corridor thus becomes the object of competing macro imaginaries. One oriented toward transportation and the other towards linear park development.

In each of these cases, macro-scale projections view the corridor as a continuous system rather than a series of local segments, and with a permanent future use, rather than a series of temporary uses. Existing practices are coopted and translated as evidence for or against each particular projection, selectively incorporating micro and meso uses in support of their vision. Macro-level actors maneuver to maintain their projections and foreclose competing visions; while this maneuvering is ongoing, the line remains in a condition of active suspension, where competing futures coexist.



Fig.9 - Project Eden, the community garden on the embankment of the RBB abandoned line in Queens, New York; Photos by the author, May 2023.

Interview data strongly support this interpretation of macro-level actors. Associations in Paris and Beirut position themselves as arbiters of micro and meso level uses of the line, always viewing legitimacy through the lens of their own envisioned future. The head of Train Train, for example, characterized private use of the railway for truck parking as a “land grab,” while extolling heritage-focused efforts to use the line as a walking trail.

Across these three contexts, association-led initiatives project the abandoned railway into structured futures. At this scale, the infrastructure is less a site of current practice than a strategic asset whose meaning and potential are continuously negotiated through organized collective action.

## ACTIVE SUSPENSION AND MULTI-SCALAR NEGOTIATION

Across the three cases, abandoned urban rail spaces act as multi-scalar fields of negotiation where different approaches to use and governance compete and overlap, without stabilizing into a single predominant form. What emerges is a condition of prolonged, active suspension, where indeterminacy allows multiple futures to coexist. In this state, different temporalities, access conditions, legal statuses, and degrees of reversibility appear and operate at each scale.

The actors who approach these spaces at different scales are constantly renegotiating the identity and use of the space. From temporary trespassers to powerful associations, their understanding of the space is expressed in their actions, maintenance, occupation, or advocacy. These gestures constantly ask and answer the same question: what is this space for? The question is answered differently at each scale, with bivouacs and improvised paths at the micro level, neighborhood gardens and collective cleanups at the meso level, and master plans

and infrastructure proposals at the macro level. Yet, the condition of active suspension continues as long as no single answer predominates.

Active suspension represents a post-operational condition for railways: they have lost their transport function, but their linear continuity, material remains, and legal status continue to organize access, interventions, and projections. While in active suspension, uses only stabilize partially, and most interventions remain reversible, contested, and limited, such that other possibilities are not foreclosed.

Spaces in active suspension are not simply static, awaiting the final decision that will determine their fate, and their users are not simply interlopers who are tolerated until that decision is made. Rather, the actors, the spaces, and the infrastructure exist in a shifting set of associations (an inchoate network), that continuously reassembles and redefines the space, and to some extent, the actors (Latour 2005). As Brian Larkin (2013) points out, infrastructures “are things and also the relation between things,” inextricable from “the social relations to which they give rise” (p.329, 332). When that infrastructure falls into disuse, its former ordering of relations is suspended, and replaced by a more chaotic process of relations in flux.

At the micro scale, practices observed are highly reversible. They rarely pose a structural threat to the corridor’s long-term optionality. They can be seen as fragile, but they maintain presence and activity across the three contexts and contribute to the active suspension of the railway.

At the meso scale, these rail corridors occupy a critical middle position. Here, collective initiatives gain partial stability through organization, negotiated access, and sometimes temporary access. These initiatives often shift from informal, bottom-up practices of community members, towards more formal integration into urban planning and policy. These initiatives usually unfold over several years, creating

more durable material and social arrangements than those on the micro scale. Questions of leases, permits, funding, and compliance emerge.

At the macro scale, the situation is almost the reverse of the micro scale. Advocacy groups and NGOs promote long-term visions such as rail restoration or linear parks. They do not hold legal authority over the corridor, but they implicitly position themselves as arbiters of existing uses. They decide which micro and meso practices are valuable and which are expendable. Practices that align with their long-term plans may be highlighted as evidence; others may be dismissed as temporary, marginal, or incompatible. In this way, the macro actors not only project futures, but they also reframe the present practices in line with their goals and narrative.

Seen through this scalar lens, railway suspension is active and structured rather than empty. Different actors operate with different degrees of formality, some informally and without recognition, others through conditional or temporary authorization, and others through attempts to formalize long-term change. The corridors remain “unscripted grounds” not because they are undefined, but because multiple and competing scripts (projects, practices, and claims) unfold simultaneously across scales without consolidating into a single dominant trajectory.

## CONCLUSION

Across Beirut, Paris, and Queens, the railway persists as a material continuity that sustains both appropriations and projections. The tracks no longer carry trains, yet their linear imprint continues to structure territory, mobilize actors, and attract competing visions. This persistence enables the infrastructure to remain politically and socially operative long after its original function has ceased. Within this field of competing futures, multi-scalar analysis reveals a layered condition in which different forms of action coexist. This

became visible through a walking-based approach that followed the three corridors, revealing how micro traces, meso arrangements, and macro dynamics inhabit the same spatial structures. Everyday gestures, collective stewardship, and strategic projections do not replace or exclude one another; they overlap. The corridors remain accessible to informal and tactical practices, even as their ultimate future is negotiated more formally by institutional actors. They are interdependent regimes through which the abandoned infrastructure is continuously redefined. Micro and meso practices are often mobilized discursively at the macro scale as evidence of public demand or feasibility. Conversely, macro projections shape how local actors position themselves and interpret their practices. The railway thus functions as a scalar mediator, enabling circulation between everyday gestures and metropolitan or national imaginaries.

From this perspective, the notion of suspension becomes central. It is not a temporary pause before an inevitable transformation. It is a structurally productive condition. Understanding abandoned railways through this lens shifts the analytical focus. Rather than asking what these infrastructures will become, the question becomes how different actors attempt to stabilize their becoming. Reactivation is not a singular event imposed from the top down. It unfolds processually across scales where informal uses, collective arrangements, and strategic claims compete and intersect over a long period of time.

Abandoned railway infrastructures are not voids awaiting design intervention. They are already active socio-material assemblages in suspension. What may seem like indeterminacy is in fact a structured field of overlapping practices, claims, and projections that continuously redefine the infrastructure. Seen this way, suspension is not merely a delay before an imagined future, but as an active mode of urban persistence.

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