

## iPLACE

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**This paper documents a series of installations built by students around Beirut in response to the socio-political inconsistencies and presents a comprehensive explanation of the design process and outcomes. It reflects on the power of public interventions as urban catalytic tactics.**

Lebanon has been operating within a deterring security and political environment. Its weak infrastructure base, absence of long term planning, sectarianism, and political favoritism have pushed the country's socio-economic capacity to the very limit. As a result, Lebanon records the largest, in its region, of electricity generation and transmission shortages, and the highest of air and water pollution resulting from a critical threshold in waste accumulation and disposal. Lebanon also registers the highest ratio of refugees per capita (UNHCR). Topping it all off, a recent UNDP study showed that the overall headcount poverty within the Lebanese population reaches 28.5%, accounting for 1 million Lebanese.<sup>1</sup>

Today, as the youth are asked to partake in the Lebanese 5-years-late general elections, it is unclear how they will attain that sense of belonging to the city; hence Appropriation Studio 2018 befell. It took on board Beirut in its current conditions: Beirut's status quo as a *fait accompli*. Moving away from exercises in representation, we chose to take the risk, and move to the streets. We could not but notice that ever since the civil war (1975-1990), Beirut's survival was only made possible through its informalities. As dwellers devised their own tactics of making do [*faire avec*], we chose to join their game, and instrumentalize their tactics. Based on Michel de Certeau<sup>2</sup>, we revisited these informal tactics to empower them as weapons of the powerless.

Our design studio, Appropriation 2018, culminates with 1:1 built installations in the city within the discourse of a participatory approach. We aim to give way to a new reflection of the city's normal. As people come to the idea of realization through use, our installations are acupuncture in the city examining it through the scopes of the mundane and the restrained.

The aim of our installations is not to find a solution to the identified problems, but rather for us, as players in the city, to create the conditions under which questions can be asked and new formulations on the status of the city can be triggered.

The built installations, with a short life span, reveal an implicit liaison between architecture and a hushed public life that

can alter the seemingly inevitable privatization of Beirut. By their ephemeral nature, their produced dynamics effectively amount to a socio-political act. They could last, decay or gradually fade the more they become exhausted by the city. They act as tool to awaken the citizens' silent rights that have long been numbed.

Key words: *Fait accompli*, Risk taking, here and now, acupuncture, temporality, Ripple effect, City Players, Informalities, Ephemeral, Tactics.

### INTRODUCTION

Beirut is a city of juxtapositions and contrasted sceneries in which the interplay of historic memory and vivid reality offer a lens through which one could scrutinize a multi layered and ruptured city. In such a context of collocated grounds, history is complicated with distorted memory; producing a reality of fragments, the stitching of which becomes the only hope for survival.

Confronting a city that has long been operating within a deterring political environment is undoubtedly perplexing, specifically when the imprints of its civil war are still imposingly tangible. The inefficient governmental structure has been undeniably present as it continues to fail in providing the citizens' basic needs. As a result, Lebanon's weak infrastructure base, absence of long term planning, sectarianism, and political favoritism places the country's socio-economic status at a diminished and limited capacity.

In his, *Practices of Everyday Life*, De Certeau introduces a vital distinction between space and time in relation to practices within the city. He introduces the tactic as an informal intervention on the cityscape. A tactic is a daily activity that depends on time to challenge the traditional spatial understanding of a city and expand on it. The layering of a city's space and time becomes necessary in, not only understanding the complexities of the city but also in finding ways to respond to it spatially and historically.<sup>3</sup>

Amid this neurotic patchwork of Beirut's chaos, we couldn't but think of ways to instrumentalize design as a speculative and projective way to nudge the citizens' rights not through introspective representation but instead, through 'on-the-ground' direct actions. In that sense, we view architecture as no less than a civic duty. It's a discipline of investigation where the city serves as an exploration into the built form as



Figure 1: 'Appropriation 2018' studio poster.

a way to demonstrate the city's potential and push towards civic engagement.

*"The problem today in architecture and other things is that representativeness is the dominating question, instead of the desire to create, to see [and] feel a surrounding atmosphere, as if someone touched you, leaving something with you"*<sup>4</sup>

In response to Beirut's post-war political situation, I established my practice, as a young architect, to resist political constraints. I found in the city the place to reclaim my right as a citizen and focus on the daily urban contentions lived by every city dweller. Thus, since 1997 my research aimed to question the ability of objects and places to become a means of political expression in Beirut. It focused on creating simple gestures and punctual interventions that trigger debates and question socio-political measures. These quests turned into installation works puncturing the city and grabbing people's attention locally and internationally.

Our design studio, Appropriation 2018, \* co-taught by Pascal Hashem and myself, was launched as a response to the city's current status-quo; 2018 marked the year of the Lebanese long-overdue parliamentary elections. This 2018 studio falls under the umbrella of BePublic, the title of the series of design studios, established in 2012, and offered during the spring semester at the ARD department at AUB<sup>5</sup>. These studios tend to question, critique and negotiate the relationship between the human and urban scales in the constantly shifting city of Beirut. Picking up on the *here and now* or the day

to day events of the city, we begin to draw the image of the city in both space and time. This being said, the investigation of the city is left as an exploration into a built form serving as a demonstration of the know-how of a certain community and people.

This same question and same objects of research can be pursued by both architects and artists. When addressed by architects, these civic questions revive a new understanding of architecture, one that is less classical and more responsive to one's direct environment. Here, shifting the focus away from questions on aesthetics and rather towards registers of relevance and evaluation is highly significant to achieve the purpose of reconnection with the political project of architecture.<sup>6</sup> This relationship was highlighted in Claire Bishop's book *Relational Aesthetic* where Bishop quests the "creative rewards of participation as a politicized working process"<sup>7</sup>. This hunt of creative rewards is pertinent to architecture in many ways; it asserts the shift from a political-aesthetic judgment that usually enforces the binary of the architect at one end and the user at another, and suggests instead a more inclusive approach that values creative achievement as an interaction of everyday users and elements whereby achievement echoes the political qualities of an architectural project.

By analyzing the city through its transient encounters, one registers a specific record of envisioning every other possible way to create a Public Beirut again. The city, together with our work, creates a public platform of investigation, imagination and intervention.

#### WHY PUBLIC INSTALLATION?

Installation works that address the city issues are human-scale architectural bodies that possess a short life span. They straddle between happenings and architecture. By their very ephemeral nature, they create a rippling effect that can last or simply fade. These interventions aim to seek, to host, to challenge, to improve, to engage and to question the city, reacting to the event that is taking place here and now. It is a pedagogical tool both for the city dwellers and for the designer, underlining the importance of the subtle and the mundane. As they seek to interject into the moments of the everyday rather than aiming for the monumental, they are able to connect to the user at an accessible and familiar interface.

#### OUTCOMES

Serving the community, especially at an urban level is becoming a necessity in a city like Beirut. Students need to be more involved and aware of their rights as citizens. The outreach at a civic level grounds the students to the city while highlighting the impact their work could have upon it.

In such projects students acquire hands-on experience while addressing everyday issues. They react to the needs

of people, understanding the benefits, strengths, and limitations of design. Students are thus heavily immersed within their city and engaged with its socio-political processes. With this, a vital dialogue between professionals and city dwellers emerges for better serving the community. A 1:1 construction gives each student a sense of maturity, while being respectful to others and understanding the importance of collaborative work.

The 'Appropriation 2018' studio work culminated with seven different built installations at four different sites: Corniche Ain El Mraissé (next to St Georges Hotel), Karm el Zeitoun, Gemayzeh/ Mar Michael and Jeanne D'Arc Street (Hamra area). These areas were chosen by the students as areas of a restricted public profile that restrains the youth from belonging or expression. The sites were of a diverse nature and presented different contexts and patterns of mundanity, which diversified the processes and design outcomes in the 4 addressed sites.

#### METHODOLOGY

Our tactic crystallizes in engaging with the city in its current conditions, as a found fabric of a city trying to heal. We chose to approach Beirut's reality positively and use the socio-economic and even spatial gaps created within it as potential sites of intervention.

*"It is in this state of 'contestatory becoming' in which space always is — in its articulations, flows and heterogeneities that never cease to frustrate professional architects and planners (Lefebvre, 2003) while delighting those who believe in the potential of city spaces and the capabilities of city dwellers — that I believe we should be looking for the spaces of hope; not in practices of dominant political parties."*<sup>8</sup>

When first launching the studio, students were asked to identify phenomena of informalities in the city. In other words, they were asked to assess the mundane elements around them past the banality of everyday. This not only obliged them to record signs of appropriation in the city, but also think of ways to rethink the banality of these signs with the purpose of reclaiming what they identified as lost. After an observation of the city in its overwhelming geography and socio-economic patterns, the first step within the studio is to adopt and inhabit a playful state of mind in which play is the attitude, the ready-made is the object of this play, and the model is the tool to think and reconnect. The object is 'objectified' and looked at as an independent entity that triggers the playfulness of the creative process. Through a series of models, the object is subjected to various interventions and reinterpretations. The moment those actions mature to develop an understanding of the urban context, the act of playing and model-making leaves the boundaries of the classroom and begins to take on the street.

This would automatically shift the students' thoughts on how to imagine creative public opportunities by observing found occurrences, and how to introduce the unexpected to the daily pattern of a city like Beirut. In other words, this allows for the city that was once recognized as a whole to be thought through redefined inscrutable relationships. These relationships drift from a one-sided pattern in which man overpowers nature or socio-political conditions to produce dialogue based relationships.

The studio took place during the 2018 parliamentary elections in Beirut. During that period, the government had increased security measures in anticipation of possible clashes. Students were implementing their works under such circumstances around several politically affiliated neighborhoods. To avoid any questioning or rejections, students had to explain and convince the community with the purpose and intentions of their projects; which were, mostly, received positively. The people's enthusiasm was reflected in their assistance during the building process, and later on in their participation and interaction with installation pieces. For some projects, the support expanded to financial contributions; as the projects were built with public funds.

In addition to gaining people's trust, students had to go through all the legal processes and conduct proper discussions with the municipality and the internal defense forces/police to install their works and ensure public safety. Despite all the efforts and explanations, many proposals were met with resistance, and some were completely banned or shutdown; forcing the students to figure out solutions to persistently negotiate their right to intervene in the city. In a certain instance, the process necessitated a 24-hour follow up on my behalf and negotiations with both the police and the municipality to guarantee the possibility of the installation work.

#### 'COME AND PLAY'<sup>9</sup>

The students who designed the installation, 'Come and Play' viewed Beirut through the lens of defiance and resistance. They responded by using 'objects and appropriating them, they believe that what they're left with is appropriating the city in order to survive it. This is how they employed the representative objects of the city to become their survival kit.

The site choice of this group was in itself an act of resistance. In that site stood a building that represented the youth's position of survival in Beirut. The building dated back to 1930 as one of Lebanon's first major factories and reportedly the oldest brewery in the Middle East. The Grande Brasserie du Levant also known as the Laziza factory loomed over the very dense working class neighborhood of Mar Mikhael for years. It stood up against the violence of the civil war and was eventually forced to close towards the very end of it, in 1990, after being hit with stray shells. Having remained unused and



Figure 2: One of 'Come and Play' Performance Installation. Using their right to park in public spaces, the students bought park meter tickets and tagged themselves in reaction to the privatized Valet parking service.

unpreserved for decades, it was recently demolished with the plan of turning it into a luxury apartment project. Its demolition came at a time when the debate over preservation of Beirut's distinct urban fabric was heavy with questions asked about long term gentrification processes and effects. The only part that still persistently stood was a small house, which was previously contained by the factory, and used to house the mayor's office. It is the only relic.

Their final installation 'Come and Play' introduced Beirut from within the Service, the city's strongest public element. The service is a very common form of transport in Beirut, especially with daily commuters. Services are regular taxis operating as shared taxis. It is a typical element of the city whereby passengers come from different places and share the same experience.

'Come and Play' is a performative ride that employs a service car to transport the installation audience travelling along the road stretch of Gemayzeh – Mar Michael. Along the route, a set of physical interventions and performances were designed to raise awareness about several cultural and environmental challenges that the city is compulsorily facing nowadays. Groups of four passengers at a time were ushered into a service taxi, which stopped at 9 emblematic places along that road stretch.

Concluding this service ride, the final stop was chosen to be around the small house which now stands at the site of the demolished Laziza brewery. Come and Play assigned this house as the culmination of all the former stops. While flyers were distributed before each stop by the taxi driver to the riders, here the students used the blinds of the relic house to convey their shared position in relation to the city explaining many of the previous stops and public statements. 'Come and Play' created an ironic scenario where the public element, the service, caved into the privatized valet service. As a reaction to their own action in relation to the valet parking, their performance revealed the paradox and anxiety of the

city's situation where resisting public elements were forced to comply with the privatization of Beirut's streets.

One of their earliest encounters was with the Valet parking companies of Beirut. These companies have forcibly and rigorously taken over parking spaces in the city, privatizing the majority of street parking spaces. Responding to that, students brought a mundane element of Beirut's narrative – the plastic chair – and placed it in parking spots with park meters. Students would pay for the park meter tickets, stick them on their arms and sit on the plastic chairs occupying one parking spot. When asked to move by Valet parking workers, they would refuse to do that claiming that it's a public opportunity and showing the workers the purchased tickets on their arms.

#### 'BETWEEN A THOUGHT & ANOTHER'<sup>10</sup>

From transiency to subtlety: A second approach to the studio is to start from and work through narrative – to stitch the stories gathered from the street into a singular moment. The installation 'Between a Thought & Another' was placed on a merchant street known as Jeanne D'Arc that is perpendicular to AUB and to Hamra Street. It was recently renovated by AUB.

After mapping that street, the students noticed that its current refurbishment had left some of the inhabitants with a sense of disconnection. So they went on asking its shop owners to describe what the street meant to them.

While the whole street had been going through a makeover, an entrance to a building and a hotel were kept unchanged, serving as a parking lot for small motorbikes. The students transformed the space by giving it a new meaning, allowing it to act again as the public space it once was with an aim for reconciliation: transforming it into a place that honors what Jeanne d'arc represents for all the shop owners.

To compensate for the lack of green space and benches, they designed a rotating platform, consisting of a long planter that



Figure 3: 'Between a Thought and Another' installation.

ends with a bench. On the floor, they inscribed and recorded the testimonies of local residents, expressing what Jeanne d'Arc Street meant for them before it was renovated and masked, engraving all their sayings onto a stainless steel sheet, the 9m planters that ended with a bench worked through a pendulum movement allowing visitors to sit and wheel themselves up and down revisiting Jeanne d'arc through the words of its people. Through their mapping, the students realized that the residents and shop-owners of Jeanne D'Arc needed an intervention that would reconcile their past and present. Hence, the idea of the installation's rotation highlights the relationships between public and private, past and present, giving a cyclical movement to the street's various dichotomies.

#### 'TAKE A BREATH'<sup>11</sup>

The installation 'Take a Breath' took a different approach towards site analysis and implementation. The installation took place in Karm el Zeitoun, which translates into 'olive grove'. A name that was appropriate to the area before the trees started to quickly disappear as the area got boldly urbanized.

It's an area of contested urban and informal hidden geographies. As a direct outcome of the wars that took place in this

region, several waves of displacement hit Karm el-Zeitoun, from the Armenian settlers in 1920 to the Syrian refugee crisis today. This re-identified the reality of Karm Zeitoun which now serves as a gathering space for the city workers and low income inhabitants, as described by Elias Khoury<sup>12</sup>. This makes Karm el Zeitoun a highly congested urban neighborhood with a diverse population of workers and tenants of different origins and cultural backgrounds.

Geographically, the area is located on an elevated hill with many slopes. Flat streets are linked through pedestrian stairs connecting the inner neighborhoods to one another. This spatially reads into an urban network of juxtaposed exclusions and inclusions.

Rich in its own informal appropriations and culture, the students chose the pedestrian streets and stairs of Karm el Zeitoun as sites of intervention due to their cultural significance and their unfamiliarity to outsiders.

The final outcome was a walking journey through the neighborhood, designed as a series of stops in 4 different pedestrian stairways in the neighborhood. This journey culminated with a specific water fountain that captured the essence of Karm el Zeitoun. It was devised conceptually as a gesture of ephemerality and physically as a diversion of existing resources. It represented the noble neighborly qualities of exchange and



Figure 4: On of Karm El Zeitoun Installations, a 13 m height basketball rim installed in a 1m alleyway between two buildings. The basketball installation can be seen from the highway coming to Beirut.

hospitality; qualities very specific to this area. Simple in its elements and subtle in its performance, the water fountain manifested itself as an inseparable part of a broader urban narrative.

The water fountain was a very rare element in Karm, found on a private terrace of one of the houses that is directly connected to a public pedestrian stairs in the area. The installation created a sustainable water system that made the fountain part of the public narrative of those stairs. This work positioned itself within the blurred public-private setting of the geographies of Karm el-Zeitoun. The water springs from the neighbor's water tank now poured into the fountain of the facing neighbor, reshaping the storyline of a neighborhood that has long survived its reality through informal apportion of the scarce resources allocated to it.

## CONCLUSION

The strength of the work is in its banality and that's different from familiarity, as banality flattens things. It is a status quo; a condition whose precise function is to remain unnoticed as the commonality of everyday practice makes its way. Appropriation 2018 explored Beirut's banality and turned it into a platform that could offer a certain leeway for this spatial game across the city to stimulate and provoke the city and its people. It is then when banality bridges the gap between the universal and the contextualized. As acts of banality cut through the particularities of a certain context to refer to universally understood practices, these universal practices modify, change and respond to very specific contexts.

Once these installations infiltrate the city through the banal, they don't only operate through spaces of contextualization and relevance but also produce universal positions and standards that strengthen their presence with influence that goes beyond the limited time and space of these banal acts.

## ENDNOTES

1. Poverty, Growth and Inequality in Lebanon", United Nations Development Programme (2017), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1468-2427.12114>.
2. Michel De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*: "I call a "tactic," on the other hand, a calculus which cannot count on a "proper" (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances. The "proper" is a victory of space over time. On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time-it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing." Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into opportunities."
3. Michel De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steve Rendall. (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1984) Chapter 3, p.29-43.
4. Mengual, Estelle Zhong, and Xavier Douroux, *Reclaiming Art, Reshaping Democracy: the New Patrons & Participatory Art*. (Paris: Les Presses Du Réel, 2017)
5. Appropriation 2018 Design Studio part of BePublic Lab, taught by Rana Haddad (founder) and Pascal Hachem at the Departement of Architecture and Design, at MSFEA, Maroun Semaan Faculty of Engineering and Architecture at the American University of Beirut.
6. Isabelle Doucet, *The Practice Turn in Architecture: Brussels after 1968*. (London: Routledge, 2015).
7. Claire Bishop, *Relational Aesthetics*. (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 1998).
8. Mona Fawaz, The Politics of Property in Planning: Hezbollah's Reconstruction of Haret Hreik (Beirut, Lebanon) as Case Study. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 2014, p.933, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1468-2427.12114>.
9. The projects were by Nicolas Abou Haidar, Soraya Hammoud, Nicol Yamin, ina akkaoui, Carl Yammine
10. The projects were done by Tima Rabbat, Mariya Zantout, Tala El Khatib, Jad Najm.
11. The projects were done by Mohamad Chami, Tala Salman, Taha Barazy, Andrea Chaanine.
12. Elias Khoury is a novelist who was born and lived in Achrafiye until 1975.