

Political Artifacts in Beirut

The story of Karm El-Zeitoun

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Abstract

While political ambitions are embedded into urban design and architecture through the commission and planning of capitals, cities, monuments and buildings that convert the built environment into a spectacle of authority, they can also be understood at the scale of the artifact, as being encoded into seemingly mundane objects by dwellers navigating the repercussions of the power constructs around them. These artifacts embed meaning and political aims that unravel a complex history of displacement, migration, war, genocide, and obscure local and regional politics. ‘Designed artifacts’ are understood here as the prefabricated objects whose functions, locations, or meanings have been altered or manipulated by dwellers to channel particular aspirations. They are existing objects whose primary designs furthered their

transformations into conduits of political ambitions. These objects trigger a representation of the city where covert negotiations of power and authority come to constitute the ordinary, where dwellers’ relationships with the spaces they inhabit define the city within which they choose – or are forced – to exist. This reading of the built environment produces a nuanced representation that rejects the construct that is the “architectural site”. It is conceptualized not as laboratory for the biopsy of Karm El Zeitoun and its surgical extraction from the rest of the city, but as a device that levitates the neighborhood just enough to understand its underlying associations – whether physical and infrastructural, personal or cultural – while retaining its material and immaterial ties to the larger city.

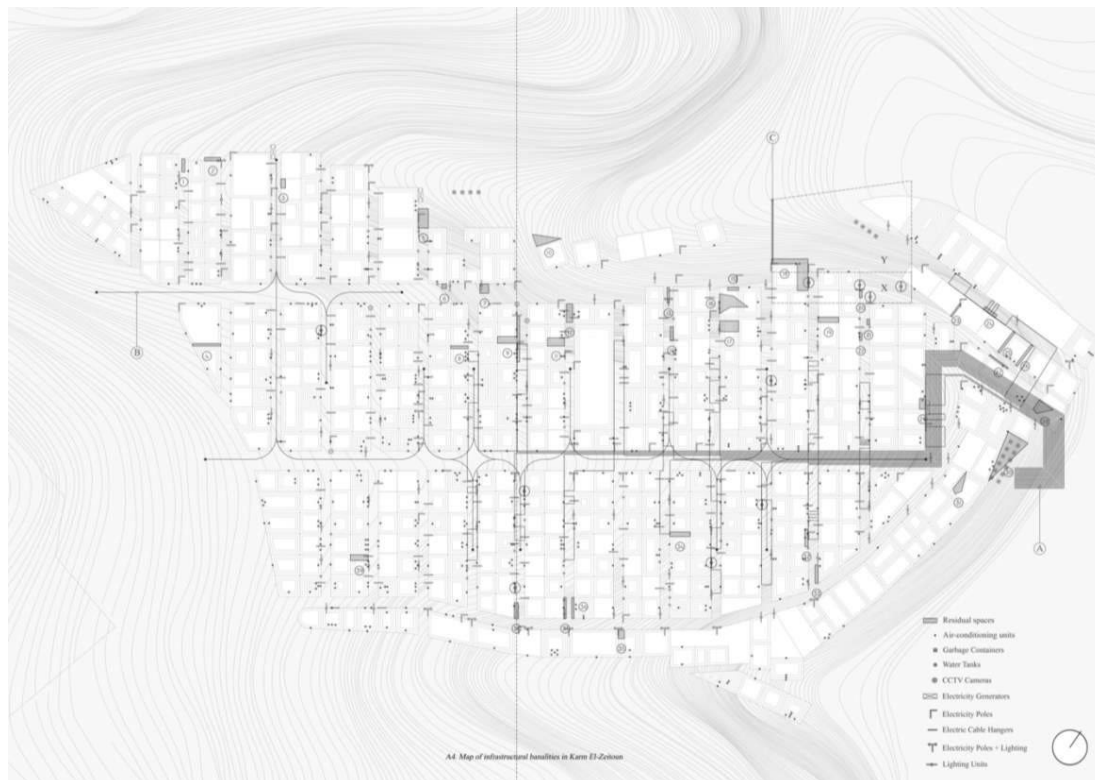


Figure 1. Infrastructural artifacts in the informal neighborhood of Karm El-Zeitoun. The circled lighting units are those produced and assembled by residents, while the others have been implemented by the government. The offsets indicate the number of floors on each plot, and the dots refer to the number of air conditioning units on each floor. Of the 717 units counted, 51.265 % are on ground floor apartments, and they gradually decrease on higher floors. Mohamad Nahleh



Figure 2. Reading Karm El-Zeitoun through its political artifacts. The blue staircase – a project I had implemented in 2018 – lives today as one artifact out of countless others, encoding political ambitions that have transformed it into a space of segregation rather than unity. Mohamad Nahleh