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MOHAMAD NAHLEH
CONTEMPORARY URBANISM PROSEMINAR

PROFESSOR: RANIA GHOSN
The Litani River, which has long been subject to industrial pollutants and solid wastes – discharged simultaneously by state-backed industries seeking quick remedies, and domestic households detached from the wastewater network – witnessed in the last few years a resurgence of territorial pressures triggered by the Syrian refugee crisis. In the absence of penal regulations, operational infrastructure and treatment plants, and amid a massive influx of displaced Syrian families who lack access to proper networks, the discreet yet notorious politico-economic incentives of the Lebanese state, coupled with the political turmoil in Syria, acquired a geo-environmental status. Intangible political negotiations within and outside the Lebanese borders materialized in the Litani River and its basin as quantifiable anthropogenic substances at macro and micro scales. The thickening density of such substances is aggravated both by the river’s open outfalls in a predominantly agricultural territory, which established it as an easy target for discharge of undesirable substances, and its long span, which made it vulnerable to numerous and incremental sources of pollution.

In recent years, a combination of political, social, and environmental factors stained the river’s mythical depiction as a pristine lifeline and infected it with chemical secretions, slaughtered animals, human excrements, toxic industrial wastes, as well as both organic and inorganic pollutants. The image of the mighty historic river and its neighboring rural landscape, long romanticized by city dwellers seeking refuge beyond the confines of the ‘city’, is slowly expunged from their collective memory and eclipsed by that of a cancer-breeding, bacteria infected version of the river that once flowed. In the context of recent studies that sampled the Litani water and discovered, apart from alarming levels of chemical toxicity, new bacterial species unknown to mankind, the project examines the process of reciprocal contamination between the Litani River Basin and its inhabitants by linking it to larger social and political phenomena. It asks: how do obscure political decisions generate quantifiable cases of cancer and alarming degrees of contamination? What are the processes that enable such conversions? Where and at which scales can they be observed? Simultaneously restrained and unconstrained, the Litani Basin provides an opportunity to examine war – the Syrian war in this case – beyond conditions of race, politics, and borders, and through its acquisition of a global scale of contamination. The following drawings trace the river’s processes of contamination across various scales: from the its infamous surface water to its groundwater below the Bekaa Valley, and through its aquatic animals, poisoned ecosystems, and contaminated crops.
On a Staircase in Beirut is an illustrated nonfiction novella that traces the capital’s layered urbanity through stories of the ordinary artifacts that populate one of its oldest informal settlements, Karm El-Zeitoun. 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 this scale, as being encoded into seemingly mundane objects by dwellers navigating the repercussions of the power constructs around them. Past accounts collected across the neighborhood are narrated into tales that emphasize the roles these overlooked objects, their networks, and histories play in negotiating the balances of power shaping both the neighborhood and city at large. They reveal how urban form, even at this scale, can unravel a complex history of displacement, migration, war, genocide, and obscure local and regional politics. But rather than offer a diagnostic of existing problems, the stories in this book foreground the opportunities that politics provide for design, and vice versa.

This project was first inspired by the design of a single, vibrant blue staircase – what was to be an inclusive offering of public space for all. Upon installation in June 2018, a series of steps and viewing decks offered glimpses of life beyond the neighborhood’s massive flyover and were, at first, animated by the activity and leisure of an exceptionally diverse community of residents. But the novelty of these solidarities did not last, and the staircase ultimately surrendered to the blatant racism, sectarianism, and xenophobia forced upon it by the neighboring residents. Abandoned and overtaken by loose wiring and power lines, the staircase became a steel-stepped conductor of live electricity. A hazard to everyone around it, not even the Beirut port blast in August 2020 would be enough to reconcile the hostilities now embodied by the structure. Unwanted and unused, the structure stands today among a neighborhood in ruins. A collector of political corruption manifested physically, the staircase glitters with shards of shattered glass, a piece from every home blasted apart in an indiscriminate storm of destruction.

The story of the staircase also traces the evolving tension between narratives intended by the architect (the alluring story of a ‘social’ project seductive enough to be named one of the world’s best graduation projects at the time) and the narratives of those living around the staircase itself. It is this tension, and the double life of the staircase – online and in international exhibitions and conferences, and offline in Karm El-Zeitoun – that inspired the creation of this book. Following a nine month return to the neighborhood, it rewrites Karm El-Zeitoun, and Beirut, beyond the successes and failures of designed objects and spaces to instead draw on the exchanges of power they both foster.
The wooden pallet rolled across the asphalt on three small wheels. The rubber was worn, and the bearings whined under the weight of the garbage bags they transported through the alley. Jamal borrowed the pallet for these trips when it wasn’t being operated along the water channel. A metal hanger clipped the side of a small sedan as he tried to navigate the many cars parked strategically across the narrow passage. He pushed purposefully through streets until he arrived at one of the neighborhood’s older buildings.

Jamal secured his makeshift cart by the stairs and turned to climb the stairs up to a door on the second floor. An elderly woman answered with a smile and returned seconds later with a full bag of garbage in hand. She offered him the bag and a 250 L.L. coin in payment. Jamal piled it on to the pallet and continued forward, making similar stops across the adjacent streets until the cart grew heavy and slow with the weight of the bags. He grabbed an unused one for his last stop at the end of the alley.

An old man answered the door and stepped aside in invitation. Jamal snapped the fresh bag open and walked inside to collect the man’s trash. He was offered a silver 500 L.L. coin for this service. With the pallet now piled high, he carefully guided the cart towards the far edge of the neighborhood. There, the streets grew wider, but the slope also dipped steeper. Jamal turned towards a narrow ramp that led down to a street lined with large metal garbage bins.

Jamal unloaded the contents of his pallet and resumed his rounds once more. He traveled from door to door collecting bags and coins until the sun was low in the sky. With 10,000 L.L. in change weighing down his pockets, he docked the pallet at home before heading back to Hakop’s. He placed the unused bags back on the shelf before turning to the shop owner with a smile.

“Spain is going to destroy Portugal,” he said confidently.

Hakop stifled a short cough and laughed. “We’ll see about that Friday night.”
It was now sixteen minutes into the second half. Spain had already scored twice, and the match was now 3-2, in their favor. Tensions rose with every stride across the field. The Spanish team made short, calculated passes in their fight to maintain possession of the ball. Their progress was monitored by the growing crowd outside Hakop’s shop on the large TV stationed by the door.

The screen was elevated on an old dresser kept level by the stacks of cardboard piled under it. Its power cord was plugged into an extension cable that snaked its way back into the shop. The volume was maxed out and sound and image together commanded the street. Spectators watched intently from rows of plastic chairs lined in front of the TV. Merchandise had been relocated from the shelves inside to the stands and tables that now framed the outdoor setup. Dani and Hakop made sure that everything was within arm’s reach.

Those who could not claim a chair were crowded around behind them. Nadim and Jamal stood among their friends, eyes trained on the TV. Provocative commentary rippled across the crowd, prompted by the close calls on screen and in the street. Spectators standing shoulder to shoulder jostled each other as the ball inched closer to the goal, but remained, for the most part, on their best behavior.

Well past sunset, the street was dark save for the glow of the screen and the streetlamps that framed the crowd from above. A gap for the passage of cars was maintained between them and the spectators seated on the sidewalk behind them. This secondary seating was dissociated from the pressure imposed by the merchandise piled high in its new context around the front-most spectators.

The dwellers not seated or standing in the street watched curiously from open windows, doors, and balconies. With no clear view of the screen, they reacted in tandem with the shouts of joy and groans of defeat that echoed across the street. At the 88th minute, the screen tracked Cristiano Ronaldo’s progress with the ball across the field and into the goal. The street erupted in cheers. Hugging, shouting, clapping, and cheering spread through the street and into the buildings. The euphoria reverberated in doorways and on balconies, in windows, and across rooftops. The area in its entirety resonated in tune with the dusty old screen.
Dani reached over the oven and switched on the apartment’s boiler system. The single bulb overhead sputtered as electricity surged towards the water heater, threatening to overwhelm the building’s flimsy circuitry. She grabbed a bucket, soap, and spare sponges from under the sink and hurried out the door to meet her housemate. It would take exactly 45 minutes for the water to heat up – just enough time to get everything cleaned up.

Outside, the women dipped worn grey sponges into foamy water and got to work dusting their landing and the planters that lined the path a few steps beyond it. All alleys in the neighborhood ended in steep staircases that led to the bottom of the hill. Residents of the apartments that lined them in parallel on either side took care to keep their portions of the passageway clean. Dani hopped up one of the steps to better scrub the wall around their front door. She scrubbed away hard at the fresh layer of mold on the wall with her rough metallic sponge. The fibers caught on the coarse, uneven surface and scratched ineffectively at the dirt packed into the many dents that marked the wall. The sponge was worked across the rough surface in brisk, erratic circles until Dani rounded the corner and pushed it smoothly across the freshly painted wall overlooking the Yerevan Flyover. She wiped down the evenly plastered surface in large, sweeping arcs, the sponge gliding across the polished surface with ease.

The wall was one of many painted by volunteers invited to help renovate the neighborhood’s outer shell, the only facades visible to those passing along the highway below. While laundry and curtains beat in the wind on the balconies overlooking the staircase, the walls facing the highway were patterned in floral motifs and massive ‘trompe l’oeil’ windows. Porous and pleasant, Karm El-Zeitoun was a colorful village of tightly clustered homes in the eyes of the spectators in the traffic below.

Forty-five minutes had now elapsed. Dani rushed past the polished wall and through the irregular surface of their doorway to ensure the boiler had been switched off – they couldn’t afford to keep it on a single minute longer. If they used the water immediately, each of the four roommates would have six minutes to shower before it ran cold again. The tank on the roof rumbled. Warm water was fed down the calcified pipes and out of a rusted showerhead. The fixture itself was secured to the inner side of the painted wall overlooking the Yerevan Flyover.
The wind swept unrestrained across the hilltop neighborhood. It charged through the dense grid of streets and along the stairways that stretched between them. Rope ties pulled free by the passing wind snapped against the metal of their balustrades. No longer anchored to the balconies, curtains along the alleyway billowed like sails in the breeze. The paralyzing heat and humidity of summer was gone and Karm El-Zeitoun was animated by the city's prevailing winds once more.

The winds barreled across the neighborhood's southern periphery in full force before dispersing into the streets and alleys. While curtains flapped languidly along the main street above, they whipped energetically across the lower alleys. It was with great resounding cracks of fabric against metal that the curtains struggled against their restraints. Fabric ballooned outwards, slipping and straining along the metal tracks that held them firmly in place to the concrete overhead. They thundered with the turn of the seasons, the echoes now a domineering point of reference across the neighborhood.

The wind and curtains were at odds across every alleyway save for one. Residents on one particular street had long since submitted to the breeze and no longer bothered to fight it. Rope ties were removed and piled aside on the tables and chairs from which they lounged, watching their curtains fly together in the breeze. Curtains on either side of the alley met midway across the street in waves of mismatched canvas. They folded and twisted in on themselves, patterning the asphalt below in instances of light and shadow. Children raced through the alley after a football that soared overhead, laughing in anticipation as it was tossed from one stretch of undulating fabric to the next. Their mothers watched from the balconies, some chatting over coffee while others busied themselves folding laundry.

With the curtains unfurled and the balconies completely exposed, domestic workers seized the opportunity to catch up. They called out to each other in Amharic, their greetings joining the ambient sound of conversation and canvas as it whipped across the space between them. Comfortable, collective, and inclusive, the street was transformed. The billowing fabric of apartments across all floors contributed a layer of movement and ephemerality to the multidimensional composition of curtains in the wind. If Hakop's television had altered the configuration of the street for the duration of the football match earlier that summer, these curtains reconfigured the street by the second. They produced and reproduced social and spatial conditions in countless iterations. In resigning to the circumstances of their context, neighbors together became designers through the collective release of a curtain.
The alley was illuminated with the blue-grey glow of six different televisions that evening. The screens flashed and faltered through the apartment windows, imprinting the pavement beyond in sensory bursts of Morse Code. The programs hummed together quietly, ambiguous and indistinguishable in the darkness.

Around the corner, a window led out to a secluded staircase. Steep and chipped, the stairs had long since been abandoned by the locals. That night however, Nadim and Layla were crouched midway up the steps, just under the windowsill. The old frame had been propped up with a thick stack of books and secured with the thin gauze of mosquito netting. The modest living room beyond was packed with a collection of objects amassed across decades. Picture frames and diplomas lined desks and side tables, and scuffed wooden cabinets proudly displayed a varied selection of heavy glassware. Outdated magazines and newspapers were piled high in a basket next to the couch. A small oxygen tank also rested beside it. Slender breathing tubes snaked up the frayed fabric and into the mask worn by a man lying across the sofa. The television glowed in the corner opposite, just across from the window.

Nadim and Layla watched, riveted as an action movie unfolded across the screen. A middle-aged woman appeared suddenly in the doorway and they ducked quickly out of view. She shuffled over to the couch and turned her attention towards the screen. Nadim nudged his cousin. The coast was clear. They inched their way back up to the sill and continued the movie.

Unbeknownst to the woman and her husband, these screenings had become a weekend tradition for the pair - curfew was much less strict at the end of the week. With the couch and television arranged in parallel, they never noticed Nadim and Layla peering excitedly into the living room. Few other spots across the neighborhood were as propitiously organized or secluded.

An hour had passed and snores now carried over to the window from the couch. The man had fallen asleep. His wife tucked a blanket around him and disappeared into the house. Virtually alone now, Nadim and Layla let themselves relax, but kept their silence. They stood silhouetted at the windowsill, the great resounding flashes of the film’s climax glowing around them. But with a loud resounding crack, the power cut out and everything went dark.

Nadim and Layla got to their feet, unbothered – it was midnight and no longer the neighborhood’s turn for electricity. The generators started to roar to life across the neighborhood, an audible rendition of inequality prompted by those that could afford the extra cost. Nadim suggested continuing with a television at one such apartment, but Layla reminded him of the fleas they had been bitten by last time. She instead recommended a small rooftop overlooking a living room on the second floor of the building opposite. Nadim smiled. He and the owner of that television both loved action movies.