

CONSOLIDATING CORNICHE EL-NAHR'S UNBUILT ENVIRONMENT

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The project we are presenting here is a graduation project designed in 2012. It focuses on a one-hundred-hectare patch of unused land located on Beirut's Corniche El-Nahr, which constitutes one of the last remaining unbuilt areas in the city. This undeveloped tract of land hosts a variety of microclimates, dense vegetation and plant species, a peculiar land topography and a few buildings. Here, in stark contrast to Beirut's bustling neighborhoods, the relative openness of the land allows for the discovery of unexpected landscapes. However, this undisturbed environment has not escaped the attention of real estate developers, and about a dozen high-end residential and office buildings have come off the ground since 2012. Because of unabated and rampant urbanization at the city-scale, this stretch of untouched land is bound to disappear, undoubtedly stripping Corniche El-Nahr of a part of its qualities and attractiveness.

By capturing the site's key characteristics and weaving in Beirut's specific urban rules and rhythm, we plan to develop a strategy that would preserve some of the site's vacant areas in the future urban plan.

As such, we will be able to more accurately formulate the nature of the problem and explore how we can partake in and openly share the design process by reframing the architecture practice's realm.

We were inspired by Andrea Branzi's perspective on urban development, in which he highlights the importance of integrating hybrid spaces into city planning. "We live in malls, museums are located in gasometers, universities are factories and car parks allow to practice gymnastics" (Branzi 2009, 3:35). We consider it a stimulating approach for reflecting on free spaces in the city. Likewise, in his book *Foams*, Peter Sloterdijk (2011) reflects on insulations, atmospheres, and stakeholders' networks. Through apt terminology, the author gives us tools to reflect on the range of possibilities that exist, as we argue in the text, from connection to isolation, between the future buildings that will crop up on Corniche El-Nahr and the land's current nature and terrain.

We describe Corniche El-Nahr in the first part, and offer a preliminary analysis of the site's potential wealth, and in the second part, we use observations and fieldwork

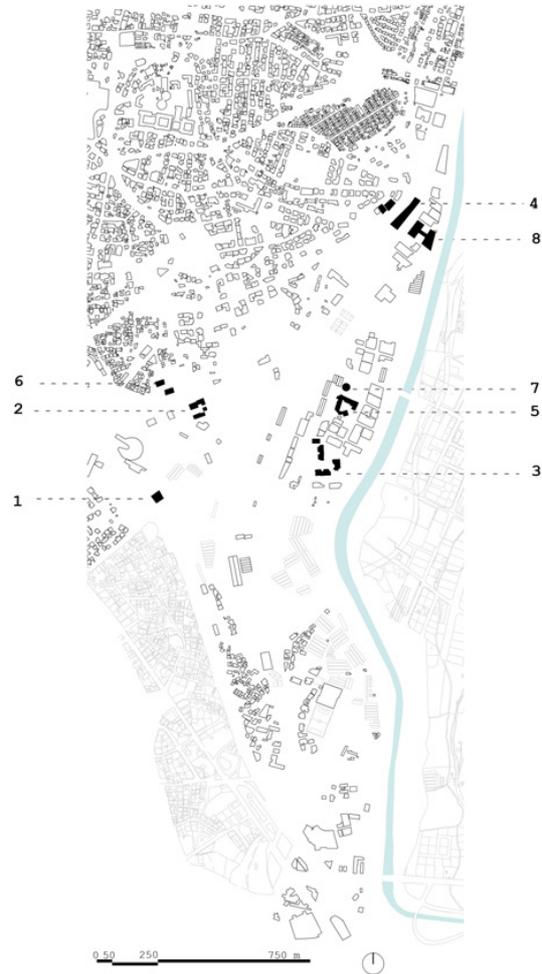


Figure 1

outcomes to back our project's strategy. The last part focuses on the four key areas that best represent the site's original significance.

I THE FLOURISHING LIFE IN CORNICHE EL-NAHR

A- An island spared urbanization

Corniche El-Nahr is part of Beirut's Green Plan and is located beside Beirut's river, which delimitates the municipality's administrative border. Three urban highways crisscross the perimeter, giving it an elongated triangular shape. Various plots, including the railway tracks, are owned by public authorities. Other patches belong to the army or are privately owned by families.

Of the few buildings scattered around the site, here are the most notable ones: a warehouse used by the ministry of antiquities to store artifacts; a fire station; and small factories and warehouses in the Jisr El-Wati corner used as art galleries. However, most land use is restricted by law, which has resulted in land being used for agriculture, partially covered with greenhouses. In spite of seemingly tight restrictions, dozens of large-scale residential units have been built in the area, in the northwestern part of the site close to the roads. The majority of them are luxury housing projects, with occasional office buildings. These residential complexes have access to shops and sports amenities, which conveys a sense of self-sufficiency. In addition, a cluster of industrial-type buildings has also been erected as part of Soho Beirut, a recently built neighborhood (Krijnen 2016). However, no matter how diverse these new projects appear to be, they provide only a limited contrast with the urban development of adjacent neighborhoods.

B- A refuge for lost practices

Corniche El-Nahr is located by the river valley's mouth. At the heart of the site, the deep-winding landscape appears limitless and keeps the cityscape at bay. In stark contrast to the rest of the city, Corniche El-Nahr boasts lush vegetation and has waterlogged ground, which significantly cools down the atmosphere. But the vegetation is not uniform, and depending on sun exposure and remoteness, different microclimates have developed, inviting practices that are no longer taking place in the rest of the capital. In this mostly untouched natural refuge, people grow vegetables or buy produce from local farmers, others lie in the grass shaded by trees, practice sports or raise pigeons. In short, this site is one of the few remaining public spaces to be freely used and appropriated by Beirut's residents. As such, Corniche El-Nahr plays a very important role in enriching the urban experience. While it is unbuilt, it is not a vacant space. It is quite the contrary, since it expands urban perspectives, and this is one of the aspects we mean to preserve. The environmental wealth of Corniche El-Nahr needs to be



Figure 2

protected and enhanced to maintain its metropolitan importance and relevance well into the future.

II ENCLOSE TO DISCLOSE: A PRE-EXISTING LOGIC AS PROJECT STRATEGY

A- Pockets of nature amidst developers' fortresses

Given its specific natural attributes, Corniche El-Nahr is akin to an island adrift in Beirut's concrete ocean, irresistibly seeping into any vacant spot.

That is what will most probably happen in Corniche El-Nahr. Plot after plot, the area will be built up with autonomous edifices. This model is similar to the concept of 'absolute island' described by Sloterdijk in *Foams*, as it seeks to be an environment in an object and not an object in an environment. Our project offers a relevant alternative to the actual urban production on that site, trying to seize its mechanisms in order to complement and enrich the city it produces. We do not pretend to control real estate pressure, but rather to channel the expansion of buildings by imposing physical limits on the project's territory, like dikes, within which projects corresponding to the needs of the whole city will be developed. These pockets of nature would ensure the sustainability of Corniche El-Nahr's existing human practices, bound to disappear if future urban development is left to real estate developers alone.

We have selected four sites for this project that account for Corniche El-Nahr's appeal: a cluster of greenhouses, La Sagesse University, the Armenian cemetery and the old train tracks. Each of these locations will pursue the legacy of Corniche El-Nahr into the future.

B- "Disruption of programmed functions"

Apart from Corniche El-Nahr, satellites pictures reveal the existence of only three other significant pockets of greenery in the entire city: the American University, the hippodrome and the park of Horsh Beirut. These spaces fulfill clearly defined functions and their limits are clearly delineated by walls.

Similarly, our project will enclose these hotspots and designate their specific functions to ensure their preservation. While the land within the dikes has initial functions, these can be diverted into other uses. For example, parking lots are often prime locations for circus tents, flea-markets of romantic rendezvous. In Corniche El-Nahr, the future university campus, the greenhouse, the car park and the waste pond could be used for other practices, following Branzi's 'disruption of programmed functions' idea.

Ensuring that spaces invite multiple uses is a prerequisite for their appropriation. It is an open invitation to take part in the city's making, and share rights and

responsibilities in its transformation. With this project, we are not planning to oppose the transformation of the space by private developers. Rather, our intention is to influence the process and contribute to consolidating these atmospheric islands, since we are convinced of their crucial role in shattering the city's homogeneity by offering reservoirs of fertile disruption.

III SAFEGUARDING CORNICHE EL-NAHR THROUGH ITS ISLANDS

A- A greenhouse, a pool, a car park and a campus

The planned greenhouse, car park, university campus and waste stabilization pond will perform their original functions as key infrastructure for the residents, but could also host a variety of other uses. The greenhouse meant for urban agriculture could become a space where vegetables and seeds are traded or could be involved in research programs carried out by the nearby university. The old train tracks' shape could support the development of a state-of-the-art landscaped wastewater treatment plant. The water reflections from the plant would add to the surrounding natural beauty of the hill of Ashrafieh and of the harbor. In the east, the cemetery is adorned by a tall pine tree canopy that would be extended for the planned car park that would serve the entire area. As unbuilt space par excellence, this shaded car park would be hospitable to a large variety of uses. Lastly, the La Sagesse university, which currently has a single building, would expand into a vast cloister enclosing a portion of Corniche El-Nahr's territory, and become one of the country's most important campuses.

B- Unbuilt spaces as necessary infrastructure to the city

The feasibility of this project relies on consensus, and as such has to fulfill the demands and expectations of the project's multiple stakeholders: the financiers, users, public authorities, and managers, with overlapping and interchangeable roles and interests. In the project's logic, the four spaces have to serve the surrounding buildings by producing food, treating water or producing energy, for example. In this productive exchange, these islands and the various uses they offer would be preserved, perpetuating the heritage of Corniche El-Nahr at the heart of the built and unbuilt space.

Indeed, the absolute islands advertised by private developers are a model towards which they can only partially tend. The infrastructure can only work if connected to energy and sewage networks and served by roads connecting it to other islands. In that case, Sloterdijk (2011) speaks of "connected isolation". More precisely, the atmospheric islands consolidate unbuilt spaces and built areas by acting as connection

infrastructure. As a case in point, developers can mutualize the treatment of wastewater by funding the waste stabilization pond and get clean water in return, in the same way that they already pay for roads. The greenhouse can recycle organic waste generated by residents and produce heat, as well as energy through solar panels.

The urbanization and progressive densification of Corniche El-Nahr will reveal the territory's unbuilt fragments that our project is keen to preserve. These islands will support the necessary infrastructure development envisioned by developers and enable the residents to benefit from one of the city's few green spaces. At a later stage, it is possible to imagine that new actors would appear, such as new populations, industries, cooperatives, etc. Group initiatives can only appear through the fruitful interactions allowed by these islands' public spaces, and we are hopeful that this project would renew interactions between urban dwellers and participate in modifying the city's social structures.

FIGURES

Figure 1. Source, authorship & copyright: Arnaud Thomas et Dalila Ghodbane. Caption: Buildings in Corniche El-Nahr

Figure 2. Source, authorship & copyright: Arnaud Thomas et Dalila Ghodbane. Caption: The greenhouse

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AUTHORS

Dalila GHODBANE started a PhD in 2016 at the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio, University of Italian Switzerland, in the research program titled "Passive Climate Control and the City (SNSF)". During her studies at the École d'Architecture Paris-La-Villette, she investigated urban renewal mechanisms in Beirut, with an emphasis on the involvement of different actors. She went on to do international development studies at the French Institute of Urbanism. Her current research builds on her previous work, questioning sustainable architecture expertise and specifically passive climatization by addressing the daily practices of residents in the old buildings of Islamic Cairo.

Arnaud THOMAS graduated in 2012 from the École d'Architecture Paris-La-Villette. In addition, he was trained in wood carpentry with "Les Compagnons du Devoir" in Angers. As a carpenter, he worked on projects at different scales, from housing, to the dismantling of the temporary Comédie Française. Back in Paris since 2015, he collaborates with the architecture office Chartier Dalix Architecte, where he experiments with approaches related to landscape and architecture.