

{Beirut, a Chronic City}

an architecture of resistance for a people whose claim to its ground is contested by displacement.



The wound's photographic sediment, 1500 BC – 2024 — from the survey timeline, reproduced as evidence. [Survey p.1]

I write from New York, of Beirut. Displacement is not my disqualification from the city; it is the condition through which this public now exists. This is written for those who stayed, those who left, and those who must be able to return. In October 2019 that public assembled in the district it had been priced out of and drew its own plan across it: a tribune, a market, kitchens, a stage, a space for debate. Within a year it was dispersed again by the collapse of the currency, by the blast, by emigration. That is the rhythm I design in. The claimant is always somewhere else.

Beirut has been ending its war since 1975 and has never finished. The civil war closed with an amnesty that seated its own perpetrators. The currency collapsed. The port detonated on 4 August 2020, and six years later no one has been found responsible. Each event is called an exception. Together they are a condition, and the condition is chronic. Chronicity is not the failure of closure. It is the administration of non-closure

In 1994 the owners and tenants of the central district did not lose their property to a bomb. Their rights were pooled and converted into shares in a single company. Fifteen years of war had produced a ground the register could no longer resolve, burnt records, contested boundaries, dispersed occupants and that illegibility was the instrument. Destruction cleared the site, amnesty cleared the liability, valuation cleared the owners. The marble arrived afterward as evidence that something had healed.

This manifesto enters into conversation with recent work on ruins, debilitation, suspension, care and maintenance but only where those concepts survive Beirut's conditions. Where existing theory fails to account for Beirut, Beirut ceases to be an example and becomes theory itself.

I refuse three dominant architectural positions. The tabula rasa, which reads cleared ground as opportunity. The moratorium, which mistakes abstention for ethics where abstention is a luxury of the over-built, not the bombed. And the exit from the human: the ecological reached by stepping outside the anthropocene. None survives Beirut. I refuse the trade, not the ecology. The harbour was poisoned and the public dispersed in one operation; to hold the contaminated soil and the displaced tenant in a single section is more ecological, not less, than to choose between them. What this manifesto writes against is not the nonhuman, it is the systems of power, amnesty and negligence and financial engineering, that wound the ground and the people in the same act. Architecture's instrument is not empathy but the capacity to keep a joint and a zoning line inside the same argument. I propose architecture as the practice of holding: suspending closure by keeping evidence, maintenance, and public claim continuously inhabitable. Holding is not preservation. Preservation freezes the wound; holding allows it to remain politically, materially, and spatially active.

To build over a wound is not to cover it, and it is not to preserve it under glass. It is to accept that the ground is evidence, that the claim on it is unresolved, and that construction will either close that question or keep it open. There is no neutral repair. Every joint, every lease, every render is a position on who holds the ground, whether or not it admits so. The principles below are what that acceptance costs, stated as things I would do and things I would refuse. None of them is universal. Each of them is expensive, and a principle that costs nothing was never a principle.

Four conditions establish the ground. Seven principles follow. Each principle is accompanied by two measures: its COSTS: the political, professional, and economic consequences of holding it and an OPEN question, where the principle deliberately refuses certainty. A manifesto that answers all of its own questions becomes prophecy, and prophecy in this city has a poor record.

WHAT THIS MAKES OF PRACTICE

This is a practice for the ground everyone else calls finished. It does not wait for the ruin, and it does not work the residual city, where interruption is still cheap; it works the completed conversion the parcel already clad in marble, where the transfer closed and the question was declared answered. It takes as its client the one no one signs: the displaced public, the custodians and maintainers who keep the thing standing, the poisoned harbour that needs a named guardian and never gets one. Its instruments are survey, section, and detail and the lease and the maintenance schedule, which are drawings too. It holds its stake long past handover, and it means to hold the ground itself, because whoever holds the ground decides what repair means. It does not draw the city healed. It draws it held: legible, maintained, claimed. There is no post. There is practice.



The Condition.

01 Anticipation is the tense of this ground.

Land in Beirut is bought, zoned, and built against a war treated as certain to return: a planning that promises no better future and manages an expected one. The operative tense is not aftermath but anticipation: it acts now, on price, on permit, on who may buy which parcel. The centre runs the same tense through a different instrument: its frontier stayed contested because many parties wanted it, while the centre was settled because one instrument absorbed every claim at once. The ruin serves two futures at once: residue of the last conflict, resource for the next. This anticipatory planning is clearest on the peripheries; the centre is its consolidated case, one act doing what the edge does by increment.

Open: Elsewhere the temporary is designed as freedom, an authored lightness — here impermanence is imposed, and the anonymous structure conceals the labour that keeps it standing. Is designing for the temporary an act of freedom, or the normalisation of someone else's precarity?

Bou Akar, For the War Yet to Come — anticipation, the doubleness of ruins · W4, KOSMOS

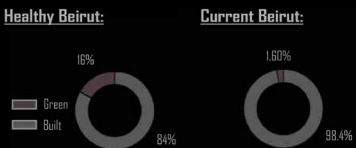


02 The wound is maintained, not failed.

In Beirut injury is administered rather than delivered: water withheld, power cut, soil contaminated, a population kept alive but incapacitated. The distinction collapses. The port poisoned a harbour and dispersed a public in one operation, and the section that describes it must hold both or describe neither. This is why the manifesto will not trade the human for the ecological: not against the nonhuman, but against the operation that wounds soil and tenant in the same act. This is debilitation, a power that neither kills nor lets live. But where such maiming can be named and intended, Beirut's is administered through amnesty, negligence, and financial engineering: diffuse, deniable, and no less deliberate for carrying no signature. The mechanism is the same; the actors are not, and to collapse them would be a theft.

Open: If I design from the injured, whose body sets the standard? And at transscalar range, does empathy dissolve into abstraction the moment it stops being someone's in particular?

Puar, The Right to Maim — debility, infrastructural wounding · W5, Gissen



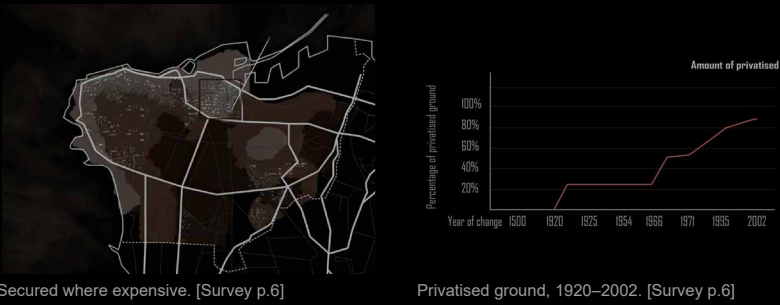
98.4% built · 0.8 m² green per capita. [Survey p.3]

03 Suspension is lived by the day.

In Beirut the temporary has hardened into the only permanence available: relief substituting for development, a grammar of days rather than periods, a cease-fire that ends nothing. Yet inside that suspension people continue building. A corridor is roofed with a tarp and benched with discarded shipping wood, and thirty displaced girls complete twelfth-grade biology in it; two teachers repair a half-destroyed house lent for free and school three hundred children. This is not architecture surviving catastrophe it is architecture: a span, a structure, a maintenance burden its makers cannot carry alone. The sharpest account of this suspension comes from Gaza and Beirut is not Gaza: one under siege, the other under administration. I take the temporal structure and refuse the equivalence.

Open: Dennis warns against method that performs rigour, the quantifiable ranked over the lived. If the temporary is the only permanence Beirut has, is building it well an act of care, or a way of making the emergency permanent? The tarp corridor is already architecture the question is whether making it last betrays the people who needed it temporary.

Rabah, "Gaza in Limbo," Avery Review 76 — relief as permanence · W6, Matsipa / Dennis



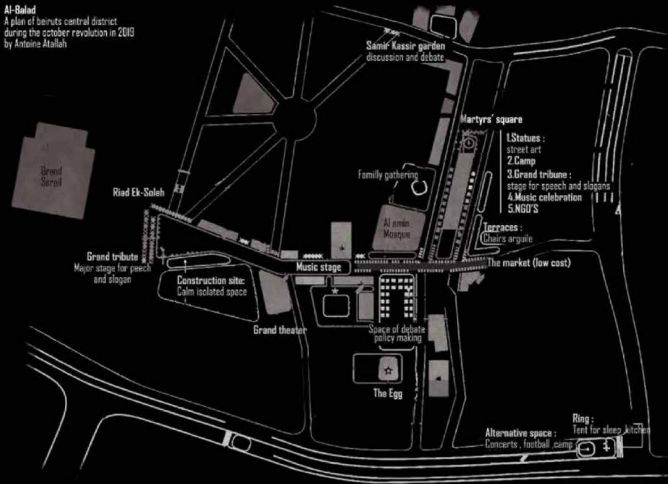
04 In 2019 the public drew a competing plan for the district.

In October 2019 the public assembled on the most expensive ground in the country and drew a plan across it. The drawing of Al-Balad records a programme: a grand tribune for speeches, a music stage, a low-cost market, terraces, a space for debate and policy-making, a tent for the sleeping kitchen, ground for concerts and football. It was executed for three months without commission, permit, or title. Two masterplans now exist for the same parcel, and only one was drawn by the people who used it.

The literature of protest calls this a repertoire signs, bodies, encampments, kitchens, stages, designed and transmitted rather than spontaneous but it treats the repertoire as portable, an imagery that travels between cities. This did not travel. It was parcel-specific, and it is the only counter-plan the district has.

Open: Not-constructing can be a material and spatial practice, not only an ethical position and Al-Balad is the closest I hold: a full programme produced with almost no construction. But it lasted three months. Does a spatial practice that leaves no substrate constitute architecture, or only its rehearsal?

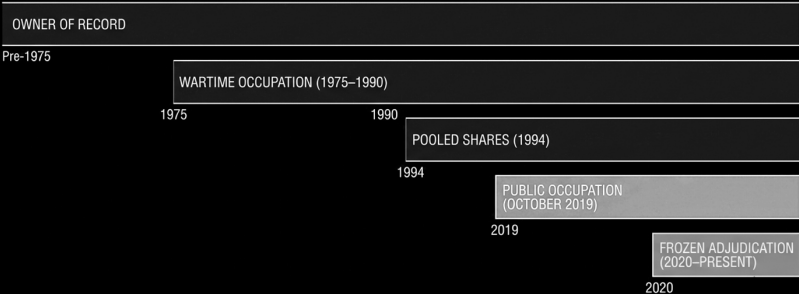
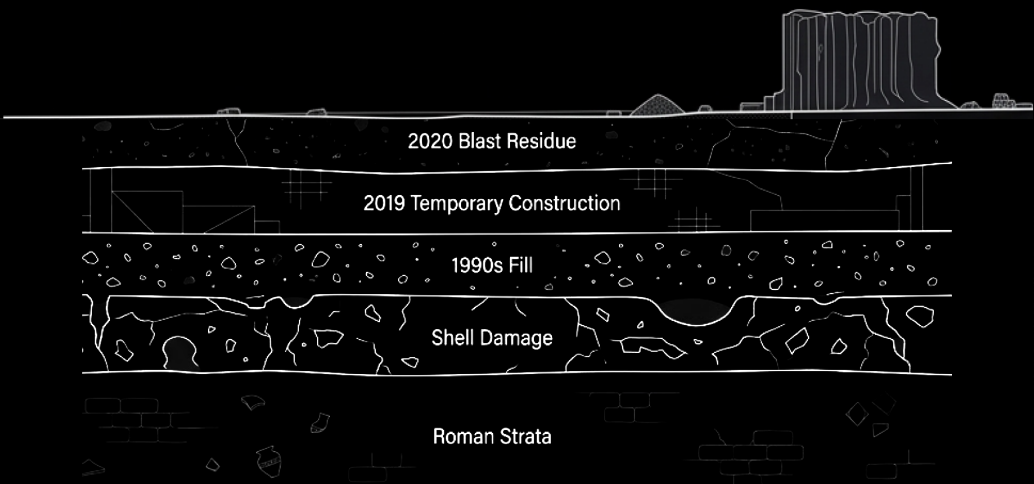
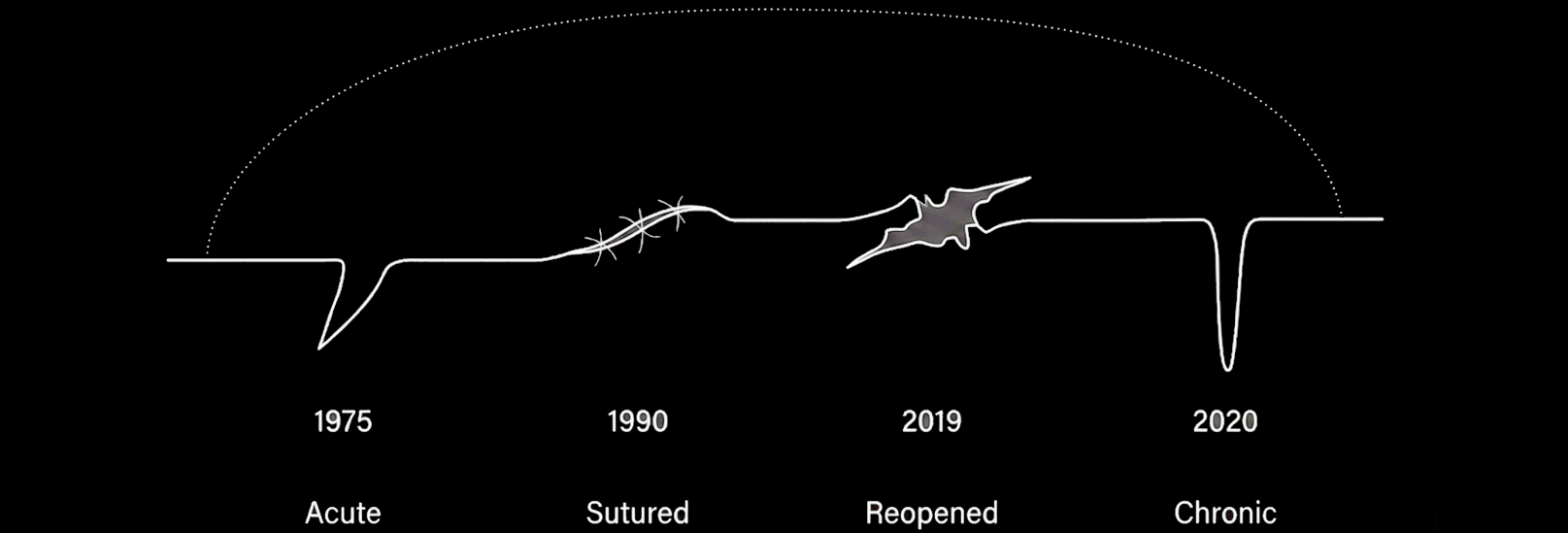
Protest: The Aesthetics of Resistance — the repertoire · W2, Malterre-Barthes



The counter-plan: Al-Balad reorganised by its occupiers, October 2019. [Survey p.9]

Depth is time. Nothing deposited is removed.

Time in Beirut is not a line toward peace but tissue that accumulates. The 1975 shelling, the 1994 conversion, the 2019 occupation, the 2020 detonation where none of these closed, and none was removed; each deposited a stratum the next was built on. A chronogram of this city therefore cannot be a sequence of dates. Depth becomes the time axis: reading downward is reading backward, and nothing deposited is ever removed. The horizontal, at unequal width, measures how long each wound stayed active, how long the currency fell, how long the port stayed unadjudicated, not how long the calendar ran.



THE PRINCIPLES

To build over a wound is to decide, at every joint, whether the ground stays a question. These are the operations that decision produces, and what each one costs.

I Debris is not waste. It is how the site holds evidence.

Debris is not waste. On contested ground it is the only physical evidence the wound has, and hauling it away completes an erasure the appraisal began. It stays: crushed as aggregate, re-laid as fill, poured back into foundation. Demolition becomes material procurement, structure is designed to accept variable low-grade aggregate, and the programme absorbs processing and storage through construction.

COSTS : Slower, coarser, and the first casualty of any value-engineering review. Whether it survives that meeting is the test of whether it was ever a principle.

OPEN: If every act of removal completes an erasure, what should remain when remaining also prolongs danger? When does preserving evidence cease to serve the living it is meant to defend?

II New work holds the wound open rather than incorporating it.

The damaged fabric keeps its footprint. New work remains adjacent, elevated, or cantilevered. For example, Scarpa at Castelveccchio or Chipperfield at the Neues Museum, so that damage stays readable and usable rather than becoming somebody's substructure. The ruin is not a plinth. Yet the refusal of reconciliation aesthetics remains incomplete, since a critical building on a private parcel inevitably participates in the very economic and political regime it claims to resist.

COSTS : You surrender the most valuable area of the site, and every developer will ask why. That question is the reason I intend to be on the other side of that table eventually.

OPEN : Can one site remain both evidence and everyday ground? If mourning, tourism, maintenance, and ordinary life coexist, what prevents one claim from consuming the others?

III Design holds authorship incomplete.

If recurrence is the tense and the state arrives last, the building must be extendable by the people using it. Dimensional coordination to what this city actually repairs with: block, rebar, corrugated sheet, standard section. Services exposed. Connections open and reversible. No proprietary system, no detail that requires the original architect. Crediting the builder becomes a structural decision rather than an historical correction. Habraken assumed supports and infill inside a functioning market; this assumes its absence.

COSTS : It reads unfinished and it photographs badly. An architecture that can be continued by others cannot also be an authored object, and I would rather have the first.

OPEN : If a building is designed to continue without its architect, when does authorship end? Can architecture relinquish control without relinquishing responsibility?

IV Scale holds possession within the constituency able to maintain it.

Where title is unavailable, possession is established by continuous, open, uncontested use so a bench crossed daily holds more ground than a locked pavilion. Size becomes a strategic variable rather than a budget outcome, and the correct scale is the largest one the constituency can keep in use without permission. The 2019 repertoire was built exactly this way: market, kitchen, tribune, each sized to the people who ran it. Usufruct is a design parameter alongside span and load.

COSTS : Declining the commission that is too large to be held. The discipline treats scale as ambition; here it is a liability calculation.

OPEN : If durable claims depend on continuous use, how can architecture support permanence without demanding constant labour? When does care become an unfair burden placed on the very public it intends to empower?

V Occupation holds claim before title.

Where ownership cannot be resolved, design for use that does not require it: reversible, demountable, insurable as temporary, so that use accumulates while the register stays contested. This is not a workaround pending legality. It is the position occupation is how a public files where no register will accept it, and the building's job is to make that filing durable enough to be inherited.

COSTS : Permanent legal precarity, accepted deliberately, and a practice that will lose cases. Anything else waits for a title that this century has not produced.

OPEN : If occupation is the first public claim, what is the minimum architecture required to carry that claim beyond those who first made it? At what point does permanence begin to resemble possession?

VI Representation holds dispute visible.

Representation is not communication, It is construction by other means. No render that resolves the ground, no photograph that crops the seam, no plan that omits what is contested. The project's images maintain the same discrepancy the building maintains, because an image of the healed site is a claim about the ground and will be used as one. Forensic Architecture demonstrates the inverse case: the drawing produced as evidence, on behalf of those affected.

COSTS : It makes the work substantially harder to sell, and it forfeits the entire visual economy on which reconstruction is financed. That forfeiture is the argument.

OPEN : If every drawing projects a future, how can architecture represent repair without declaring the conflict resolved? Where does preparation end and prophecy begin?

VII Maintenance holds responsibility.

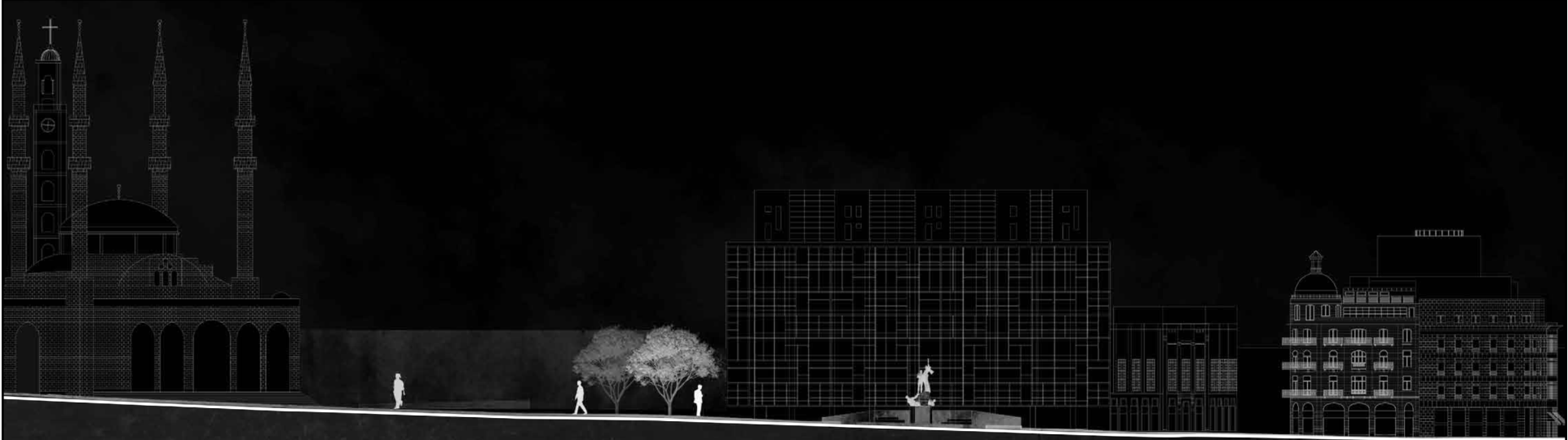
The drawing set includes a maintenance regime, a named custodian, and a funded schedule to the tenth year. The practice holds a stake in the operation of what it builds, not only in its delivery. Maintenance is architecture after authorship; here recognition becomes contract. And the departure is the whole of it: maintenance-for-permanence keeps the building as designed precisely the operation the marble performed downtown. Mine maintains the discrepancy: the seam legible, the pit crossable, the evidence admissible.

COSTS : It determines what kind of office this is: fewer projects, held far longer, with revenue that arrives slowly. It is a business model before it is an ethic, and it should be argued as one.

OPEN : If maintenance becomes the means through which architecture claims responsibility, how can that responsibility avoid becoming another instrument of control? Who decides when holding becomes ownership?

Holding is not the refusal of architecture. It is its political task under chronic conditions.

Not the city healed. The city held.



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