



SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

Living In[-]Formal

The Challenge of Informalizing Architecture in Beirut



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The Challenge of Informalizing Architecture in Beirut

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Abstract

During the last century, the city of Beirut has witnessed an extreme expansion and growth in population, which grew from 130,000 inhabitants in 1920, to more than 1.5 million today. The recent history was marked by the arrival of refugees, rural migrants, and displaced people. Arrivals started by Armenian and Assyrian refugees in the 1920s-1930s, Palestinian refugees in the late 1950s, rural migrants starting in 1940s and until now, internally displaced people from several Lebanese cities during the civil war period 1975-1990, Iraqi refugees in 2003, and recently more than 250,000 Syrian refugees starting from 2011. The first arrivals have always chosen the peripheries of the city, that became nowadays the city –what scholars call “Greater Beirut”–, and informally expanded. The construction started with the first arrivals in 1920s, who built their tents in the Quarantina and Bourj Hammoud, and the first waves of rural migrants who built similar tents and shacks on the banks of Beirut River. Later on, informal concrete buildings invaded all the peripheries, overlapping the building code and urban regulations. Without the intervention of engineers and architects, the construction of informal settlements evolved while using primary design and construction methods. Still today, informal settlements in Beirut are not recognised by the state, thus there is no attempt by all the governmental institutions to move forward upgrading the living conditions of the low-income population that live in them.

The research investigates the role of architects in the upgrading the living conditions of people living in precarious residential units. The situation of the buildings and apartments poses many questions in terms of architectural quality safety, health, and privacy, among others. The research insists on informalizing architecture in order to serve the poor people that really need it, through analysing and discussing three neighbourhoods in Beirut, and finding out the critical issues in order to get out with action tools that are applicable for the upgrade; thus, defining the role of architects in informal neighbourhoods. All this calls for a changing in the role of architects to better respond to the needs of poor people living in the city through using architectural technologies and tools, and creativity in designing for informal dwellers while allowing them to participate. Moreover, architects also have to work as supporters of the community, they should design for the sustainability and prosperity of all components of the urban context.



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