

Sama Beydoun

American University of Beirut | samabeydoun@outlook.com

KEYWORDS

Beirut; alternative museum; vernacular; psychogeography

ABSTRACT

It all started with the plastic chair, it is often found in Beirut's urban settings without ever really being questioned. Inside the house, it's an object you sit on. On the street, it prohibits parking. Like an unspoken and untaught language, everyone knows that if there's a chair, you can't park. Thinking about this specific urban phenomenon, it was about seeking instances in which the city creates solutions for itself. This collection of informalities formed a popular visual language worth being thought of, challenging the conventional ways we think of our own city. The plastic chair, the wheel, the concrete block, the fruit basket; those are a few ingredients of a creative recipe made of available, low-cost and repurposed materials, patched by a sense of utility. By considering those social occurrences, we attempt to reconsider our own cultural landscape, and by actually looking, we realize they are reflections of our times, struggles and daily obstacles. As urban artifacts, their whole is greater than the sum of their parts. The Beirut Street Museum is a conceptual museum that resists conventional forms of art and dismantles the exclusivity of museology. It operates on the ground, where every city walk becomes a museum walk. Rooted in concepts of the *dérive*, situationism and deconstructing museology, the BSM speaks the language of the street. It becomes a growing archive of collective evidence: people's marks on the space that surrounds them.

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Beirut Street Museum



Their story begins on ground level, with footsteps.¹



INTRODUCTION: INVISIBLE OBJECTS

It all started with the white plastic chair. The infamous, anonymous, widespread, stackable “monobloc” chair created in the 1940s and widespread for being lightweight, resistant to weather and competitively cheap.

This now-commodity is often found in the urban setting of Beirut without ever really being questioned. Inside the house, the chair is an object you sit on. On the street, it's used to reserve parking. Like an unspoken and untaught language, everyone knows that if there's a chair, you can't park. Approaching this phenomenon from an ethnographic lens, the first part of the exploration collects informal instances in which the city creates solutions for itself. Once the whole is smarter than the sum of its parts, we solidify the investigation. The interest of this study lies in perceiving a popular visual language, generally unseen, as an attempt to defy the conventional ways we look at our own city. The plastic chair, the wheel, the concrete block, the fruit basket, the graffiti on the walls – each used in the context of the



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1
Chair reserving parking (author's photograph, 2019).

2
Beirut Street Museum Artifacts (author's design work, 2019).



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street (outside of their initial scope of function) – those are a few ingredients of a creative recipe made of available, local, low-cost, accessible and repurposed materials, patched by a sense of utility in daily life. **Fig. 1**

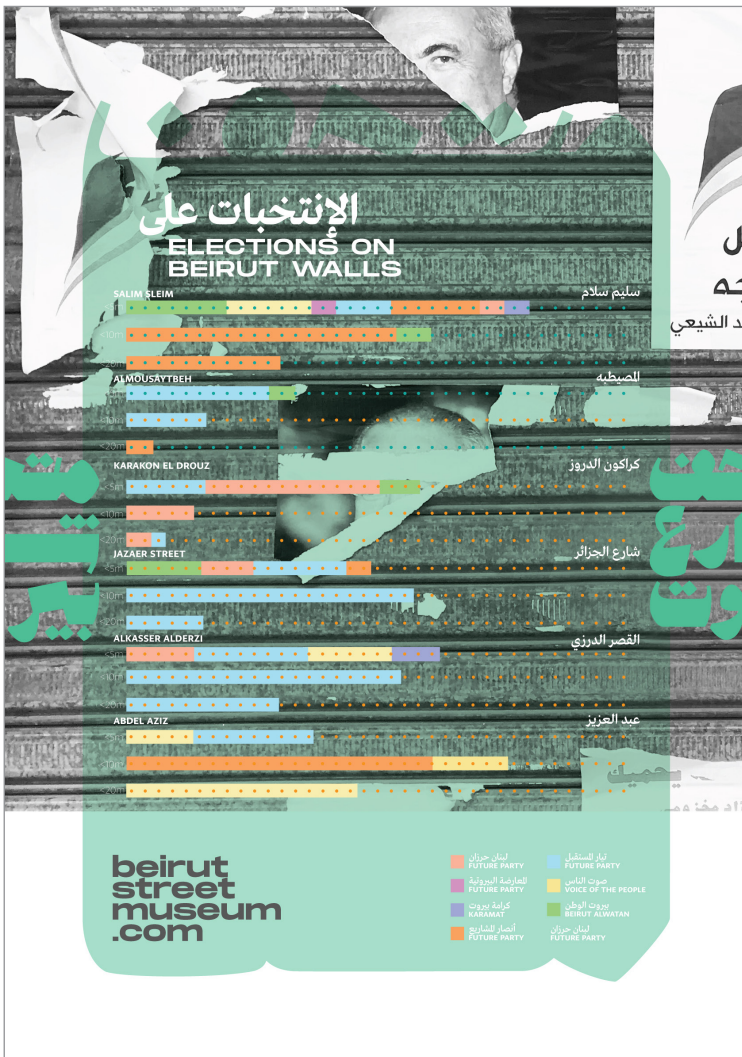
With a clear fascination for the urban apparatus and a deep interest in contemporary museology, this project acts as a venture to bridge the two fields. In rethinking the museum institution – what it stands for, advocates, how the experience is designed and scripted – this paper will reflect on the definition and role of such an institutional status. This quest will take interest in how its operation would extend and re-organize itself when the museum is propelled onto the streets.

METHODOLOGY: FOUND OBJECTS

In the context of something so organically-fed, informal and authentic as the street, engaging in a formal structure like the one of a museum acts nearly as an oxymoron. A walk on the street is a completely sensory experience: in instances appealing and in others repelling. Outside factors seem to shape the experience for you. You would choose to cross the road if there is garbage on that sidewalk and walk faster (or slower) if you run into something you're familiar with. All those factors feed into molding the street experience as unscripted and engaging (or more accurately, it shaping

itself as so). On the other end of the spectrum, the museum experience is somewhat the opposite: its path is shaped from point A to point Z. The outside interferences are either obsolete or designed within the trail, and the experience is planned in a way that could be recreated by every visitor both repeatedly and identically. When both occurrences are so divergent, the only similarity is that they both happen within the scope of the experience of a space and the absorption of external information. The proposed outcome echoes as a reconciliation of the two sectors.

Moreover, taking interest in urban trivialities, what one might call "found objects," the attention goes from the appreciation of curious banalities to the study of their context; to later on acknowledge their value. This project takes the objects of interest and lets them grow with the study: the sociological manifestations of informal design in the streets. This subsequently reveals habits, customs, peculiarities of people that unfold the hitherto urban realities. The culmination of those creative manifestations become the objects of interest of the Beirut Street Museum (BSM). Moreover, in arguing that they actually shape the local visual culture, they are perceived just as any museum object would be: with time, curiosity and interest. The museum therefore pays attention to them not only to study and analyze them, but also to preserve and protect them



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(ideologically) as all museum institutions act in regards to their artifacts.

The Beirut Street Museum would be special in its lack of operation within a confined architectural space. Instead, it takes the city both as its subject of interest and as its literal locality. The urban space acts as the boundary of the museum and the streets shape its trails. The lack of borders within which to operate introduces a certain spacelessness that sets the stage for a complete "spacefulness:" the capacity to appropriate non-conventional scope and embrace its constraints. This pushes the boundaries of what can be contained in a museum and how one can experience it. The defined spacelessness creates a certain framelessness that concerns the space, the experience and the object itself. This leads the paper to shedding the light on the exclusiveness and authority that happen in the process of "musealization."² This initial way of operating would need to be translated into a system as inclusive as the street, while formally referring to a colloquial language and a vernacular visual language. In this scenario, every person walking by could be a visitor, not only an educated elite.

With this aim, the BSM will question and challenge the conventional notions associated with the traditional museum, to reflect and adapt accordingly in relation to

what it stands for and inevitably stands against. This forecasts the challenging rethinking of notions of authority, authorship, curation, ownership, public space and speech. In the following sections, we use an "assemblage-thinking" methodology to approach urban and cultural studies.³ Through its lens, we address the city as multiplicities as opposed to a final outcome. As opposed to treating it as a stable reality, we acknowledge its heterogeneity, complexity and circumstantiality. This allows us to ensure a non-reductionist approach to include candidates across material literacy, financial worth or aesthetic qualities: "To group these objects according to their formal qualities would iron out their particular contexts and reasons for being."⁴ Among the uncountable objects this interdisciplinary study pays attention to, there is the wheel. It is reimagined as a recipient in which someone pours concrete and sticks a pole inside, a scarecrow for parking-seekers. This created structure might need to be chained to the closest electricity pole to avoid its disappearance. Their consideration becomes essential and their context-specificity all too particular. Therefore, we regard those social occurrences as reflections of our struggles, our daily obstacles, and in a way our times. In thinking about a museum that stems from the street, the point of entry has been the idea that there are valuable objects worth looking at, "that seem to

3
Political Posters infographic (author's design work, 2019).

4
Infographics Poster Walking (author's design work, 2019).



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fail comparative judgement of aesthetic quality⁵ but hold value in their sense of utility, innovation, creativity and purpose in the political context of efficacy.

RESULTS: FROM MUSEUM TO DEFIANT OBJECT Museum object

The following sections deconstructs the museum institution, its object and its experience with the aim of rethinking how it can therefore be incubated by the street.

The museum finds its roots in primitive forms of exhibitions as early as Renaissance Europe, with a different purpose at the time: exhibiting foreign “exotic” objects. Their mere “foreignness” and “exoticness” made the object eligible to be part of the exhibition. In a way, contemporary museums are not too far from this.

The fundamental roles of the museum gravitate around making culturally significant items accessible to the wider public. This is done in different ways: First, it is done by transferring them from private ownership into the public sphere. Second, it is done by educating the mass into acknowledging their relevance. Lastly, it lies in protecting and archiving this knowledge, in respect to the past and in regards the future. In its very nature, the institution of the museum is an authoritative, top-bottom, finger-pointing instance for a filtered crowd. When offering culture in the

form of art, it is displayed in a take-it-or-leave-it approach. Indeed, the mere fact of narrating history makes one wonder about the point of view by which it is told. A big part of what makes the job of a curator inherently political, is the filtering system by which some things are included and therefore some are left out. What started as a mere collector's job a few centuries ago evolved with time, became an interpreter (in relation to history), a researcher (within contemporary work), and currently also entails the safeguarding of the work, its preservation and its exhibition framework. Therefore, in displaying the extracted works in a way that creates associations and new perceptions, the curatorial work treats the artifact as a means to an end. This approach bends the point of view of the artifact, distorting or obliterating its initial context, meaning and/or function. Those are the conditions through which the private collections become public within the traditional museum institution.

If it claims to educate, it already excludes the illiterate, and in that case only preaches the converted. If the conventional museum turns the private into public, it would be of interest to think of the way our museum would translate this phenomenon by dealing with instances that are already part of public speech.⁶ Moreover, rethinking the context of the object is necessary, as well as thinking how



it would perform if left in their environment of practice. If the museum doesn't exist as a physical tangible space, it manifests itself through the apparatus of the museum. This is where design and architecture come in, acting like the glue between otherwise floating items.

"The Museum of the Ordinary" is a project that drew out design's situated meaning by transposing the institutional markers of museums to the street. By applying labels, tags, titles to random objects, they elevate them from object to "star-object." This proposal is of tremendous relevance in relation to the BSM for what it advocates and stands for. First of all, it is a very didactic application of combining the notions of the street and the museum. In this shift from the private to the public realm, the museum object is allowed to keep inhabiting its context; this leads us to the second point: it rethinks and diversifies the ways in which a museum can be experienced. Additionally, it deals with the notion of "art" in the public sphere and the one of not dealing with art at all. Last but not least, it challenges how scripted museum walks are and can be. **Fig. 2**

Defiant Object

According to The Museum of the Ordinary, the museum object is classified in the following way: First, the "well-designed object" that works as codes for universal

aesthetic that undergirds a model for an international audience. The relevance of such selected works comes in the scope of reforming and taste-making. This "edifying" approach succeeds as a self-proclamation as "museum quality."⁷ Second, the "common object" that works as some indices of everyday life. They become relevant outside of their epoch as a model for past technologies and modes of everyday life. Some of those artifacts are interesting for other reasons. The thought-process in their making seems very relevant to their circumstances and context, that leads to "creative problem-solving manifestation."⁸ The object ordinarily acquires value as soon as there is a shortage in one of those factors: if some time has passed, it speaks in the name of its time, if it's taken out of place, it speaks in the name of its culture and geographical identity.

"Disobedient Objects" is an exhibition revolving around the objects used in the context of social movements and protest. "The protest object" is usually handmade from available items. A few things that catch our attention: first, those objects' purpose and function appear to have shifted from their everyday use to actors in public movements. Those objects are usually made of cheap materials, which "passes as a form of disobedience in its own right, not least in questioning the narrow grounds of 'quality'.⁹ Disobedient objects propel the cause forward, by contributing formally



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and ideologically to the narrative. Placing them at the center-stage in a museum refers to the context they creatively provided solutions for, exceptionally making the extraction part of the disobedience the exhibition stands for. It seems important to think of our interaction in regard to those “miniature acts of defiance,”¹⁰ one day they don’t have value for their status as an everyday object and another they are valued as art. Duchamp, Hirst, Koons, Lavier and many other artists tackled with critique the place of the readymade and the found object in contemporary art, but material culture was never given too much attention in a design historian’s narrative. Those manifestations are an embodiment of transcending their role by resisting their status of commodity-objects. The BSM treats its informalities with the same importance. Their value is in their triviality, it makes room for abundance. Their creativity is in the reshuffling of their function and their rebirth within another context. In this case-study, the museum is not taken to the street, the street is taken to the museum. We can moreover think of how unscripted the experience of those objects was, whether in the household or in manifestation, and how scripted it has become in relation to being exhibited in such a prestigious establishment, alongside such “fine art.”

Within the approach of the common object that performs as

indices of cultural value before ordering a certain behavior, we choose our objects from the streets of Beirut. Objects that act as regular objects taken out of their initial function and are given, in an almost random process, another task. Therefore, those instances are created in the streets from a need or a drive of spontaneous origin. Through a collection of innumerable singularities, those informal manifestations “have reinforced themselves in a proliferating illegitimacy” that take part in a bigger network of informal practices and within those instances, create a special debate bigger than what they initially directly stood for.¹¹

DISCUSSION: RECLAIMED OBJECTS

“It is in the law of necessity that leads to the construction of these devices, often simple in shape, naïve, and made from materials easily at hand.”¹²

In order to reclaim those objects and transpose them from one framework to another, one can think of a walking tour, the conventional way to go from an artifact to another. The fact that it has some common point with the main activity in urban spaces acts in our favor. Usually, a walking tour holds the form of an experience that takes the walker on a path from a defined start onto an end point. It is



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Beirut Street Museum Posters (author's photograph, 2019).

6
Beirut Street Museum Poster Series (author's photograph, 2019).

informative, educational and makes sure to come across a curated selection of works or artifacts that fall under a larger thematic.

In the realm of finding something that is initially stumbled upon instead of the product of something you look for, the redesigned walking tour can't be of scripted nature. Additionally, driven by curiosity in an "unthought-of" experience, it seems fit to challenge the walking tour in the mere fact of walking aimlessly as an act of protest. Psychogeography and the notion of the *derive* rethink the theories of walking as a critique of urban geography; Debord – that led the "Situationist International" group of thinkers and walkers – defines psychogeography as "an aim to study the precise laws and specific effects of the geographic milieu, consciously planned or not, acting directly on the affective comportment of individuals."¹³ Careri amongst "the Stalkers" considered walking as a critical tool.¹⁴ The unconventional notions are extremely relevant as a path to urban curiosity and rethinking the vernacular realm away from curated control. In comparison to the stroll in the city (the usual scenario in which our minor object mechanisms operate and are stumbled upon), it would only be adequate to give extreme importance to the mere act of walking in the city, and to think of the walk as speech and the movement as space shaper: "The act of walking is to the urban system

what the speech act is to language."¹⁵

This research leads us to a wide visual exploration. Those objects, symptoms of their times and result of their contexts are indicators of social frameworks. Three infographics were created as a first way to map out the collected information. The first poster navigates the streets of Beirut while keeping an eye on the wild posters on the street walls. In the context of the Lebanese elections, the presence of the posters indicates the political affiliations according to areas. The second infographic tracks the different chairs of the streets of Beirut, their abundance, material and appropriation of public space are factors to bear in mind. They allude to the socio-economic situation of the concerned area, as well as the quantity of public problems to find informal solutions for. The third poster creates a situationist map that tracks the informal manifestation of a daily walk, coded by category and typology. Those posters act as examples to the contribution the BSM makes both quantitatively and qualitatively. **Fig. 3 | 4 | 5**

There are four spaces of the museum that the BSM poster series recreate. The front desk is replaced by an informational series, the navigation is embodied by an infographics poster series, the collections act as title pages for the different categories of posters: "homemade solutions," "guiding voices," "political conversations,"

“spiritual encounters,” “wall exchanges” amongst many other possible collections, and finally the giftshop, that acts as the promotional series, and showcases the objects as if they were sold for their humorous/surreal new-found functions. **Fig. 6**

CONCLUSION: EPHEMERAL OBJECTS

Hence answering the question “How can I bring the museum to the street?” is by no means simple. Let alone if the artifacts it collects are made by the people for the people. This participatory aspect challenges the role of the museum institution, and imagines an open-sourced archive that invites the flaneur to look at their city by noticing things that shouldn't be there, that resist or replace formal authorities and gloriously embody functional “signs of official failure,”¹⁶ by out-designing authorities. Now that we have acknowledged the existence of those-otherwise-invisible-objects, it keeps us wondering about the politics of their removal. This acts as an invitation to ponder about how those informal manifestations come to life, hold together, perform, act within urban realities, collapse, then disappear.

¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (California: University of California Press, 1998), 97.

² Michael Rock, and Susan Sellers, “The Museum of the Ordinary,” *Eye Magazine* 7, no. 28 (1998).

³ Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari, *Milles plateaux* (Paris: Ed. de Minuit, 1980), 90.

⁴ Catherine Flood, and Gavin Grindon, *Disobedient objects* (London: V & A Publishing, 2014), 24.

⁵ Flood and Grindon, *Disobedient objects*, 12.

⁶ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 81.

⁷ Rock and Sellers, “The Museum of the Ordinary,” 30–1.

⁸ Fátima Finizola, Solange G. Coutinho, and Virginia P. Cavalcanti, “Vernacular design: A discussion on its concept,” in *Design frontiers: territories, concepts, technologies. 8th Conference of the International Committee for Design History and Design Studies*, eds. Priscila Lena Farias, Anna Calvera, Marcos da Costa Braga and Zuleica Schinca-riol (São Paulo: Blucher, 2014), 483–87.

⁹ Flood and Grindon, *Disobedient objects*, 12.

¹⁰ Flood and Grindon, *Disobedient objects*, 95.

¹¹ De Certeau, “Walking in the city,” in *The practice of Everyday Life*, 96.

¹² Finizola, Coutinho and Cavalcanti, “Vernacular design,” 483.

¹³ Guy Debord, “Theory of the Dérive,” in *The Situationists and the City*. ed. Tom McDonough (London: Verso, 2009), 77–85.

¹⁴ Francesco Careri, Steve Piccolo, and Paul Hammond, *Walkscapes: Walking as an Aesthetic Practice* (Barcelona: GG, 2002).

¹⁵ de Certeau, “Walking in the City,” 91–130.

¹⁶ Jérôme Denis and David Pontille, “The Multiple Walls of Graffiti Removal. Maintenance and Urban Assemblage in Paris,” in *Urban Walls: Political and Cultural Meanings of Vertical Structures and Surfaces*, eds. Andrea Mubi Brighenti and Mattias Kärrholm (London: Routledge, 2018), 215.

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Il Beirut Street Museum

Sama Beydoun

PAROLE CHIAVE

Beirut; museo alternativo; vernacolo; psicogeografia

ABSTRACT

*Tutto è iniziato con la sedia di plastica, che si trova spesso negli ambienti urbani di Beirut senza mai essere messa in discussione. All'interno della casa, è un oggetto su cui ci si siede. In strada, vieta il parcheggio. Come una lingua non parlata e non insegnata, tutti sanno che, se c'è una sedia, non si può parcheggiare. Pensando a questo specifico fenomeno urbano, si trattava di cercare i casi in cui la città crea soluzioni per sé stessa. Questo insieme di informalità ha formato un linguaggio visivo popolare su cui vale la pena riflettere, sfidando i modi convenzionali in cui pensiamo alla nostra città. La sedia di plastica, la ruota, il blocco di cemento, il cesto di frutta: sono alcuni ingredienti di una ricetta creativa fatta di materiali disponibili, a basso costo e di recupero, conditi da un senso di utilità. Prendendo in considerazione questi eventi sociali, cerchiamo di riconsiderare il nostro paesaggio culturale e, osservandoli, ci rendiamo conto che essi sono il riflesso dei nostri tempi, delle nostre lotte e dei nostri ostacoli quotidiani. Come artefatti urbani, il loro insieme è maggiore della somma delle loro parti. Il Beirut Street Museum è un museo concettuale che resiste alle forme d'arte convenzionali e smantella l'esclusività della museologia. Esso opera sul campo, dove ogni passeggiata in città diventa una passeggiata nel museo. Radicato nei concetti di *dérive*, situazionismo e museologia decostruttiva, il BSM parla il linguaggio della strada. Diventa un archivio crescente di testimonianze collettive: i segni delle persone sullo spazio che le circonda.*

Sama Beydoun

American University of Beirut
samabeydoun@outlook.com

Nata e cresciuta a Beirut, in Libano, Sama Beydoun è un'artista multidisciplinare che attualmente vive a Parigi. Si destreggia tra design, fotografia, tipografia e illustrazione come mezzi di espressione.

Il suo progetto "Beirut Street Museum" è stato premiato con diversi riconoscimenti internazionali. Sama continua la sua ricerca e il suo progetto trae ispirazione dalle strade e dalla sua gente, gravitando intorno a temi legati alla cultura visiva, alle cause sociali e alle narrazioni collettive.

Born & raised in Beirut, Lebanon, Sama Beydoun is a multi-disciplinary artist, currently based in Paris. She juggles and mixes between design, photography, typography and illustration as means of expression.

Her project "Beirut Street Museum" was the recipient of various international awards and continues today as an ongoing research and project.

Her work draws much of its inspiration from the streets and its people, gravitating around topics related to visual culture, social causes and collective narratives.