

Follow-on Grant Project

Community's Digital Archives: Imagining the Recovery of Karantina

Beirut Urban Lab Team (BUL)

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Project Description

Background

The BUL, as part of the IF project, explores two interrelated thematic strands: “city as archives” using Beirut as its case study, and “recovery as unarchiving” by looking at the post-disaster recovery processes in producing multiple future imaginaries. It challenges authoritarian narratives by exploring alternative and inclusive egalitarian methods of archiving its oral history and socio-spatial practices. It aims to use the digital archiving of the LevantCarta to increase the participation of a broader archival custodianship bound by ethics and legal reflection in an urban context; achieved by the participatory model of BUL recovery that is community-based and bottom-up.

Brief

The follow-on grant focuses on “recovery as unarchiving” in the neighborhood of Karantina. Karantina is a site of multiple traumas and remains the most marginalized and vulnerable neighborhood in Beirut that houses low-income groups. It is confined by natural and physical infrastructural edges that separate it from the city. Karantina’s built environment is an overlap of historical evolution, spatial practices, and built fabric, further damaged by the port’s blast of August 4, 2020. Today, Karantina is stigmatized, silenced, and excluded from participating in the narrative or future of the city, neither in the process of “city as archives” nor “recovery as unarchiving.”

Having engaged in developing digital archiving for the city of Beirut through the LevantCart project, the proposal seeks to design an online open-source platform for Karantina. LevantCarta is an online mapping platform illustrating the urban layers of Beirut across the entire history of the city. The platform is currently developed between the BUL and Rice University/Texas. This information is the first comprehensive urban archive of Beirut available as an open-access digital library.

Most of the available historical maps of Beirut offer information about the Central District and its old intra-muros city. Sitting at the eastern edge of Beirut, Karantina has the least archived material in respect to other parts of Beirut. The proposed platform offers georeferenced historical maps constructed by the research team allowing the community and other stakeholders across generations, gender, and class to

upload archival material such as photos, maps, and oral voice bites. The team will overlay the multiple data and reconstruct the historical layers of Karantina as vector data, including the road network evolution, the main historical buildings, and the demolished and current building footprints. Through our trained Citizen Scientists (CS) and networks, we will encourage the locals to participate in sharing material on the open-source. Each geo-referenced building footprint or street can hold attachments. The user can click on the vector and add the associated photographs or text files as an attachment. Since the project encourages collaborative and oral history archives, the user can even record his/her voice narrating the stories of the neighborhood and can upload them as attachments. The attachments will be uploaded on a cloud where the responsible member for ethics (Dr. Al-Harithy) will review the information to adhere to the IRB rules and guidelines. After approval of the data, all of the data will be available for download by any user on the web.

Outcomes

The digital archive offers georeferenced historical maps that will allow the community and other stakeholders across generations, gender, and class to upload archival material such as photos, maps, oral voice bites, and narratives. Using dissensus methodologies, this open-source platform articulates modes of egalitarian archival practices and becomes an entry point to create future imaginaries and participatory approaches to recovery as opposed to top-down state-driven masterplans. It will be a reference point for recovery plans that BUL is directly or indirectly involved in, and recovery strategies and imaginary futures that officials and NGOs are engaged with. While participating in archiving the lines between the author, resident, and the observer will be blurred, in some instances a resident will decide to archive his belongings. This act, once multiplied by the collective, will be a step towards negotiating the future of a neighborhood and empowers recovery as unarchiving. This pilot can be a proof of concept and a repository for future recovery plans and egalitarian participatory and community archives.