Finding Room in Beirut: Places of the Everyday
Carole Lévesque

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Finding Room in Beirut. Places of the Everyday demonstrates why it is worth our while to explore the value and contemporary meaning of urban areas about to undergo complete renewal. Branching off from discourses surrounding the terrain vague, the book argues that large populated urban areas meet the criteria of the vague and constitute a particular perspective from which to build a critical stance in regards to the contemporary city. But unlike a terrain vague, a vague urbain—an inhabited area where property ownership is usually obscure and informal behaviours a daily affair—possesses real communities and offers an alternative understanding on how a city can be practiced and how lessons should be learned before its complete transformation. Stemming from a photographic and architectural documentation of Bachoura, a central area of Beirut, Lebanon, the book shows how the vague urbain allows for different ways of inhabiting, ways that are as—or perhaps even more—real and anchored in the imagination of the city as those proposed by standardising developments. Building on the intricacies of found situations, improvised uses and local narratives, it is an exploration as to how the meeting of a marvellous realism with the intrigue, the vague urbain and temporary architecture can provide opportunities for the emergence of hidden narratives.

“The emerging literature on postwar informality in the Arab world mostly pertains to peripheral slums, refugee camps and decaying postcolonial infrastructural sites. Carole Lévesque’s highly original text shifts our perspective towards the peri-center districts in a state of transiency to redefine the meaning of terrain vague inside the city and invest it with architectural interventions to probe the unique nature and inner logic of a dualistic city like Beirut. Only an outsider/insider and empathetic gaze such as hers can enrich our local vision of the ordinary with the marvelous real, adding a unique and imaginative dimension to architectural studies of postwar cities at the global and regional levels.”

Robert Saliba, Professor of architecture and urbanism at the American University of Beirut and editor of Urban Design in the Arab World, Reconceptualizing Boundaries.

Carole Lévesque holds a PhD in the history and theory of architecture and is an associate professor at the School of Design of UQAM in Montreal. Co-founder of the Bureau d’étude de pratiques indisciplinées, her work explores different means by which to represent and engage the urban territory, its temporalities and practices by investigating margins, diversions and hybrid methods.