



• Creativity • Collaboration • Continuity • Community

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FEATURE STORY

STARTING A CONVERSATION ABOUT LAND IN BEIRUT

We were delighted to meet international artist *Otobong Nkanga* in Beirut this month and take part in her installation work: **Landversations Beirut** at the **Beirut Art Center (BAC)**.

Otobong is a wonderful soul and her passion is contagious. In collaboration with activists, artists, architects and permacultivators in our network and from across Lebanon, she put together an intervention team that aims to initiate conversations about land in Beirut and people's relation to it as a source of food, as property, as living areas and public spaces, etc.

The result is Landversations Beirut, an interactive installation featuring 3 tables with different themes: earth, walls, laws. The installation serves as a forum where citizens can meet with urban planners, growers, lawyers and activists to talk about their city's land, soil, laws and walls.

What does soil mean to people who have lived all their lives in apartment buildings? Where does their food come from? Or their water? Can they grow anything in the city? Where? How? What are their rights as property owners or leaseholders? Who owns public spaces? What are the construction laws? How do walls and buildings shape a city and its people? These are some of the questions that visitors have been discussing with the different interventionists every day.

Our friend and SOILS member *Ghassan Al Salman* worked closely with Otobong to design the "earth" table. They designed the earth installation together, and Ghassan added some local species of plants and trees designed to grow and change over the course of the installation. Like the other two, the table is lunar shaped and invites people to look, touch (even smell and taste) and discuss it. Ghassan and *Alexis Baghdadi* are representing SOILS among the interventionists around this table, together with our friends *Hussam Hawwa* from Difaf natural water systems, *Abou Rabih*, *Chawki Boustani* and *Louis Bassil* whom you might know from Souk Al Tayeb.

The installation is open to the public daily from February 10 to April 2, 2016, and on Saturdays and Sundays between 3:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m.

Shared by the Editorial Team



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LET'S FOCUS

ABCYCLING - GUIDE AND TOOL KIT FOR URBAN CYCLING IN BEIRUT

Let's consider some of the benefits of cycling: cycling is healthy, promotes geographical and local knowledge, does create neither noise or air pollution, does not cost municipalities as much for infrastructure costs as cars do, takes a fraction of the space cars do on the road and for parking, cyclists don't indebt themselves to buy their bike, lower maintenance and running costs and most importantly – sexy calves.

Siwar Kraytem (23) is part of the capital's intrepid and growing community that braves the traffic by bicycle. For her final project in graphic design, she decided to create **ABCycling** – a printed guide and tool kit for urban cycling in Beirut. In order to print about 300 copies of the 65-page guide she is currently running a crowd-funding campaign on **Zoomal**.

"It all started 4 years ago, back in my second year of university," Kraytem explained. "Faced with the catastrophic traffic of Ras Beirut, a friend of mine and I decided to dig out our rusty old bicycles in an attempt to get to class on time every morning. It was the best decision I have ever made! It turned my life around, and I have been commuting by bicycle ever since," she underlined.

Seeing that the initial volume was a graphic design project, a lot of attention went into design, hence there are lots of illustrations inside and leaflets and pertinent posters but also inside stories. "The actual cover is screen printed," Kraytem said. "I used screen printing as it is a manual process like pedaling is manual."

"Beirut is full of surprises to me – riding a bike in the city. Even if you take the same road there will be something new, someone will tell you something, I wanted to translate this experience in the guide. Keep it animated like riding a bike in Beirut."

With the help of the funding, Kraytem plans to incorporate more findings gathered over the past 18 months since completing her final year project and addressing practical questions she often has to answer such as for example what do you do in the rain? Are you safe on the road? How do you make yourself more visible? Where to find a bike? The book is mainly divided into three sections: equipment in general, types of bikes in Beirut, etc.

Kraytem's relationship with bicycles is long-standing: she still recalls how her mother pushed her and her brother to start cycling as kids. As a teenager, she barely rode a bicycle. It was only in second year of her graphic design studies that frustration with public transport got her back on one of the old Chinese mountain bikes they had kept over the years – and into bicycle activism.

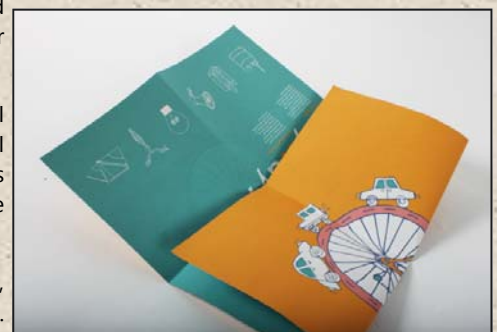
"By the time I had to work on my graduation project, it was obvious it would revolve around the bicycle," she said. "After researching the cycling cultures of the world's cycling capitals, such as Copenhagen, Amsterdam or Portland, I turned to the Beirut scene and conducted surveys and interviewed cyclists in the city. I started by summarizing my findings and research into a paper about the emerging bicycle culture of Beirut."

Especially over the past year, Kraytem has observed an increase in cyclists on Beirut's roads. "I have even felt that people now see me biking on the streets as completely normal versus when I started cycling four years ago, I used to get more looks and comments. Bicycle rides, activities and initiatives such as the [Deghri Bike Messengers](#) have blossomed and become much more popular than just riding on the Corniche, which is great."

"The people driving it are the people who need it most, enjoy it most, and see the beauty of it, free young souls who love the city and want to live in it on their own terms," she put forward. "That said, I think it is still growing and has so much more room to grow, it's up to us to keep the energy flowing."

Kraytem concedes that it is not easy to bring about change in Beirut. "This is exactly why I resorted to the bike, because it is just such an easy thing that everyone can start on a small individual level and collectively it just becomes so powerful. It only takes a couple hundred dollars to own one, and it is very accessible so no one has an excuse!"

Kraytem uses her bike virtually every day, to get from Mar Elias to work in Gemmayzeh and then from there, either to Hamra or Badaro to meet a friend for coffee. She also uses her bicycle on weekends – no longer to ride on the Corniche but to Batroun.



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ABCycling includes a section on gender-related issues as well as on safety. This pioneering guide is designed for people who wish to cycle in Beirut but need a little advice and encouragement, and for those who are curious to know more about this small but vibrant subculture. Anyone who has experienced the thrill (and Schadenfreude) of weaving through traffic jams knows that the slow speed at which cars often have to go allows cyclists to overtake them. But it is crucial to keep a watchful eye out for car doors opening or pedestrians that may sneak through at any time.

Bicycle cities like Copenhagen, Amsterdam and Portland emerged through civic movements and investments by municipalities. Kraytem though puts forward that Beirut has by far the better weather. "Beirut has such beautiful weather. In my research I was looking at Amsterdam and Copenhagen. They may be flat cities, but they get super cold and windy for an extended period of time and people still cycle. It is such a shame how people here are locked up in their cars."

Support the ABCycling crowdfunding campaign by following this link:

<http://www.zoomaal.com/projects/abcycling?ref=44032019>

Shared by Nathalie Rosa Bucher



Photos by Siwar Kraytem

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THE CHAIN EFFECT

Beirut is a relatively small city with old neighborhoods, narrow streets and road network development that is not in line with its population increase or city development. It has a weak, informal public transport 'system', and the car ownership rate is among the highest in the world with the private car being the most popular mode of transport by far. As a result, Beirut suffers from unbearable traffic congestion and high car dependency, which creates multiple negative effects on the economy, society and the environment. **Cycling** is far from being viewed as a mode of transport and is considered mostly a sport or leisure activity. Furthermore, the car is king of the road, with on-street parking, double parking, and investment in monstrous bridge, tunnel and road networks mainly serving cars with little regard to other users.

From this context, '**The Chain Effect**' was initiated by three young professionals and friends, out of a passion for sustainability and street art. The Chain Effect's mission is to introduce the idea of the bicycle as a sustainable and convenient form of urban mobility and promote its use in Beirut through street art, public installations and community painting. The vision is that the bicycle becomes a viable and desirable option for getting around conveniently in Beirut, transforming the city into a healthier, more efficient and more pleasant place to live in and flow through. The founders believe that the bicycle is a fundamental symbol of equality and sustainability, and both cities and people would benefit tremendously by introducing it into the urban landscape. Street art was an intended choice for this initiative because it is highly visible and targets everyone regardless of economic class, educational levels or access. It is also very impactful and ideal for the theme of sustainable mobility because it is situational and forces people to think about their transport patterns while they are in the process of moving around.

The main objectives of the movement are:

- To provoke people to think about their travel habits in a heavily congested city through situational street art.
- To influence people to look at the bicycle as more than just something for sport or leisure but also as a way to get around efficiently, quickly, inexpensively and pleasantly.
- In the longer term, to increase awareness and initiate a debate on urban cycling among the public, planners and decision makers to eventually create and push for a bicycle culture.

So far, our members and volunteers have painted **13 bicycle-themed murals** around Beirut. The idea is to choose walls at streets and junctions that are heavily congested, where people will have the time to look and also feel the gravity of the messages while stuck in traffic in their cars. Messages are generally in English and Arabic, short and to the point, and highlight the benefits of cycling in different ways depending on where the wall is painted. Several of the walls usually start with 'If you rode a bicycle' and end with different things such as 'you'd be there by now', 'If you rode a bicycle, parking would be easy' (near paid parking lots) and 'If you rode a bicycle, ...



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LET'S SHARE OUR NEWS

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... gas would be free' (near gas stations). Furthermore, simple but eye-catching designs and patterns are chosen, always with a similar color scheme to create links between the various painted walls around the city. Their largest project so far is a 90 m x 6 m wall that was designed, planned and painted with around 45 school students and scouts members in the district of Batroun as part of a master's degree project in environmental education.

The Chain Effect came about because we did not want to replicate what others were already doing in the cycling scene in Lebanon. There were already a good number of bike shops and bike rental spaces, groups that organize rides in the city and outside for different levels, and a few others advocating for sustainable transport in broad terms. An important missing link was slowly introducing the culture of cycling: the idea that the bike is not a toy or just a sports machine, but that it is a viable and convenient form of transportation. The aim was to spread that message and provoke people to think about the bicycle differently. We focused on the fact that the bicycle is convenient, fast, cheap and reliable - not just that it is healthy and environmentally friendly. These are positive effects but not necessarily the main reason someone would use a bicycle. As a first step in the change chain, we started creating awareness. Other organizations focus more on other parts of the chain, such as bike schools, bike rides and bike messengers. Through the combined efforts of several cycling related organizations and businesses it seems the community of cyclists in Lebanon is quickly growing and improving.



Apart from wall painting, we are also shooting and collecting a series of **portraits of cyclists** in Beirut. Many are aware that there is actually a small but growing community of bike commuters in Beirut and that it is quite practical and relatively safe to cycle in the city. The idea of the series is to highlight these people who use a bike as their main way of getting around. By sharing cyclists' stories and perceptions of cycling in the city, the aim is to 'normalize' cycling and make it seem more accessible to Beirut's and overcome this notion that cycling is something that only Danish and Dutch people do. Eventually, the photos will be printed in large format and exposed in a public outdoor exhibition printing and exposing these portraits in large format.

To stay up to date with The Chain Effect's work, follow us on our social media pages:

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/TheChainEffect/?fref=ts>

Instagram: <https://instagram.com/the.chain.effect/>

Shared by Zeina Hawa @the.chain.effect



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UPCOMING EVENTS

"MONOT STREET BOOK MARKET"



MARCH 5, 2016

10:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.

Monot street - Beirut

Buy or sell old and new books.

<https://www.facebook.com/events/463254730547226/>

"ONE DAY IN JAPAN" LUNCH AND CONCERT



MARCH 26, 2016

2:00 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.

Beit El Nessim, Mina - Tripoli

Enjoy a Japanese lunch and traditional Shaku-hachi flute concert.

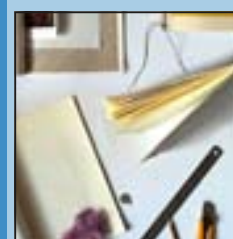
Lunch: \$30

Concert: LBP 25,000

Both: LBP 55,000

<https://www.facebook.com/events/956176444430835/>

"CONTENT INTO FORM" BOOKMAKING WORKSHOP



APRIL 2, 9, 16, 23, 2016

2:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.

Sursock Museum, Ashrafieh - Beirut

4-part workshop on how to design, layout, print, and bind a book.

Fees: LBP 40,000

<https://www.facebook.com/events/1713998898839876/>

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SAVE PAPER – Do you really need to print this newsletter?

L.E.T.S. Lebanon

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LET'S SHARE OUR NEWS

DISCOVER THE BEAUTY OF EARTHEN NATURAL PLASTERS - WORKSHOP

Earth has been used for thousands of years in construction and even today 50% of the world's population lives in houses made of this material!

But contemporary builders neglect this material, even though it was used in many **UNESCO World Heritage constructions**, from the Great Wall of China to the Alhambra in Granada.

In order to rediscover this beautiful and sensual ecological material, we are holding a 2-day earthen plasters initiation workshop for the first time in Lebanon.

EARTHEN NATURAL PLASTERS WORKSHOP- - - - -

Date: Saturday and Sunday April 16-17, 2016

Location: Lassa, near Qartaba - Jbeil

The workshop will be held in a small permaculture-friendly family farm.

For fees and registration details, check Page 6

Earth is present everywhere in the world, literally beneath our feet. It was the primary construction material in many sites of early human settlements, such as the Iranian desert in Kashan. Combined with bold construction techniques that captured wind energy effectively, it guaranteed living comfort in any season. It is not only an ecological material (one that does not require transportation or much transformation, i.e. gray energy, before it can be used) but also one with great thermal properties, breathability, and moisture regulating capacities (it will absorb humidity in a humid room and release it in a dry one, ensuring maximum comfort).

People have always used what was around them to build houses: timber in forests, stones in mountains and earth in deserts. Today's buildings all look the same around the world and use concrete at the expense of their traditional local characteristics. But the damaging effects of concrete on the environment are now well known (notably the energy necessary for its preparation), and so are its health consequences - just ask masons what it does to their hands and lungs. There are no such problems with earth; on the contrary, any potter or ceramic artist will tell you how soft the earth is, how sweet it smells, and how malleable it is. You can even work on it months after it dries up, just by adding water to it.

But that doesn't mean it is a fragile material: if it is worked correctly, it can last for centuries, even thousands of years. There are arches made of earth in Egypt that date back to the time of the pharaohs.

In Lebanon, you only have to look at the ruins of old houses (in the mountains and on the coast) to see how unbaked earth was used in traditional houses. Earth roofs were made of clay soil that was flattened with a round stone after the rain in winter, and inside houses earthen plasters reinforced with hay were used to fill the joints between walls' stones and insulate rooms in winter as in summer. Earthen plaster used to cover walls effectively fills gaps but allows the walls to breathe. By adding hay to it, it serves as a coating to regulate heat. Finishing earthen plasters are thinner and have mostly aesthetic purposes. Different mixture compositions produce different renderings, depending on your preferences. You can even imprint motifs in the plaster to add texture to it. The work of artist (or mason?) Daniel Duchert gives an interesting idea about the possibilities of finishing plaster.

My name is *Joanna Parker* and I am happy to conduct this workshop for the first time in Lebanon. The aim is to give people the chance to reconnect with **natural building** in a friendly learning weekend.

I am an architect myself, having earned my degree in France at the École Nationale d'Architecture de Grenoble and I completed my master's degree in construction architecture and culture by CRA-Terre research laboratory. I have also explored the use of natural materials (earth, wood, straw) in different workshops and construction projects with professional builders.

You can check out my projects on this link: <https://issuu.com/joannaparker3/docs/portfolio>

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*Earthen souks in Kashan, Iran
Photo by Joanna Parker*



*Earthen plaster and sculptures
Photo by Joanna Parker*



*Application of earthen plasters
Photo by Joanna Parker*

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PROGRAM AND REGISTRATION- - - - -

During the earthen plasters initiation workshop, you will get the chance to discover the wonderful material that earth is through simple and fun experimentation, then put this into practice by creating earthen plasters on small surfaces. This will enable you to create your own natural earthen plasters for future projects.

Fees: LBP 90,000 (\$60) per person (full payment on the first day of the workshop)*
This includes the 2-day workshop 4 vegetarian meals cooked with fresh farm products (pesticide- and chemical-free), snacks/beverages, and accommodation (double room or dorm)

The deadline for registration is April 10, 2016

Places are limited (maximum 8 participants), reservation is on a first-come-first-served basis.

To register, send an email to joannaparker@hotmail.fr stating your name, age, telephone number, occupation and your interest in the workshop (+any special dietary needs)

Note: Musicians are encouraged to bring their instruments with them ☺

**A reduced price can be negotiated in case of financial difficulty (please specify why you qualify for this reduction in your registration email)*

Based on participants' interest, the initiation workshop could be complemented by future workshops on natural building such as cob bricks (like those used in houses in the Bekaa valley), cob or straw bale construction.

Shared by Joanna Parker



Photos of earthen finishing plasters from the website of Daniel Duchert: www.lehm-design-raum.de

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PROTECTED MIGRATORY BIRDS OVER LEBANON - THE EURASIAN SPOONBILL

The **Eurasian spoonbill** (*Platalea leucorodia*) is a large-sized migratory bird that flies over Lebanon in autumn on its way to Africa and then in early April back north.

This social bird migrates in medium-sized flocks that can number up to 100 individuals. As a wading bird, it prefers to stay near the edges of shallow wetlands that abound in plants and reeds. Small flocks fly over the Lebanese coast and over the Litani river, stopping for a short while to catch some rest in the **Ammiq swamplands** (Bekaa valley) and over some small coastal islands before resuming its long route.

The bird can reach a length of up to 85 cm with a wingspan of around 120 cm. It has white feathers with a yellow spot on its chest, and black legs. During mating season, a white crest appears on its head. But its most distinctive feature is the long spoon-like bill that gives it its name (in Arabic, it is also known as *Abou Malaa'a* - أبو ملعقة). Its beak is black with yellow with yellow stripes, and ends with a flat rounded spoon shape. It uses this appendage to catch and feed on mollusks, fish, worms, insects, frogs and grass.

The spoonbill is not a game bird, and it is protected by the **African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement** (AEWA) intergovernmental treaty. Hunting it is punishable by law.

Shared by Fouad Itani

An Arabic version of this article was published on February 18, 2016, in Sayd Magazine's website: <http://www.sayd-magazine.com/?p=3210>



See more photos of spoonbills and other birds on **Birds of Lebanon and the Middle East** <https://www.facebook.com/birdsoflebanon/?fref=photo>

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PHOTO OF THE MONTH

You sent us your submissions and you voted for your favorites. Here it is, the PHOTO OF THE MONTH:
To send us your photos, email us on contact.soilslebanon@gmail.com



Faces of Lebanon
Photo by Amal Charif

Faces of Lebanon <https://www.facebook.com/Faces-of-Lebanon-592958520806592/?fref=ts>

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GET IN TOUCH, GET INVOLVED


Do you enjoy reading this newsletter?


Send us your feedback and suggestions, share your news, photos, tips or thoughts, or find out more.


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A THOUGHT TO SHARE ...

"When a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower."



–Alexander Den Heijer

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