

Contesting Hard-Line Boundaries:

Towards a Reconceptualization of Beirut's Neighborhoods

Ahmad Gharbieh

Beirut Urban Lab – American University of Beirut

Geographical boundaries are notoriously unyielding. This may be more glaring in the case of geopolitical borders between nation-states and the hostile guardedness they exhibit, but it is equally true across scales, down to the divisions of neighborhoods that make up the towns and cities we inhabit. Even as they present as more traversable, they too are rigid and inflexible, both in their representational form as literal hard lines on a map and in their hard-line nature as uncompromising and ubiquitous political realities. Separating the land into clearly defined units is after all one of the principal conventions of political maps. The boundaries they harbor are precisely what these 'reference maps' –as they are often called– *refer* to. While the maps might also show infrastructural and natural features such as roads and waterways, their declared interest remains unchanged: to make conspicuous and assert an abstract taxonomy, one that the map deems necessary for it to provide its account of the world.

This is true of all maps and mapping systems. They impose an alien classificatory order upon the human landscape, and, while silently pretending to merely observe and record, they intervene and participate in bringing the landscape into being. Critiques of the map as a socially constructed text with claims of unbiased comprehensiveness are well established by now. Denis Wood provides a useful distinction between the two ways in which maps work to achieve their assertions. The first is that they are operationally efficient, they are able to carry out a task and practically do not fail. But maps also work in the sense of labor, they toil as they apply themselves and ceaselessly reproduce the culture from which they emerge.¹ Distinct sets of features and rules govern the production of the map: *a priori* features and the rules of measurement that govern its technical production and subliminal features and the rules of the social order that govern its cultural production.² They act together as the means by which the map figures its measure of the world, separating itself from the territory –the reality we *sense*– while simultaneously speaking about the territory to deliver a reality we *understand*.

The operational efficacy in maps, coupled with the fact that “they are generalized, scientific and seem to present an expert, neutral point of view,”³ instills in them the kind of credibility that allows their assumptions to pass unnoticed. As these trusted visual devices insist on adhering to preordained configurations such as fixed neighborhood divisions, all the while assuming their detached neutrality, they

¹ Denis Wood, *The Power of Maps* (London; New York: The Guilford Press, 1992), 1.

² J. B. Harley, “Deconstructing the Map,” *Cartographica* 26, no. 2 (1989): 6.

³ Catherine D'Ignazio, “What Would Feminist Data Visualization Look Like?,” *Center for Civic Media* (blog), December 1, 2015. <https://civic.mit.edu/feminist-data-visualization>.

conceal the lived practices of those whose experiences, although subject to the imposed reality of the hard line, might otherwise unsettle the neatly divided city. Generalized knowledge is necessarily exclusionary, often at the expense of the oppressed, the disenfranchised, and the marginalized. This, of course, is not surprising. Harley reminds us that, historically, both the makers and users of maps belonged to a very limited and small elite, and that fusing policy and territory in images was always used as an intellectual apparatus of power.⁴

It is tempting to think that newly developed and increasingly available mapmaking technologies, at the center of which are GIS and digital visualizations tools, can provide some liberating possibilities. Like citizen journalism, citizen mapping is dependent on access to content production tools and usable dissemination formats facilitated by digital interfaces. And the many synergies that open-source GIS software in particular promotes between multiple types of mappers across the amateur-professional spectrum, as well as the exchange and potential convergences it encourages between their mappings, is an undeniable and serious challenge to the authoritative power historically embedded in cartographic practice. But this could well simply reproduce the basic (but flawed) premise that mapmakers –all mapmakers– are involved in a scientific form of knowledge creation and that the map consequently delivers an objective view of the world, accurate, and value free. Catherine D'Ignazio warns that “[w]hile there is a lot of hype about data visualization, and a lot of new tools for doing it, ... fewer people are thinking critically about the politics and ethics of representation.”⁵ The irony is that, as access to geolocalized maps expands and their producers and consumers diversify, standardization becomes more and more attractive. Not only does a geographical constant facilitate the clear and tangible advantages of “open data,” it also comes to symbolize the noble status of hard-earned democratic shareability, making it increasingly difficult to give up.

And why should we give it up? When readily available, a common technical frame of geographic reference can be vital in contexts plagued by the scarcity, secrecy, and neglect of data in both its raw and visualized forms. What is important to keep in mind is that, in many places, something seemingly as straightforward as an open, georeferenced, detailed, and reliable base map is hard to come by, let alone the datasets that might begin to populate it. It is certainly the case in Lebanon that such digital artifacts are both urgent and precious. The Lebanese state discloses little to no information about its public sector, which is increasingly seen as nontransparent and irredeemably broken amid the unprecedented current financial crisis. And this lack of public data in accessible formats is becoming a hallmark of its corrupt status quo.

If consistent administrative boundaries expedite the sharing and aggregation of data compatibly –equipping citizens, researchers and policy-makers to craft more

⁴ J. B. Harley, “Deconstructing the Map.”

⁵ D'Ignazio, “Feminist Data Visualization.”

informed and effective decisions collectively– then the lines’ debatable claims of forming correct and finite representations of neighborhoods can be momentarily overlooked. But it should not be forgiven. The map’s *a priori* and subliminal features that govern its production are not magically undone with a more open cartographic practice; GIS mapping tends to perpetuate the same classificatory systems already carved into the cannon of cartographic convention. And its aesthetics of dispassionate computation further reinforce the big myth of science and the blind ethics of accuracy. A more accessible cartography is essential, but, for it to be more critical, perhaps, as D’Ignazio suggests, “there are ways to do more responsible *representation* [emphasis added].”⁶

In what follows, we will interrogate the role practice could play in the delineation of neighborhoods and the defining of urban boundaries, examine how different areas of Beirut are lived/perceived, and how such socio-spatialities could be represented across digital visualization tools. We will briefly highlight the divergent approaches to classifying the city’s neighborhoods as tested through our work on the Beirut Built Environment Database (BBED) at Beirut Urban Lab, and look at examples of previous mapping projects that propose more alternative methods of reading the city such as islands of security, territories of sectarian political signs, and the spatial accounts of deliverymen.

The official division of Municipal Beirut into quarters and sectors can be traced back to a booklet issued by *Electricité du Liban* in 1973, in collaboration with Beirut Municipality as well as the Water and Telephone Companies and the Ministry of Post and Telegraph. As cities are homogenized into a standard idea of what neighborhoods are –what they look like (how they are defined), but also how they come to look the way they do (how they evolve)– it is administrative concerns that fuel these conventions over time. The 1973 example is a clear demonstration of how the conceptualization of neighborhoods, among other hegemonic map tropes, is often set, delivered, and maintained by those who hold the tools of power – cartography itself being one of them. As a group of government agencies, the author(ity) behind the original map of Beirut with its divisions into cadastral zones (quarters) and the more frequently encountered smaller districts (sectors) is a testament to the primary interests behind such jurisdictional impositions on the territory. But while they enable regulatory frameworks such as building law ascription and public service management such as basic fee-collection, the resulting lines are not detached geometric abstractions whose impact is only visible on the level of compartmentalized governance. Firstly, they were roughly informed by the city’s physical –natural and infrastructural– features of the time and continue to retain a material familiarity. More importantly, they have lingered as the default defining outlines of Beirut’s neighborhoods in cartographic representations since their inception, nourishing an omnipresent geographical description with tangible ramifications, despite them being at odds with the mental maps, practices, and

⁶ D’Ignazio, “Feminist Data Visualization.”

popular designations and appellations of different neighborhoods by city dwellers, even until today.

An unofficial Beirut indeed exists in practice, from the commonly used names of buildings, streets, and public spaces that do not correspond to their official counterparts to enduring ghost boundaries such as the infamous civil war's Green Line to, of course, neighborhood accounts that clash with their manifestations on the map. But as mentioned earlier, hard lines are more than just theoretical shapes on an administrative map; they are political realities that perform myriad expressions of this hardness. For instance, while crossing Beirut's municipal boundary might not feel like 'leaving the city', there will necessarily be more frequent electrical blackouts. The gerrymandering of electoral sectors is another classic case of how even the slightest manipulation of district boundaries can have absolute and lasting effects.

The most concerning discord for us while setting up the BBED platform is how the city's official districts fail to reflect the different physical, environmental, and socioeconomic conditions seen on the ground. As a public online geo-portal with multi-layered social, environmental, and economic data on building activity in Greater Beirut, one of the database's main objectives is to address the gaps in public information on urban development. In building this database, it was important to visualize, read, and analyze the data on the neighborhood level while remaining sensitive to indicators of class, sect, and urban fabric, to name but a few. In an attempt to address these concerns, and partly as an intuitive act of simple resistance against the troubling qualities of the cadastral map –its finality, disinterested erasures, and insistence on privileging a controlled and arbitrary space discipline– we took an aim at conceptualizing Beirut's neighborhoods in another way [Figure 1].

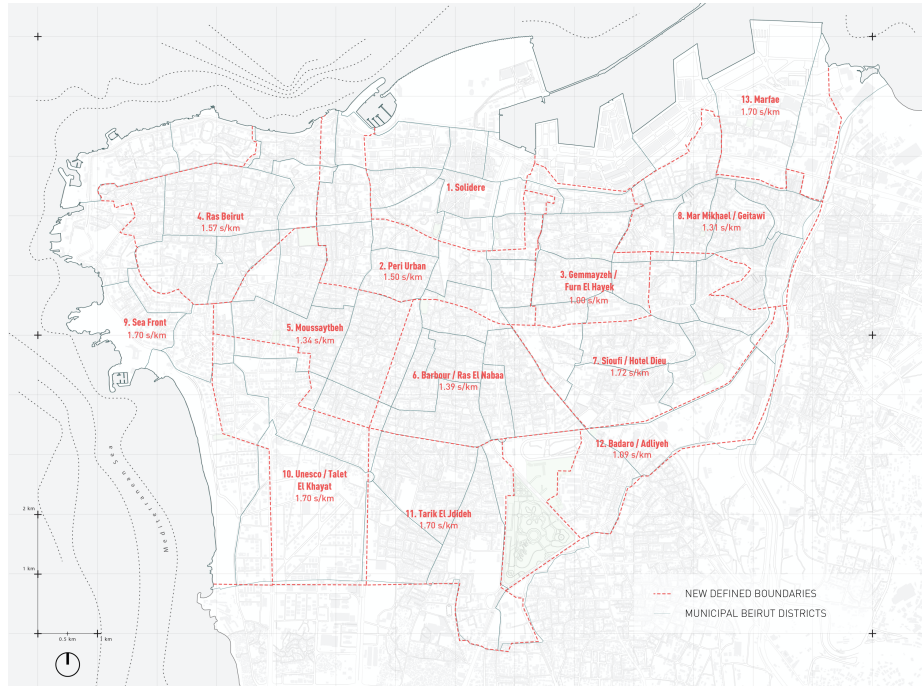


Figure 1: An experiment to divide Beirut's districts into neighborhoods with relatively equal surface areas. Beirut Built Environment Database, Beirut Urban Lab

As exciting as it was, this exercise of drawing our own non-official neighborhoods proved a complicated endeavor that requires more careful considerations. Admittedly, one of the main flaws in our process was that we tried to reconcile this more 'faithful' reconfiguration of Beirut's neighborhoods with an equal-area distribution that we hoped would make for more sound comparative analysis on the mathematical level. Many issues ensued, one of the most obvious being the discrepancy in building and population density across these new zones, which can render an equal-area metric of measurement useless. The more fundamental problem is one faced by all those who use maps to examine the terrain through both a geometric *and* an experiential lens: usually, something has got to give. But the main drive behind abandoning –or at least suspending– this attempt at a more socially aware map of Beirut's neighborhoods was our belief that in the context of the BBED and the role we envision it playing towards a collaborative ecosystem of urban change, a common frame of reference –one that enables an easy exchange between datasets made available by different groups– should trump all.

At no time was this more poignant than in the aftermath of the blast on August 4, 2020, when a colossal explosion in Beirut Port killed more than 200 people, injured thousands, and destroyed one-third of the city. Until today, multiple international and local NGOs, syndicates, activists, civil society groups, and state actors involved in damage assessment and recovery of the devastated areas are scrambling to collect, locate, process, consolidate, and analyze spatial data, which is made even more difficult under the current COVID-19-related restrictions on mobility. Shortly after the blast, the BBED base map was shared directly with many parties engaged

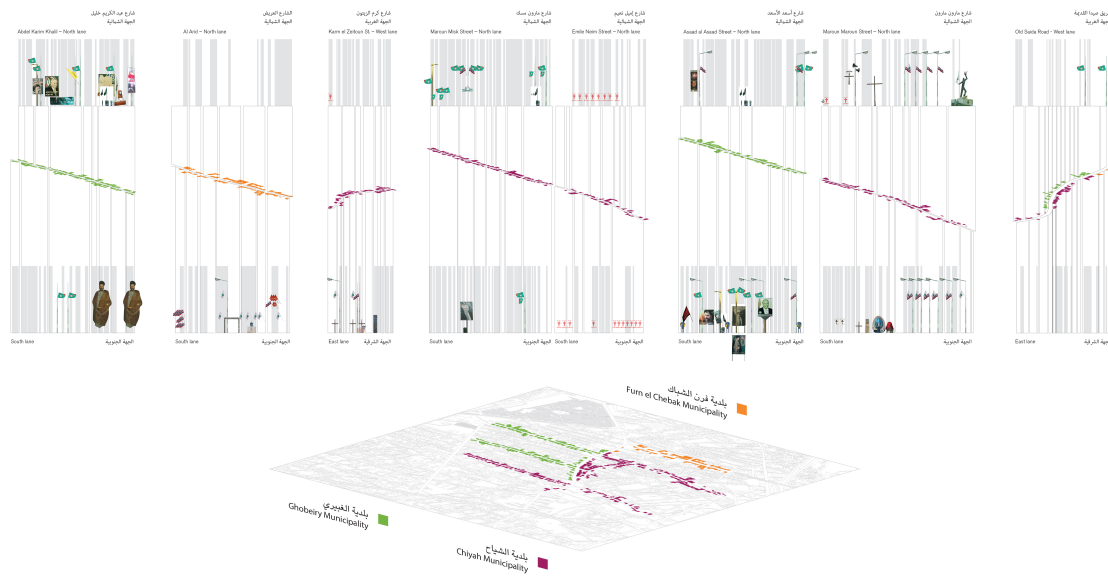


Figure 3: Territorializing the Street. Ahmad Gharbieh and Mona Fawaz, 2015

In another mapping project that investigated strategies of learning and navigating the city among 23 food delivery drivers residing and working in Beirut, the (re)formation of neighborhoods was a primary aim, and the excavation of their forms necessitated inventive methods of data collection and visualization. The interlocutors were asked to name the neighbourhoods that make up the city, as well as all the landmarks that they can list within them. Plotting the location of each mentioned landmark, tracing a derived outline around the individual clusters, and overlapping all the final accounts of neighbourhoods on one map [Figure 4], allowed for a very particular city to emerge, one that exposes intricate patterns of spatial reasoning and elastic boundary negotiations. By comparing the result to a map of Beirut's official sectors [Figure 5], we can clearly see the extent of these divergences. The intricacies and elasticities are even more visible on the micro level, where the complexities behind the delivery drivers' collective neighbourhood accounts can be probed even further. By comparing two Beirut neighborhoods, Hamra and Jeitawi, [Figure 6], for example, we see how the former interlocks with other neighborhoods while the latter is cradled within Achrafieh, itself a container of smaller entities and sub-neighborhoods. This fluidity is a testament to the fact that neighborhoods are seldom perceived in the same strict manner as those of the spatially regimented map, but are always informed by both individual and shared lived experiences and impressions. Interviews with the delivery drivers, who are almost all Syrian refugees, revealed that many factors inform their neighborhood configurations from how safe –or dangerous– a certain area is to how generous its inhabitants' tipping practices.⁷

⁷ Mona Fawaz, Dounia Salamé and Isabela Serhan, "Seeing the City as a Delivery Driver: Practices of Syrian Men in Beirut, Lebanon," in Fawaz et al., *Refugees as City-Makers*, 60–81.

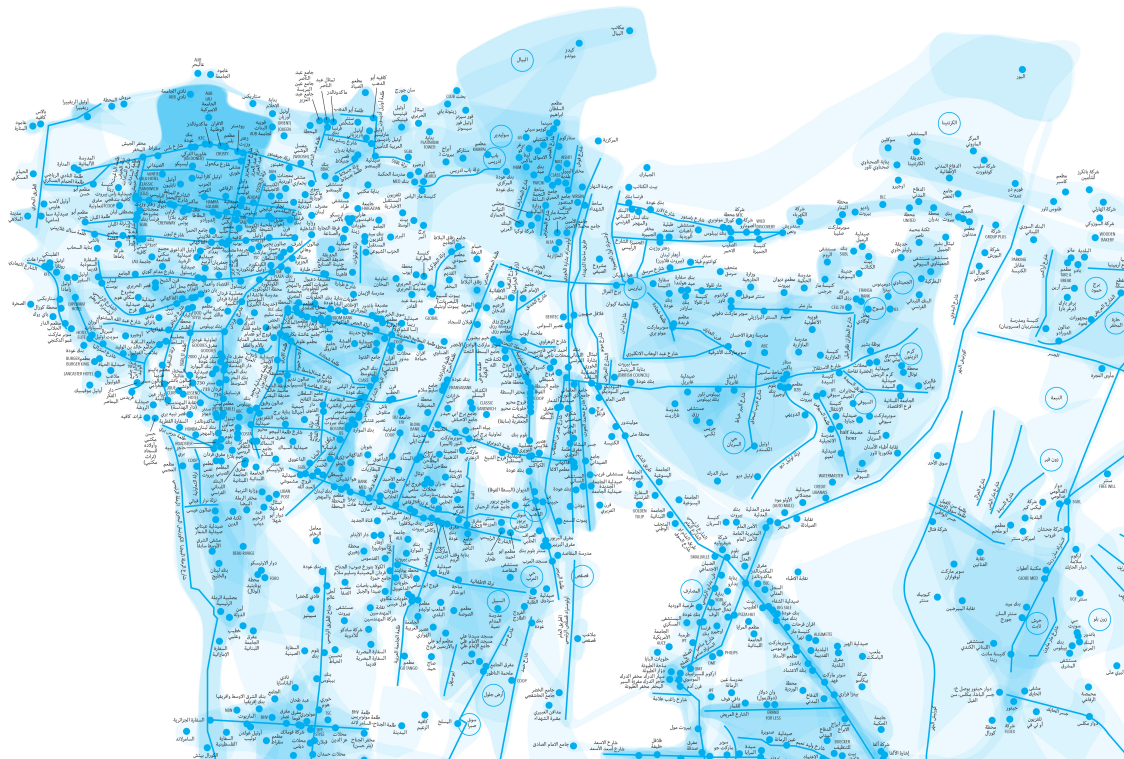


Figure 4: Delivery Drivers' Landmarks and Accounts of Beirut's Neighborhoods. Ahmad Gharbieh, Mona Fawaz, Monica Basbous, and Dounia Salamé, 2018

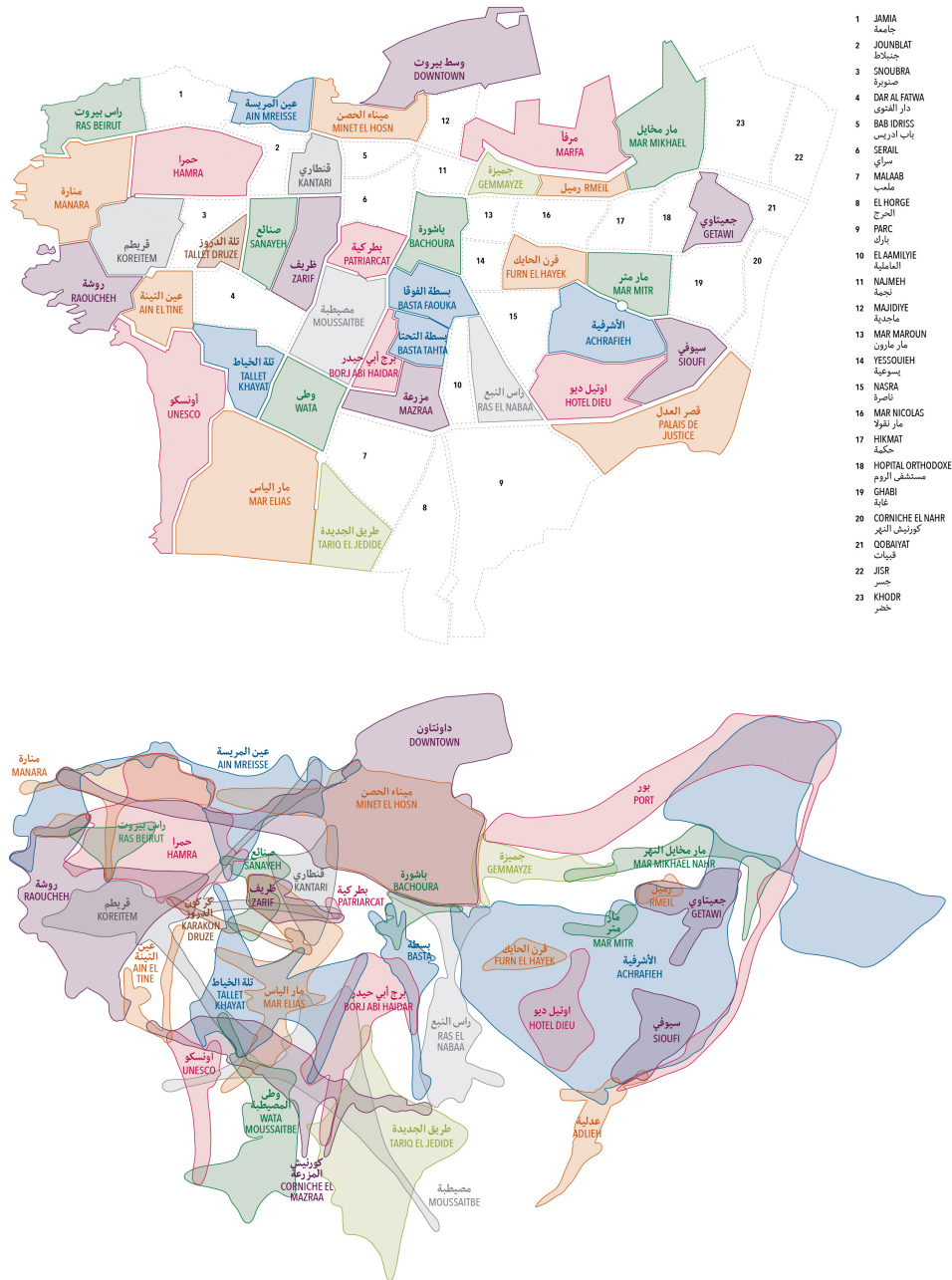


Figure 5: Administrative Sectors vs. Combined Delivery Drivers' Accounts of Neighborhoods. Ahmad Gharbieh, Mona Fawaz, Monica Basbous, and Dounia Salamé, 2018

The above mappings illustrate how contesting the fixity of hard lines must consider the more complex manner in which the city is reproduced through practices of everyday life. Especially as times of crisis reinscribe the need to rely on pre-existing demarcations, we need not dismiss the more authoritative, formal, and ultimately more conservative geographical boundaries but should try to be mindful of their

utility as well as their overbearing presence and the implications of their finality. We need to use them selectively, propose critical ways through which they are visualized, and more importantly, engage mapping explorations that challenge both the method and result of their delineation, generating radically different neighborhood representations in the process.

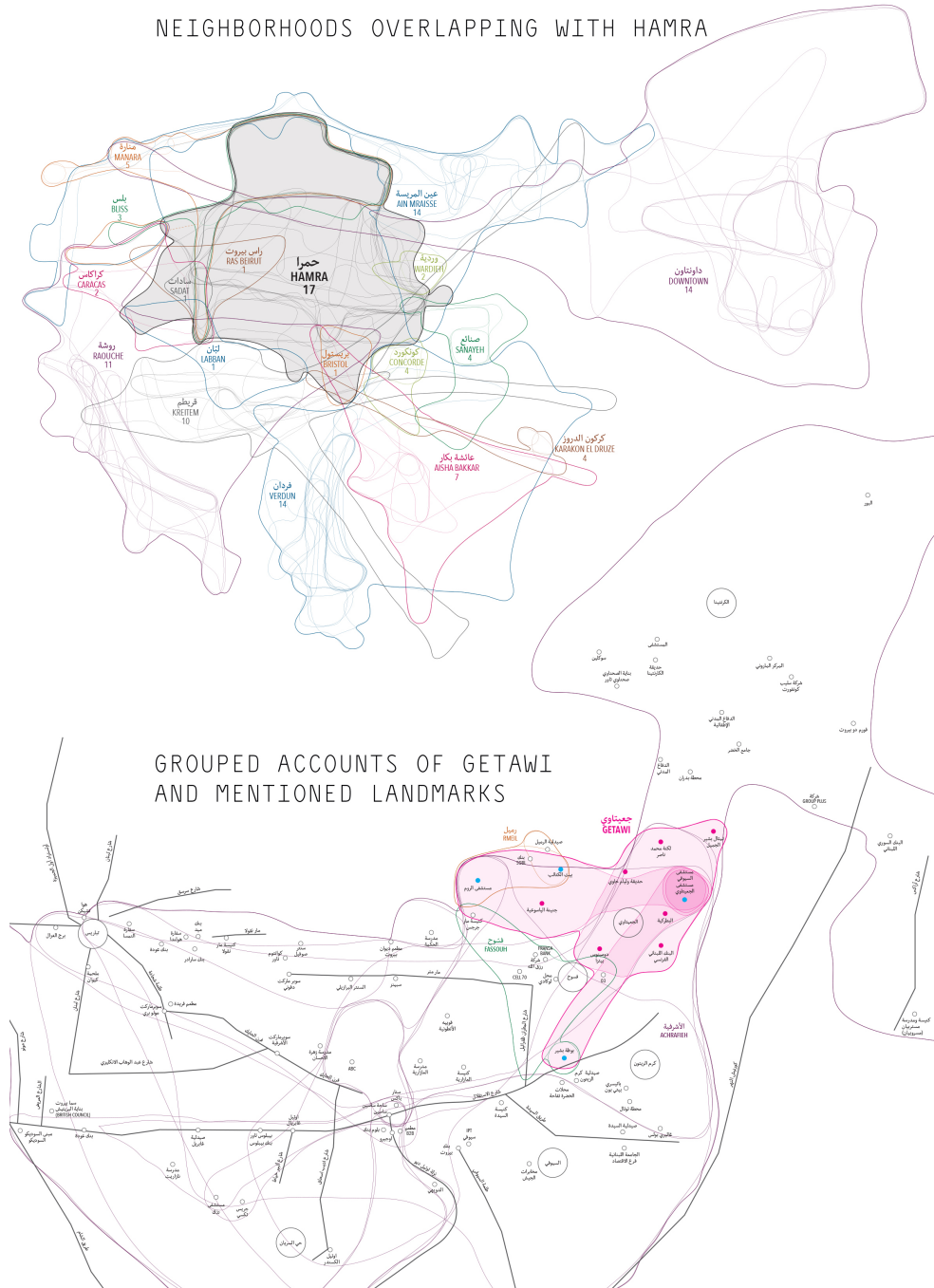


Figure 6: Delivery Drivers' Accounts of Hamra and Getawi Neighborhoods. Ahmad Gharbieh, Mona Fawaz, Monica Basbous, and Dounia Salamé, 2018

Ahmad Gharbieh, Beirut Urban Lab, American University of Beirut, ae21@aub.edu.lb