

# Outside interest

An architect and his wife have made a modern yet classic home from which to look over the city of Beirut.  
By Johanna Thornycroft. Photographs by Andreas Von Einsiedel



**The living area** The spacious double-height living area features a wall of glass – which can slide away – facing an astounding view to the south of Beirut. The modular sofa is by Piero Lissoni for Living Divani ([livingdivani.it](http://livingdivani.it)), and the caned pentagon armchair is by Philippe Bestenheider for Fratelli Boffi ([fratelliboffi.it](http://fratelliboffi.it)). The dining table was designed by Bernard Khoury and made by Doumit Tannous, a local carpenter; the chairs are vintage, by Hans Wegner.

The architect Bernard Khoury returned to Beirut in the 1990s full of optimism about the reconstruction of his home town after 15 years of crushing civil war. 'To me Beirut was the most interesting laboratory in the world, the most dynamic city on earth,' he explains. But his dream of being part of the promised culturally sensitive regeneration effort was never quite realised. 'In fact,' he says, 'I believe that the disillusion and the outcome of the conflict has been more problematic than the conflict itself.'

Khoury, who studied architecture at the Rhode Island School of Design and has a master's in architectural studies from Harvard, is a co-founder of the Arab Center for Architecture and established his own practice in 1993. He talks wistfully about the planned rebuilding of Beirut and how it was intended to create a sophisticated capital in the Middle East, but through a combination of national politics, impotent public bodies and intermittent violence it has not happened. The private sector took over, architecture competitions ceased and no public debate was held.

Work was hard to come by but Khoury made his name building clubs and restaurants – B018, Yabani, Centrale – which became hotspots. Innumerable defeats and aborted projects were the result of his resistance to the prevailing poor standards, by which only financial viability ruled and lacklustre, inappropriate design was the norm. Beirut was – and still is – being crammed with gloomy, introverted apartment buildings with poorly ventilated interiors and dusty little balconies. Now Khoury has an international profile, driven in part by his ability to create alliances with the growing number of enlightened entrepreneurs in the region and build standout projects.

His own home is the perfect showcase for his aesthetic. Eschewing sea views and facing south, towards the sprawling city, the building sits on a formerly abandoned, very narrow plot beside the infamous Damascus Road, once the line between East and West Beirut. 'A friend bought it years ago for very little and it appealed to me that it was neither in the East nor the West, and also that it is surrounded by low-level university buildings,



**The living area** The polished aluminium low table is by Karen Chekerdjian ([karenchekerdjian.com](http://karenchekerdjian.com)). The digital print on the white-oak-veneered lower wall is by Walid Raad. The break in the wall leads to the entry and staircase. The floor above has a glass screen, behind which are the children's quarters.

**The staircase** White-oak veneer and black steel create a textural and colour contrast in the staircase, which was made in two sections and installed by crane. Each tread comprises an oak inset placed in the metal frame.

**The swimming pool** The lap pool is on the roof. At this level it becomes clear that hundreds of new sea-facing buildings now clog up the city's skyline, whereas to the south and west there are still sight corridors to the mountains. 'It was an acrobatic project on a difficult site, but worth it,' Khoury says.



cemeteries, churches and the French embassy, so there was no chance of building up close.'

Khoury shares the home – which covers three floors of the nine-storey building – with his wife, Nathalie, who works at Beirut Art Center, and their children, Teymour, 15, and Lilas, 11. The top floor features a pool, a pair of giant light fixtures and a raised outdoor dining area with sweeping views of the city, but Khoury insists 'it is not a penthouse'.

One arrives in a lift, straight into the spectacular main living space, where a front-facing glass wall retracts to leave only a balcony walkway with a waist-height glass barrier. Similarly, there is only a glass screen around the pool. A steel mesh 'bridge' allows access across the room at mezzanine level. This is not a home for the faint-hearted.

A simple kitchen on the main floor features pale marble worktops, and behind the living space is a cloakroom and master bedroom. A bathroom is set beyond an oak-clad bedhead, which acts as a screen. The children's rooms and bathrooms are tucked away on the floor above.

Nathalie says that once she got used to the idea of the unconventional shell her husband designed, she told him she was happy to go along with it on one condition: that she could furnish the interior without interference. Her choice of furniture includes contemporary pieces such as a modular sofa by the Italian design polymath Piero Lissoni and vintage mid-century classics by the likes of Hans Wegner. It makes for a stylish mix.

The backdrop Khoury has created was made using traditional materials – wood, steel and plaster – in a modern fashion, and he mentions his pride in Lebanese skills often. 'All the interior woodwork and some of the furniture here was made by Doumit Tannous, a local carpenter,' he says. 'My grandfather was a carpenter and my father was an architect and furniture designer, so there's a sense of continuing a family tradition.'

Despite subtle nods to the past, the home feels like a dramatic, exciting and forward-looking response to the still-broken city below. As Khoury says, 'I may not be able to change what's happening in Beirut now, but this house is my vision of what it could be in the future.' ■



**The middle level** The matt black polyurethane and plaster cover concealing the air-conditioning apparatus appears to hover over the living area. 'The modern tradition has rarely used ceilings for more than decoration,' Khoury notes. The bridge across the front enhances the feeling of floating above the city. Long, narrow windows have been inserted on all sides of the property. The cabinets on two sides of the living area are on wheels.

**The master suite**, which is behind the living area, extends the width of the property, with plenty of natural light provided by large windows at either end. Above the bed is a digital print by Hiroyuki Masuyama ([hiroyukimasuyama.com](http://hiroyukimasuyama.com)).

The mid-century chairs were bought at Galerie XXe Siècle in Beirut.

**The bathroom** The shower, bath and lavatory, set against dark stone, can each be enclosed by heavy canvas curtains. The basin and bath are by Antonio Lupi ([antoniolupi.it](http://antoniolupi.it)).