

# TOXIC GROUNDS

## MY CITY IS BLEEDING

*Bernard Khoury*



My city is bleeding, contaminating the Mediterranean Basin with its toxic fluids. On August 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Beirut took another major blow. Today, more than ever, its deeply scarred fabric is in desperate need of assistance.

As a practitioner, I have been drawn to problematic territories. Most of the grounds I have operated on were either highly sensitive zones, cities undergoing convalescence or regions in which the state and its institutions have failed to regulate or control the growth of the urban tissue. Beirut is a striking example of what I often call 'a wonderful catastrophe,' a city that, over the last few decades, has witnessed rapid and chaotic development. In the absence of federating and consensual political projects, our neighbourhoods have been shaped by individualistic and distinct gestures that do not cooperate with each other. These are often driven by defensive postures that are the result of the inability to predict the future of the surrounding context and the danger of what could be coming right around the corner.

In such conditions, you must be extremely alert. Engaging in any kind of speculation or assertive stance over the future settings of a project could be lethal. We have taken that risk in many of our schemes, which I would describe as voluntarily

masochistic and at times consisting of suicidal propositions. There is no comfort zone on unstable grounds, where the most fundamental rules of urban planning do not apply. This is the result of the total moral bankruptcy, the incompetence and the corruption of Lebanese institutions. In such conditions, architecture must be a political act.

What could be at the outset an ordinary built program, can soon take on a whole other dimension. When the state does not provide the most common built typologies—parks, memorials, museums, opera houses, social housing—a residential development, a night club, a corporate office tower or a commercial building must be considered as projects that can hold a political charge. These private undertakings, which initially do not bear any heavy social or political accountability, can be the grounds for another kind of radicalism.

This is where architecture should take on another kind of political responsibility, in formulating a history that is non consensual and not necessarily affirmative. I did not choose my battlefield. I choose to act on distressed grounds, where meaningful and sympathetic efforts are most needed.



### **B018**

*Location: Beirut, Lebanon (1998/2018)*

*Project Type: Entertainment*

*B018* is a nightclub, a place of nocturnal survival.

In the early months of 1998, the *B018* moved to the 'Quarantaine,' on a site that was known for its macabre atmosphere. The 'Quarantaine' is located at the proximity of the port of Beirut. During the French protectorate, it was a place of quarantine for arriving crews. In the recent war, it became the abode of Palestinian, Kurdish and South Lebanese refugees (numbering 20,000 in 1975). In January 1976, local militia men launched a radical attack that completely wiped out the area. The slums were demolished along with the kilometre-long bordering wall that isolated the zone from the city. Over 20 years later, the scars of war are still perceptible through the disparity between the scarce urban fabric of the area and the densely populated neighbourhoods located across the highway that borders the zone.

Opposite: *B018* exterior © Ieva Saudergaite.

Above: *B018* interior (renovated 2018) © Ieva Saudergaite.

The *B018* project is firstly a reaction to difficult and explosive conditions that are inherent to the history of its location and the contradictions that are implied by the implementation of an entertainment program on such a site. *B018* refuses to participate in the naive amnesia that governs the post-war reconstruction efforts.

The project is built below ground. Its façade is pressed into the ground to avoid the overexposure of a mass that could act as a rhetorical monument. The building is embedded in a circular concrete disc slightly above tarmac level. At rest, it is almost invisible. It comes to life in the late hours of the night when its articulated roof structure, constructed in heavy metal, retracts hydraulically. The opening of the roof exposes the club to the world above and reveals the cityscape as an urban backdrop to the patrons below. Its closing translates to a voluntary disappearance, a striking gesture of recess.

## Yabani

Location: Beirut, Lebanon (2002)

Project Type: Entertainment

The *Yabani* project was built to house a Japanese restaurant and bar on a 285-square-metre site located at the edge of the Damascus Road on the former demarcation line that separated East and West Beirut. The traces of shelling of the recent wars are highly visible on many of the adjacent buildings in which refugees are still squatting.

The building incorporates a two-storey concrete structure below ground level and a 14 metre high steel tower above ground. The tower contains a mobile reception room that travels vertically within a circular glass perimeter from the street level to the restaurant level below ground. The guests' seating is laid out in a circular configuration around the transparent mobile reception which animates the centre of the plan. The vertical circulation of the guests' arrival and departure is intentionally overexposed as the reception becomes the point around which the seating is generated.

The restaurant interior is exposed to the sky through trafficable glass windows located at ground level. The patrons therefore enjoy their dining experience in total denial of their immediate, scarred urban surroundings. However, the *Yabani* also accepts its own absurd presence and its impossible relationship with the urban environment through its striking tower structure and the provocative relationship it establishes with its immediate surroundings.

*Yabani* describes a fraction of a society living in marvellous denial. Ruins of war and spectacles of desolation become a backdrop to the more impressive spectacle of a society being entertained. *Yabani* strives to be a monument for the entertainment industry, a building that claims a landmark status it cannot possibly assume.



*Yabani* exterior (Built 2002) © DW5 Bernard Khoury. Photo by Joseph Chartouni.

## Derailing Beirut

Location: Rome, Italy (2010)

Project Type: Installation

Conceived for the MAXXI Museum of Contemporary Arts in collaboration with Yasmine Almachnouk.

Production: Georges Daou, Ryan Mehanna and A.C.I.D.

As an ultimate act of resistance to a falsified history in which we have become passive actors, are we capable of inventing the tools that can overturn Beirut's sensational stereotypes and denounce the innumerable fantasies attributed to it? We propose to draw an infernal circuit in which sensation-driven tourists seeking instant gratification are propelled in a predetermined course. As passive projectiles, the tourists are placed in a hermetically lethargic situation to ultimately be embedded in expected representations and clichés of our city. Beirut becomes an exotic amusement park destined to be consumed through representations of a history that escapes us, postcards that will, hopefully, be deemed historical waste.

Saïd, bearer of the rolling capsule, wanders the city awaiting the occasional tourist. His task consists of recuperating the device at the bottom of its course and hauling it back to its departure point. Before being assigned this duty, Saïd was a porter at Beirut International Airport.

French photographer Eric Lambert came to Beirut to document the circuit, which was jointly implemented by private investors and the Lebanese Ministry of Tourism. Soon enough, Lambert's fascination for Saïd's routine prevailed over the initial object of his research: the tentacular tracks within the cityscape become a mere background to the city that has yet again assimilated another discordant layer into its fabric.



*Derailing Beirut*, Saïd, bearer of the rolling capsule, wanders the city © DW5 Bernard Khoury.

## Centrale

Location: Beirut, Lebanon (2001)

Project Type: Entertainment

*Centrale* is housed in a recuperated ruin of a 1920s residential structure that is under historical protection. It is in an area that was deserted during the civil war due to its proximity to the demarcation line that separated East and West Beirut. Near the site is the Beirut Central District historical quarters which have been subject to a rehabilitation scheme to restore the formal gestures of Ottoman, colonial and other influences to their 'original' state.

To implement the required space for the restaurant within the remains of the existing house, the internal partitioning walls of the building and the slab of the first floor were demolished. In the process of voiding out the interior of the existing structure, the outer envelope of the house was reinforced by placing horizontal beams that embrace the skin from the outer perimeter of the façade. This seemingly temporary process features in the final configuration of the edifice,

with the steel beams used in the temporary reinforcement preserved. They now imply a new reading of the non-restored façade. Furthermore, we chose not to re-plaster the damaged façade, as would have been the case in a traditional rehabilitation. Instead, it is covered with a metallic mesh behind which the plaster finishing of the old façade remains in a state of decomposition. The mesh now enhances the poetic and temporal dimension of decay.

The construction process of the *Centrale* project relied heavily on the know-how of the local craft industry. Low-tech and non-standard techniques were particularly in use during the metal works. This is part of a more general concern we have with the making of architecture. It is a reaction to the prevalent construction industry that relies on standardised modes of production and an attempt to escape the typical process of construction by re-enacting traditional ways of making.



Structural beams inscribe a circular section encasing a 17 metre long bar above the main hall.  
All *Centrale* images © DW5 Bernard Khoury. Photos by Joe Kesrouani.

Top and Bottom Right: The *Centrale* bar opens up through the rotating movement of the cylindrical envelope.

Bottom Left: The façade utilises horizontal beams and a mesh to embrace the outer perimeter.