

Photo Bahaa Ghoussainy



In his architecture, Bernard Khoury no longer responds to future urban plans – they're bound to change anyway.

Text
Michele Braidy

**‘Beirut required
from me that
I answer in the now’**

1993:

the war just ended in Lebanon, leaving the country an open wound. Beirut Central District is disfigured. The architectural future of the city is unclear. Despite the massive destruction, a strong hope rises among the new generation; the situation is seen as an opportunity for reconstruction and renewal. It is in this context that Bernard Khoury decides to come back to Beirut from the United States, where he's just graduated from Harvard University, and to start an independent architecture practice. His first projects mark this chaotic period through their straightforward and honest designs, while also generating controversy owing to their functions: he builds entertainment venues, for instance, at places with a rather macabre history, most notably the famous subterranean nightclub B018.

Almost 25 years later, Khoury runs a successful office that's involved in many of the city's noteworthy residential projects. Two recent examples are Plot #1282 and Plot #4371; Khoury often gives his Lebanese projects names that coincide with the Land Registry's plot numbers. Plot #1282 comprises 95 industrial lofts, most of which have double-height, open-plan living areas. Outside, the building's sharply edged terraces and expressive vertical lift shafts have a mysterious aesthetic and evoke images of a ghost ship. Plot #4371 is a compact, bullet-shaped, seven-storey building whose 29 units are also mainly double-height. The building's *pièce de résistance* is a large freight elevator that transports cars and motorcycles and allows them to be parked inside the apartments.

Bernard Khoury discusses the bumpy road that led from his early beginnings to his present-day ideas.

Your first projects were built on sites that were heavily charged with political history. The fact that they were meant to be temporary gave those projects even more intensity. Your discourse on scars and remembrance



Bernard Khoury.
Photo Piero Martinello

challenged the general denial of war and violence. Some of the early projects – now almost landmarks – remain today, but the context is quite different. When you consider your initial aims, do you recognize a sort of self-betrayal in the continuation of these projects?

BERNARD KHOURY: First, I would not use the word 'discourse'. I never had a systematic architectural strategy. I approach every project in a different way. You have to understand the political context that existed during that period. We had big hopes – call it naive – for the reconstruction of our nation. But it didn't happen, for many reasons. Our country has been hijacked by a corrupt, incompetent political class. Beirut Central District was completely privatized. For many of us architects, it was a very tough start. Architecture with a political dimension – social housing, schools or community centres, for instance – happens through institutional projects. At least that's what I had been taught during my academic years. But in Lebanon we couldn't build social projects. In this context, no political act was possible. In an attempt to survive, I had to explore other territories.

My clients handed me sites that hadn't reached full maturity in terms of land value; they wanted buildings for only a limited length of time. Because I couldn't design 'temporary' institutional projects, I started from the bottom up. I did a lot of entertainment venues, such as music clubs and bars, which are less meaningful on an architectural scale. There was a huge contradiction between the entertainment industry and the historically charged sites occupied by those venues. I had to deal with existential questions. To top it all off, my projects had predetermined expiry dates. To be honest, I had been obsessed with the notion of temporality even as a student, but being confronted with the ephemeral in post-war Beirut was a brutal experience for me. It's like telling a pregnant woman that her baby will die

at the age of six. Nevertheless, I soon realized I could do something in temporary projects that I couldn't express otherwise. It changed my relation to time. Beirut required from me that I answer in the now and only the now, and I owe her that.

It's true that the present context is often completely different to what we initially found here. Restaurant-bar La Centrale has a roof that can be opened up. When we completed the project in 2001, the roof offered pretty views of old residential buildings in the vicinity. It's now surrounded by blank walls on three sides. The subterranean Yabani restaurant has simply been abandoned; the building is still there, but it's empty now. Beirut's reality has changed palpably. The gentrification of certain neighbourhoods endangers the coherence of such projects. Back in 2002, when Yabani was built, the building next to it was squatted by Syrian workers. Even the music we used to play at B018 was completely different. If B018 is still holding, it's because La Quarantaine is kind of cursed. The government stores mounds of garbage in that neighbourhood; no-one wants to settle in an environment like that. Although B018 has survived so far, it's still threatened by an expiry date. It's just a matter of time.

What is your approach to permanent projects?

My first permanent project, an apartment building called IB3 that was built in 2006, marked the beginning of a new phase for me. I've moved on from projects that didn't involve floor area ratios, for instance, to works that demand my compliance with that kind of stuff. To satisfy the requirements, I applied the city's zoning regulations to the letter. The form of the building corresponds to the maximum volume allowed. I didn't draw floor plans. I submitted the building for approval with a core and shell design, which included structure and circulation. I left the design of the floor plans and the façades to the interior architects. In my temporary projects, I had controlled everything

'Beirut Central District has been hijacked by a corrupt, incompetent political class'

– right down to the tiniest furniture detail – and here I decided to let go of everything. The developers were more than happy. We now gear every project to its site, but we are also strongly inspired by the people who initiate these projects.

Indeed, in your book, *Local Heroes*, you focus on the close relationship between the story of a project, its site and its initiators. When you look at Plot #1282 and Plot #4371 from this perspective, what do you see?

Every site has its stumbling block. Plot #1282, in its present state, benefits from panoramic views, thanks to expansive glass façades and large balconies. Even though the area isn't residential at the moment, our project faces the risk of construction on surrounding plots that could literally suffocate it. Studying the history of plots in Beirut is like analysing the city's DNA. You begin to understand why we reached such a concentration of solitary islands with no possibility of communication between them. An unhealthy urban fabric leads to unhealthy living and feeds hostility among people. We applied a setback along the total perimeter and had the floor slabs gradually diminish as the building rises, allowing it to breathe and connect to its environment, even if it gets surrounded by other buildings.

As for Plot #4371, the developer had acquired this abandoned land – a property in line to be condemned – for a very good price. There wasn't a lot of interest initially, and I first refused to design a project that seemed destined to fail. But I couldn't resist the temptation of the developer's eccentric proposal for a high-rise designed for specific kinds of users: the divorced, the playboys, people without kids and those who liked the idea of ending the night in their cars, at home. It proved to be a winning bet. —

bernardkhoury.com

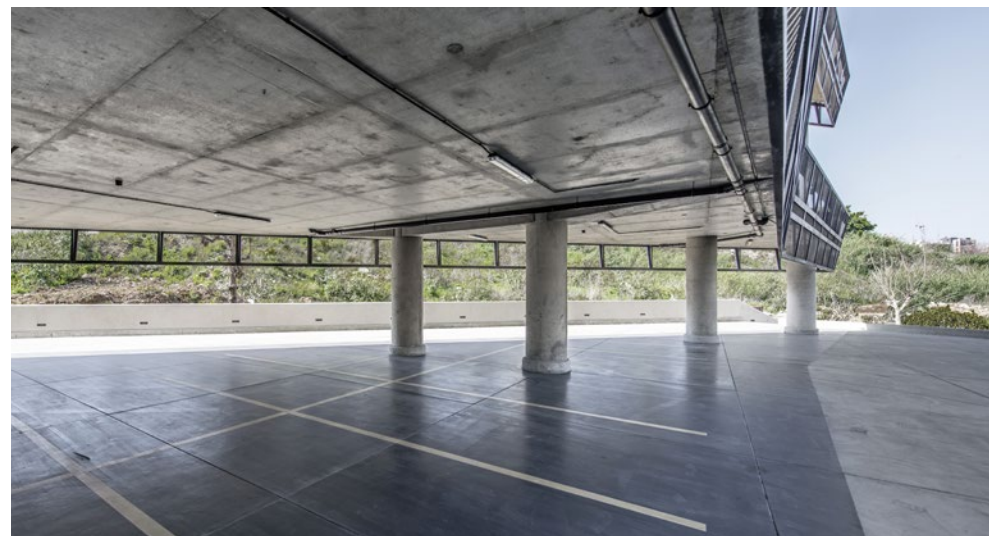
Plot #1282*Beirut — Lebanon — 2017*

Containing 95 industrial lofts from 100 to 650 m², Plot #1282 occupies a total built-up area of 25,800 m². Nine exposed cores lend access to a maximum of two apartments per floor. Most units have double-height, open-plan living areas.

Photos [Bahaa Choussainy](#)



Generous balconies offer impressive views of the city – for now.



The ground floor houses an open-air car park.

The building site has a 430-m perimeter, only 12 m of which faces a public access road. The implication is that 97% of the perimeter borders on plots suitable for other building projects in the future.



Large balconies line the full perimeter of the building.

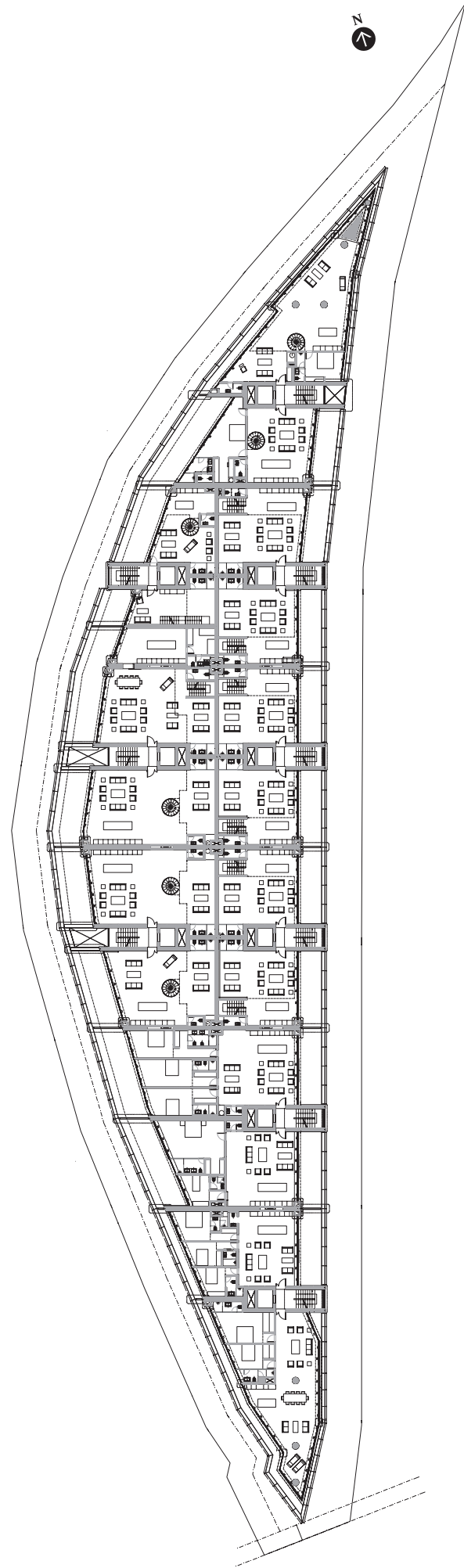


Lofts feature 5.3-m-high ceilings, open-plan layouts and minimal partitioning.

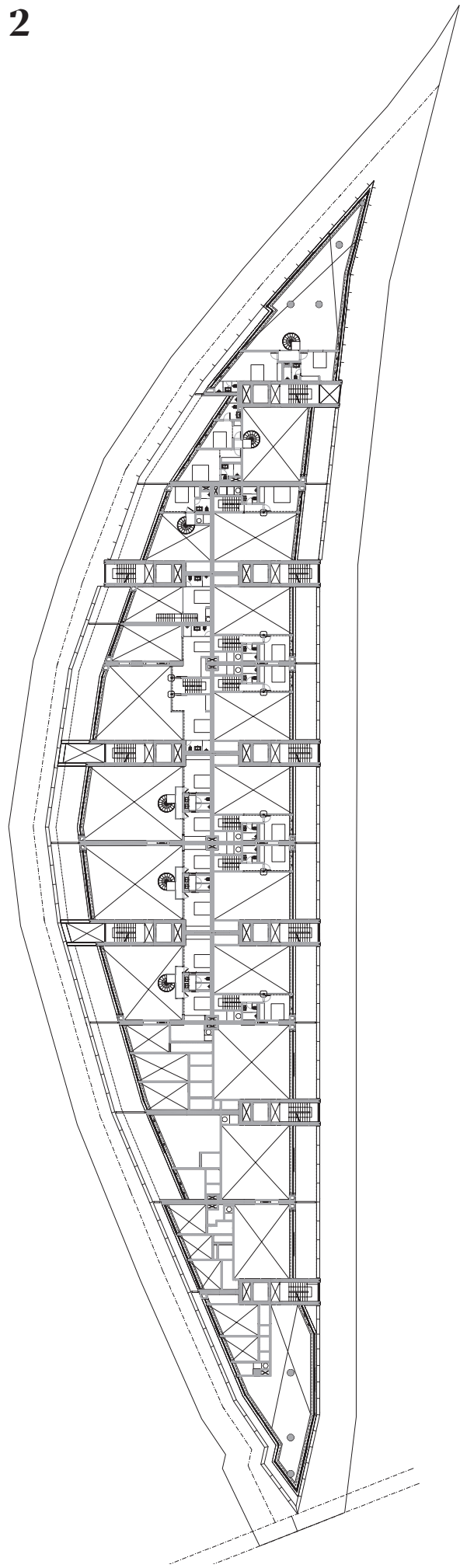
Plot #4371 can be seen through the window.



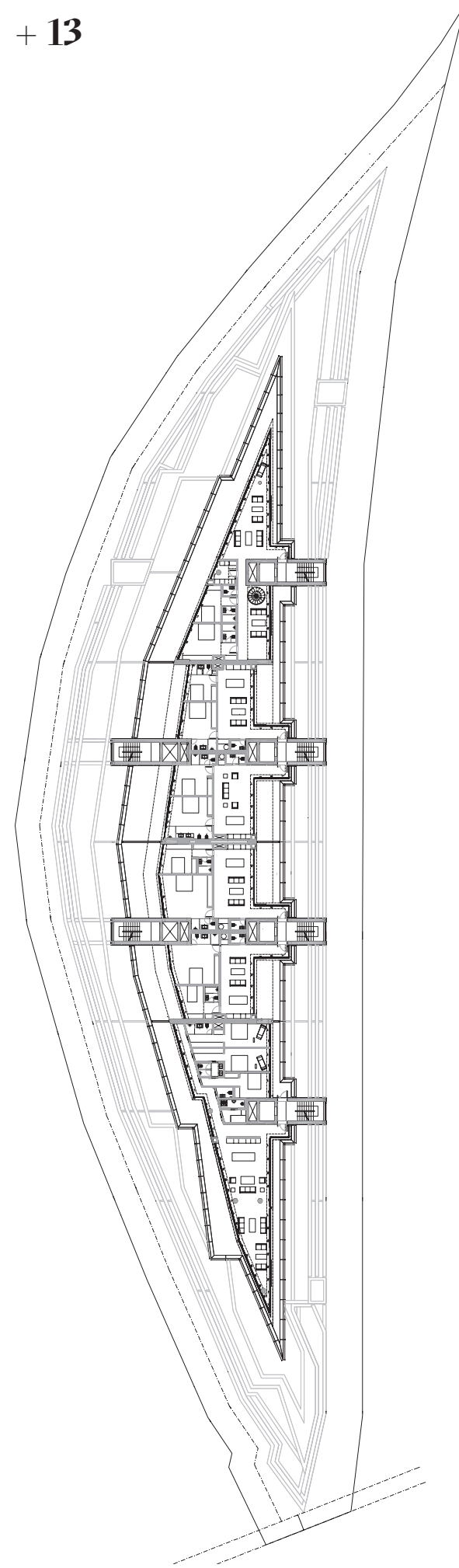
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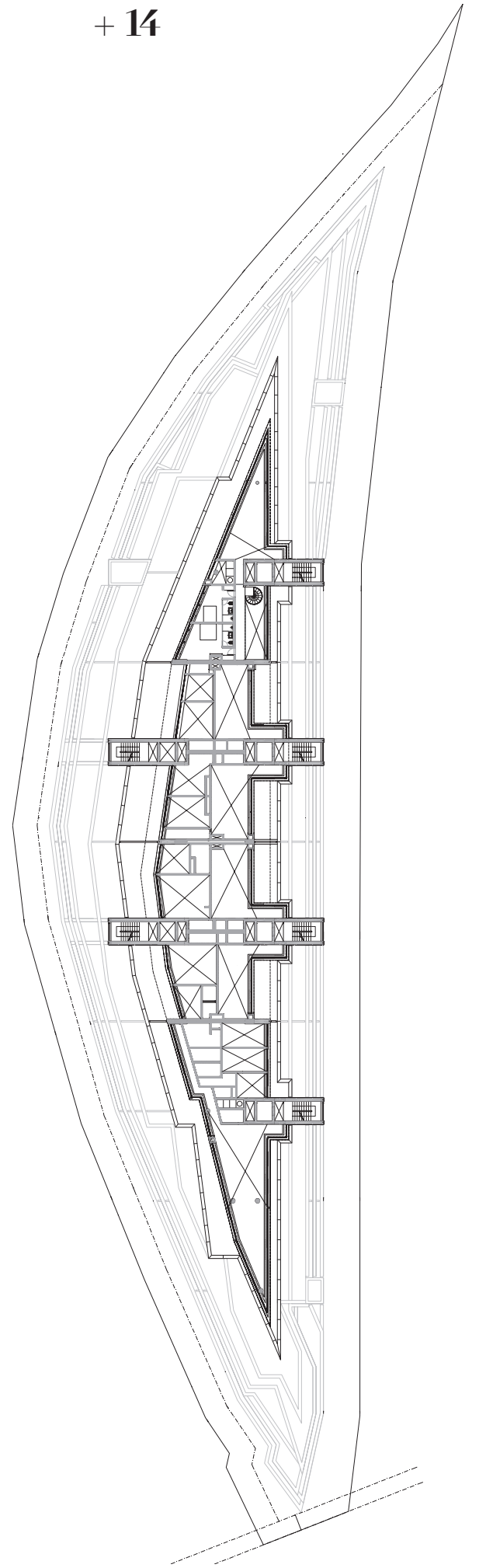
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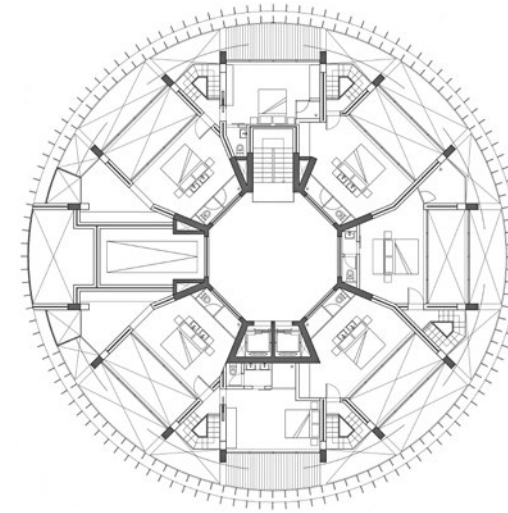
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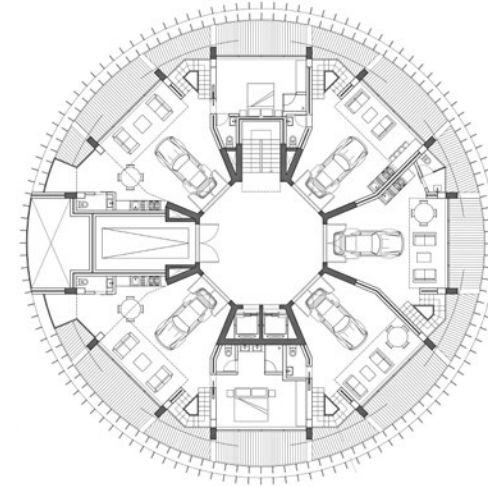


The apartment building is near Damascus Highway and the National Museum District.

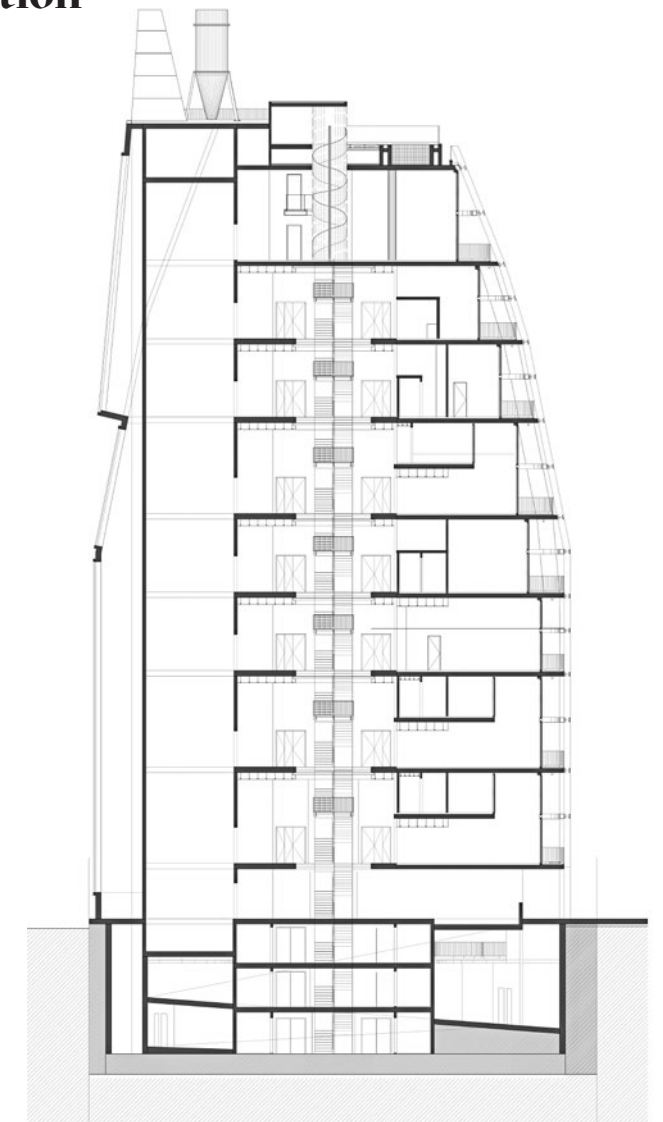
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Section



Plot #4371
Beirut — Lebanon — 2015

Plot #4371 is a seven-storey, 29-unit building with 24 types of apartments, ranging from 110-m² duplexes to 435-m² lofts. A freight elevator surrounded by circular floor slabs serves all residents and provides direct vehicular access to each unit.

Photos Ieva Saudargaitė

Plot #4371's studios are large enough for items such as works of art, musical instruments and automobiles.



'An unhealthy urban fabric feeds hostility among people'

A freight elevator can be used to transport vehicles and other large loads.

