

ARCHITECT OF AN ERA

I arrived early. Quite early. But then again you have to be if you are interviewing Bernard Khoury, a noted architect who runs DW5, which boasts a diverse and vast portfolio of projects spanning Lebanon and beyond and has won numerous international awards. With a blunt, meditative philosophy that critically examines the dynamics of culture and society around him, Khoury represents a unique voice and perspective to the region.



I headed for the elevator of the industrial building and soon found myself in the midst of chaos and order. As I was escorted into the spacious design office, I was astounded by the saturated red hue of the floor, the vastness of the space, the seemingly out of place motorcycle parked next to one of the pillars, as well as the two beautiful vintage cars parked in the far corner. I later found out were the cars he dreamt of having when he was too young to drive. I suddenly felt ghostlike, as if walking on clouds, entering a room filled with scores

of people engrossed in their work stations: typing, designing, creating, completely unaware of my presence.

I saw Khoury from across the room, entrenched in a conversation with his team members. Whilst contemplating the massive, bustling office, my thoughts were interrupted by the noted architects' husky, distinguishable voice. Despite the clamor of creativity engulfing us, his captivating voice which spoke passionately about his work quickly drew me in until the noise faded into the background.



Tumo Center For Creative Technologies



Plot # 183

You are the son of a modernist architect, Khalil Khoury. Has this influenced your decision to choose this career path?

Certainly, yes.

Tell us a bit more about your early years as a child and a teen growing up. When did you know that you wanted to be an architect?

I knew I wanted to be an architect just like I knew I wanted to drive my father's car, just like I [knew I] wanted to bite my father's cigar. My first attempt to make it to my father's studio was in the early 70s. I broke my clavicle on my way down to my dad's office on my tricycle, as we lived one floor above his design studio. I probably wasn't aware of the fact that the tricycle doesn't make it down the stairs.

Your career began in the 1990s, shortly after the end of the civil war in Lebanon. How have scenes of destruction and bloodshed influenced your work?

You are not speaking to a traumatized man; in fact, I have great memories of the 1970s, the 80s, and the years I spent here during the conflict or the so-called civil war. I think the post-war years were more traumatizing, if you want my opinion. All of the disillusion and the outcome of the conflict were, in fact, more problematic than the conflict itself.

What would you say were the most difficult moments early on in your career?

Abortions. I started my career with 16 aborted projects; I think number 17 made it and materialized. It is very common in this profession, but this is the type of work we do. It is very difficult, and obviously in my early years the rate of what was built versus what stayed on paper was extremely low; probably around 10 percent. But slowly, that percentage grows as you are perceived as somebody more reliable. You have many of those accidents early in your career where people come to you for the wrong reasons, either because you are the son

of a famous architect or because you are a Harvard graduate, all of which are irrelevant reasons. And you can quote me on that. Is it irrelevant? To be a Harvard graduate? Yes. I saw many idiots at Harvard. The more time you spend in school as an architect, the more difficult it becomes to be active and in tune with the sour realities of our world financially, economically and sometimes culturally and politically.

With a successful career behind you – and having attended some of the top schools for architecture in the world – you have been invited to teach design studios in several architecture schools, including L’Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, L’Ecole Speciale d’Architecture in Paris and the American University of Beirut. What is your message to young architects?

I teach not necessarily because I have a very specific message. In fact, teaching is another way to take a peek into specific areas that you are not always familiar with. It is also a way to be entertained and it is refreshing. If you are working with a group of 20 students, you could end up meeting one or two exceptional people who are already very good, and that is very rewarding. I think what’s most challenging is to see to what extent you can still trigger the curiosity of younger generations.

Would you say things have changed since you were a young, new graduate?

In some ways yes, but there are questions I had back then that still haunt me today just as intensely. Therefore, I think it is very important to keep that curiosity going and I hope it is still there. On the other hand, I think we have reached a level of credibility that allows us to take positions that we couldn’t take years ago. But one must stay aware because we can get into a comfort zone.

What does the name of your company, DW5, stand for? How did it come about and what was

the rationale behind it?

It stands for Design Workshop and the “5” came after four bankruptcies. That company came with its organizational and administrative tasks, things I don’t like to deal with, things that irritate me and things I’m not particularly good at.

On your website, DW5 is described as a company that functions as a “workshop” for developers, architects, planners and designers, and that the design space is essentially one large open area free of any sub-divisions.

How does such a space reflect your vision of architecture and other design-related fields?

About 10 years ago when we started this company and we moved into this space, I thought I could share the tools of production with other individuals like me. The idea was to create a community of architects that would share tools of production and human resources, whether they were administrative, legal or even technical. I thought that people would grow and become independent to the extent that we could share the space together so that the platform would eventually be



Plots # 6473, 5561 & 6475



powerful enough to take on large-scale projects without having to sustain the burden of a large architecture practice by myself.

To put it in simple words, in order to have access to certain types of projects and a certain scale of projects, you have to have a certain power of production in terms of human resources and financial means. Members of my team take on a certain amount of work; just to keep that practice going. At the end of the day, many architects become the slaves of their own practices – slaves to the

scale of their practices. The larger the practice, the more powerful maybe in terms of means of production but it is also more constraining because you become the hostage of this practice. You have to feed this practice with projects constantly. Sometimes you end up taking work you don't want to take, and you end up producing more work than you're supposed to produce [which can lower the quality]. I would like to remain an artisan in the temporal sense of the term. I know what my limits are in terms of volume – you cannot make love to 20 women at the same time; it just doesn't work.

You will not satisfy them. So if you really want to fully live every single experience you encounter in your practice, you have to be very much involved and you have to give it time, you have to give it emotions and you have to give yourself fully. That takes being very picky sometimes about what [work] you take and what [work] you don't take.

So to go back to this idea of a big practice – the idea behind this design workshop is that we could have a big practice, while sharing the burden of keeping the big practice alive as a group. Think of it as a large hospital that is shared by a number of doctors. It didn't really work, to be honest with you, maybe because my floor is red, maybe because I ride my motorcycle into my space. I don't have an office; theoretically, I sit everywhere. My office is a chair. Maybe I was too present.

How many people presently work for DW5?

I think we fluctuate between 17 to 25.

What are the most notable projects you are currently working on?

That is a tough question. I'll try to answer it as generally as I can. I would say that I don't look at the importance of a project necessarily relative to its scale as, in fact, the larger the project is in scale, the more constraining it is, and the more you have to sort of fight against the existing procedures and ways of doing things. The smaller the project, the more you are directly in contact with the decision maker. I would say that the importance of a project does not increase with its size, but instead it is about who I'm working with or for. I was very fortunate to have met some exceptional people whom I worked with and for in my career – not all of them, but some of them.

What is next for DW5?

You mean what is next for me? Let us forget DW5; it is just administrative terminology. I don't know – if I knew, I would be bored. Well, let's say I'm fortunate to still be surprised.



Plot # 4328



Plot # 893

How would you best describe your vision and design approach?

I don't have one. I think every situation has its own strategy; every situation has its own specifics and for every situation, there will be a different story. I am not into repetitive recipes, I am not into recognizable forms and I am not into recognizable syntax. I would like to think that I will hopefully have a very specific, tailored answer to every specific condition I'm confronted with.

If you were to pick three yet-to-be-built projects that you would like to see realized today, what would they be?

Things I would do...You want me to go to the fantasy world? Give me the Vatican and let me convert it in to a huge shopping mall. That would be a very interesting project. The second one, we will censor it because we are in the Arab world! And the third one we will keep for the next interview.

Are the region in general and Beirut in particular ready for Bernard Khoury?

Of course – why not? I think the region is ready for many things. I think the region, if you are talking about the radius of a couple of thousands of kilometers around Beirut or probably more east, has missed many opportunities, very sadly, particularly in the last couple of decades. I think the Arab world does have a serious problem with modernity. I can say it because I'm an Arab. So don't expect a Dutch man to say that, or a British or American or Canadian or South African or Italian one. The Arabs have a serious problem with modernity because Arabs don't exist in the present. Arabs want to exist in some sort of dangerously simplified past that is the invention and fantasy of others who they have completely complied with. They have become passive actors in a history that has been written by others and that is extremely dangerous.

We are not capable of contributing to the promised future or modernity. When an Arab wants to be modern, he relies on

the import. When an Arab wants to build a tower, he will call an international consultant to do it for him. What he doesn't know is that he is a complete moron because all he is doing is just buying into imported innovation.

That is the very sad reality of the Arab world. Even with all the talk and a lot of hype around supposedly new cities and the genesis of new cities, particularly the Gulf area in the last decade or so, I cannot take it seriously. Take Dubai, for instance; there's a lot of hype around Dubai. However, as an architect, I've seen Dubai in and

out, upside down, from every single direction for the last 10 to 15 years, as it has been supposedly building up, and I can't see a single relevant building that was erected that has produced meaning– not one, zero, nada. Now, what does that mean and why is that? Probably because Dubai wants to perpetuate and replicate models that have already existed and were produced somewhere else by others for others, and for other reasons and for other purposes. We've seen it in London, we want it in Dubai. We've seen it in Vegas, we want it in Dubai. I want to believe in Dubai's excess but



IB3 BUILDING



even then they failed to take the excess to an interesting level. I think Dubai is really mediocre in its excess. That applies to any Gulf city. I have worked on many fronts at varied scales in the Gulf cities during the past decade on projects that were extremely interesting – in fact, they are explosive in the questions that they confronted me with. I've touched Dubai, I've touched Qatar, Riyadh, Bahrain, Muscat with probably over 20 design missions so far, some of them ranging from up to 3000 to 4000 square meters in surface area, on huge scales that I would've never tackled here or in Europe. But

again, this is not about scale.

The first project I ever worked on in the Gulf area was in Kuwait. It was a mall, an uninteresting subject. It is a sad story because the malls you see in Kuwait are malls you would see anywhere, from the suburbs of Houston to the suburbs of Shanghai, and this is exactly where the problem lies. We have taken the Anglo-Saxon models that were created for very specific situations and specific moments of time by certain people, by certain societies, and then literally replicated them in an environment where the mall can have a completely

different meaning. So reconsidering what the mall meant in Kuwait to me was an extremely important question, even more important than designing a museum in Paris.

It is about time architects recognize the sour realities of the society they live in. It is about time that architects came down from their clouds. Architecture should no longer be just about what you see in the polished pages of architectural magazines or in the beautiful pages of architectural history books. People only register the exceptional moments of social architecture, not the normal moments of historical architecture and history in general, because this is not where and how cities are happening.

Cities are happening without us and despite us, the architects. Projects like malls, airports and hospitals are no longer in the hands of architects, but in the hands of expert consultants. Architects are being completely wiped out. We are here to embellish, we are here for the last layer of sugar coating, which has absolutely no meaning in terms of what the project is fundamentally.

Regarding the Gulf cities, I think there were extreme situations in the last few decades in which intense modernity could have happened if we had had the courage from within to ask the right questions and to try to reinvent the buildings that can shape societies. Arabs have failed to do so. Instead, they have relied on imports and they have created generic cities, so generic that they have become banal and mediocre. They didn't even succeed in excess and speed. And now they are trying to buy culture and make museum cities, which is pathetic, trying to import museums that exist in other places to be filled with their own content. If we are going to find any content from the region, it will be through the eyes of Western curators, who will tell us what is Arab. We are not producing a contemporary culture; we are just buying dead stuff that has already been consumed. ■



Plot # 7950

