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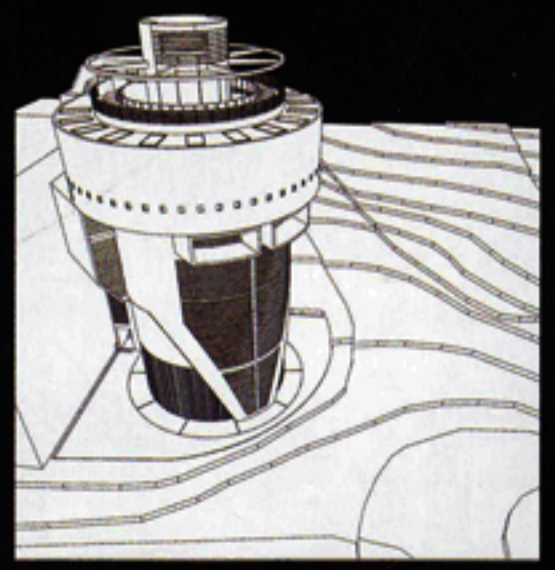
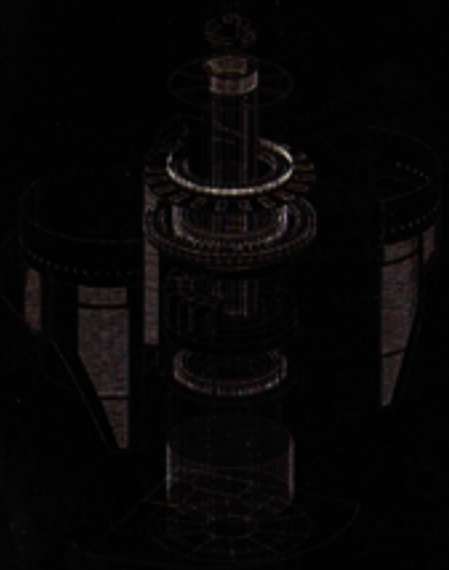
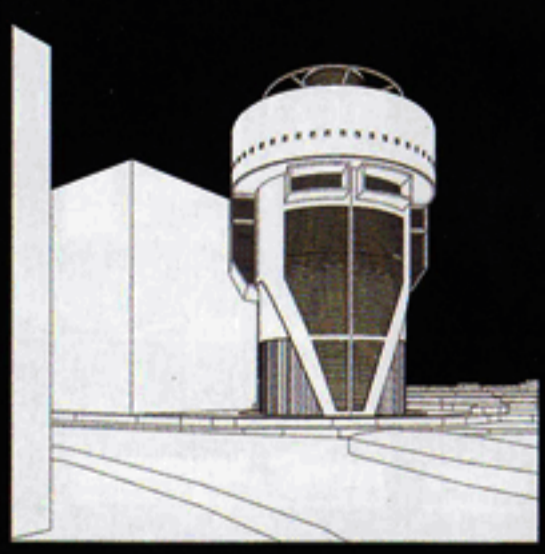
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Yabani R1 Beirut, Lebanon,
preliminary Design 2000





A Volatile Fabric

BERNARD KHOURY: BEIRUT AND BEYOND

A slow writer who hasn't read a book in ten years, Bernard Khoury is a Lebanese architect currently based in Beirut who doesn't see himself embedded in a geo-generational context. Aware of the exotic charm of the creation in conflict scenario, he was an interesting choice for the Politically Design session that took place at the International Design Forum in Dubai earlier this year. And it was after-hours that co-director of London's Serpentine Gallery, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and fellow panel member, Rem Koolhaas, spoke with Khoury about his work and the political perspectives that are inevitable in the area. What follows are edited extracts of this dialogue.

Hans Ulrich Obrist To begin at the beginning, yesterday in the introductory panel at the conference here you said that when you came to Lebanon 15 years ago you had expected a very different kind of situation, so I was interested to hear more about your expectation and how Beirut changed what you expected from it.

Bernard Khoury Beirut didn't change. I changed... Beirut didn't get rebuilt. At least the reconstruction project we were naively expecting, back in the early Nineties didn't really happen, but something else has happened. I don't think there was a war period and a post-war period. It took me a while to understand that. Beirut kept on going; it's not like there was a serious break between 1975 and 1990 and then there was going to be some miraculous reconstruction project. I think there were very interesting mechanisms that developed during the war, not only of survival, but also of development. I became very interested in watching those and learning about those because it's a different kind of economy and it's a different way of looking at politics and it's a different way of looking at culture. And it's also a different way of practising architecture.

Rem Koolhaas Can you give concrete examples? I imagine what you are saying but I think it would be interesting to hear specifically.

Black Box, Beirut, Lebanon, 2005
The black box is located next to a major department store on the northbound highway of Greater Beirut. On the tip of the arm a 5x3m screen retransmits in real-time scenes selected from the interior of the black box. The assemblage of the installation recognizes and amplifies contemporary society's reliance on the trendiest fashions, latest entertainment venues and the facility of money distributors.

BK Solidère is an obvious example and it is sometimes overused, but it is an interesting example because we have a private company that put together the agenda for rebuilding the city centre. In the total absence of institutional involvement in the development of public domains, our territory fell in the hands of the private sector. How do you define public space in such a context?

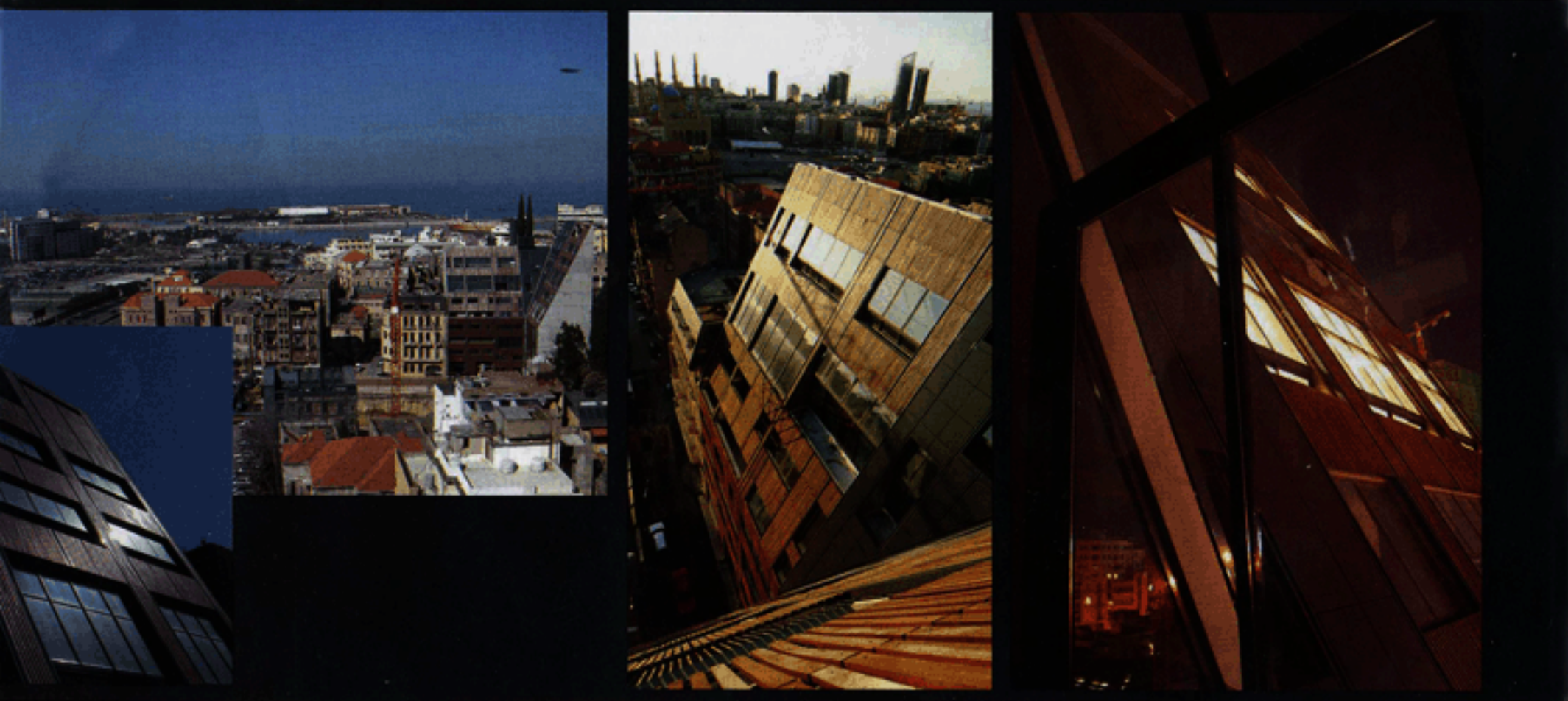
RK ...always the most important.

BK But what was most interesting about Solidère is their formula that redefined the notion of ownership. Beirut is a very complex city and has a complex fabric and different layers that built up this fabric...The company compensated the owners with shares, which I thought was extremely fascinating because of the volatility of the shares.

RK Intriguing.

BK It [Solidère] could have been fantastic in the sense there were other ingredients to look at the city or to try to look at how we plan the city. Again, it might have been very naïve on my part to think that we could have looked at that as architects and have some sort of intervention in that. It turns out town traditional town planning did whatever it did and that was a lost opportunity.

RK Basically what you suggest is that since then you have learnt things that you couldn't have anticipated and that a war or a condition of war was instrumental in teaching you these things and you even implied that there was a particular kind of creativity which is triggered by those conditions.



IB3 Building Beirut, Lebanon, 2006
The I.B.3 residential building is located in the Gemmayzé area on plot # 595 Saifi in Beirut. The design mission was developed around the shell and core principle which consists of designing the structure of the edifice, its facades and the common areas, leaving all the inhabitable surfaces to be partitioned and finished by the architects of the future owners of each residence. The particularity of the design resides in the free plans proposed initially on all the levels of the building. Residences in the I.B.3 building should be regarded as suspended 'urban villas'.

BK I don't know if I would qualify it as creativity but –

RK Ingenuity?

BK Yes, hopefully.

RK Intelligence.

BK And there are very obvious and visible things in Beirut with regards to that. The city, for instance, grew. There was an accelerated decentralisation due to the war... Along the coast, which maybe is not pretty but could have been very beneficial politically for the country and that happened before the war but it was accelerated by the war due to the fact that the centre was voided out.

RK You consider that ultimately a positive thing?

BK Yes.

RK Even now.

BK Yes.

RK A potential base for a political solution.

BK The problem is that our so-called politicians have perpetuated again what has brought us to the war, the re-centralising. The Solidère project represents that.

HUO The re-centralisation.

BK Yes, which is a mistake that leads us to what is presently happening in the southern suburbs. We have abandoned the southern suburbs, we have abandoned the south, we have abandoned Tripoli to fo-



cus on the centre. It is a dangerously romantic notion of Beirut prior to '75; a postcard city which was in total denial of other Beiruts that were happening around it.

HUO Rem talked about experiencing your buildings, which I unfortunately haven't seen. Yesterday, you said as much that you wouldn't do social housing for the time being -

BK ... I started my career designing a nightclub [BO18] ... And I got to understand and learn that there is something political about this situation. BO18 became, despite me or my design, a political project. In this context, entertainment projects have become to me more important than museums or the more traditional way of thinking about public places.

RK That's an interesting point, because when I listen to you - I almost never feel envy - but in your case I feel a certain envy exactly for those unique potentials that are emerging from a condition of crisis and an ability to invoke yourself in that. That's why I am interested, for instance, where that kind of experience - do you think it could be applied in a condition like Dubai? Or is Dubai too immune to that kind of intelligence? Are you working here?

BK Yes.

RK And what are you doing here?

BK An office tower in the Business Bay.

RK Congratulations!

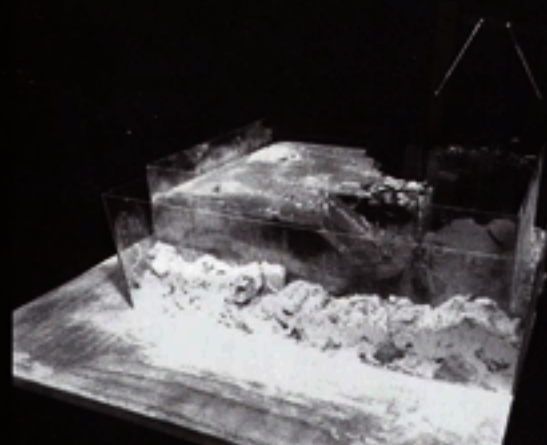
BK We are in the process of designing it. I stayed away from the Gulf until 2001, 2002. We also have projects in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, The Sultanate of Oman, and Dubai.

RK As contrast.

BK These projects are quite different from the Beirut projects in many aspects. But my first project in the Gulf was in Kuwait, it was a mall. It's a long story.

Centrale Beirut, Lebanon, 2001

The Centrale project is housed in a recuperated ruin of a 1920's residential structure that is placed under historical protection. It is located in an area that was deserted during the civil war due to its proximity to the demarcation line that separated east and west Beirut. To the vicinity of the site is the Beirut Central District historical quarters that have been subject to a general rehabilitation scheme through which the formal features of Ottoman, colonial and other various influences were restored to their 'original' state.



Evolving Scars, Beirut, 1991

As the newly proposed plan for the rehabilitation and re-construction of the Beirut Central District was being implemented, we proposed to turn the process of demolition of war damaged buildings in the city into a collective architectural experiment. Our proposed scenario 'Evolving scars' was, first of all, a political act in opposition to the adopted conventional urban planning methods. The project consists of a temporary transparent skin that is implemented around the outer periphery of a ruin and a 'memory collector' that deploys itself within the perimeter of the ruin while collecting data. 'Evolving Scars' was an attempt to translate the demolition of buildings into an ephemeral architectural act.

Andalus, Kuwait City, Kuwait 2006

The Andalus development is located in the Hawally district of Kuwait city. The new development includes a shopping mall, a cinema complex, office space, a hotel / serviced apartment building, restaurants and entertainment facilities with complimentary parking space.



Surramanraa, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 2005

The project is located on a 3,200 sq m site in the centre of downtown Riyadh, KSA. Surramanraa is a ladies-only leisure facility meant to offer women a stimulating entertainment and shopping experience, providing them with an exclusive space for social and cultural gatherings. This makes the project unique in its local context, and places it on the Arab world map for its social significance.

RK I've seen it. I know a little bit because I am also working in Kuwait, so I know your story.

BK The Fintas Mall. That's currently on hold. It was not a cute story and every experience after that in the Gulf was a very enriching experience to me. We are working on another mall now.

RK Enriching exactly in what way?

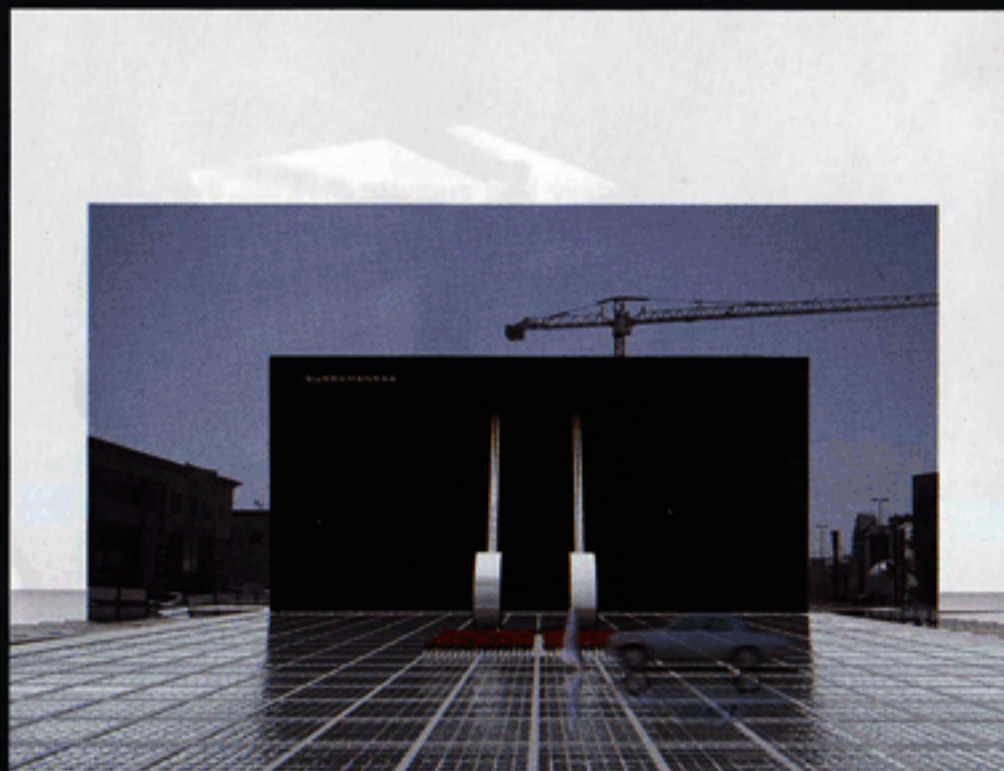
BK You should not approach a mall project in Kuwait like you would approach a mall project in another context. I have seen the dramatic implications, although the deceiving implications, of the blind importation of American models in that part of the world. It was very deceiving on my first visit to Kuwait to see the same mall I had seen over and over again, that was perpetuated there without necessarily trying to experiment with the incredible possibilities that this programme can have in the society of Kuwait. So my first mall for Kuwait was trying to be a super mall, the Formula One of malls, the high performance mall that celebrated this as a true public building, something that really had a great social and cultural importance, almost in an over-pretentious way because malls don't do that usually.

RK It is true that a mall is fundamentally different in the Middle East because it's where social life takes place and it's an incredible experience; you go to malls at midnight and they're completely full with people with kids.

BK We also worked on a women's only leisure facility in Riyadh. That was also an amazing experience; the kind of programme you simply don't deal with in Beirut or anywhere else in the world.

RK The exciting thing, I think, is two-fold. On the one hand it's a kind of awakening from all kinds of inhibitions and forbidden conditions and at the same time there is this crisis and the combination.

BK I think the interesting thing is that we can find through some of these projects that - may seem very banal - conditions that could reflect on things we could live in the West ten or 15 years from now. And in that sense it is way beyond contemporary.



RK Do you think that the condition in Iraq will in the end have the effect on the Middle East of reducing the attraction of the American model, even of architecture?

BK You are being too idealistic..

RK Well, I have a kind of instinct that somehow the inevitability of that kind of modernity ... will diminish and disappear.

BK So you are saying the failure of the American policies in Iraq will open up this part of the world to European culture?

RK Well, I think in other parts of the world, for instance if you look at the Cannes Festival, this year is an incredible year because there are very few American firms and an unbelievable influx of foreign ones.

HUO Romanian, first class Japanese films.

RK Russian, incredible films. So it seems as if there is a certain reduction of the American model in all kinds of domains and presumably in architecture.

BK Modernity in this part of the world is still generally associated to the American model. It is difficult to measure the failure of American foreign policies in the Arab world. I don't think anybody has a clear picture of what's on the American agenda for this part of the world. You are looking very far and it is quite a complex, difficult territory to assess at this point.

HUO Who are your heroes? Are there Western influences or are there influences from a Middle East



context? You moved to Beirut fifteen years ago. Are your influences in the Western canon?

BK My influences are not architectural.

HUO Can you talk about your heroes?

BK You would be deceived. I change heroes every day.

HUO Today?

BK [Laughs] Tough question. That's too intimate.

HUO Too intimate. And what about your unrealised projects? Do you have projects which are yet unrealised?

BK We have about a hundred projects online on our website, out of which only seven are built. So the rate of built projects is not that great but now we have a few under construction. In the beginning of my career it took me 17 projects to get the first one built.

RK How big are you? How many people work for you?

BK We are not very big; we're about fifteen.

HUO And what are the current chantiers [constructions] you are working on?

BK We have many projects in Kuwait: an office complex in the Free Trade Zone which is under construction, a shopping mall, another shopping mall with a hotel and a financial centre with a business hotel. We are working on a resort in Muscat, Oman with Oberoi Hotels. We have two other residential projects in Muscat. We are working on a couple of projects in Saudi Arabia. We are also working on many fronts in Beirut. Our local projects are smaller in scale.

B018 Beirut, Lebanon, 1998

The B 018 club is built below ground. Its façade is pressed into the ground to avoid the over exposure 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. 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 a voluntary disappearance, a gesture of recess. The building is encircled by concrete and tarmac rings. The automobiles' circular travel around the club and the concentric parking spots frame the building in a carousel formation. At night, the continuous motion of the visitors' cars animates the parking and becomes an integral element of the club's scenario.

HUO What are they, the Beirut projects?

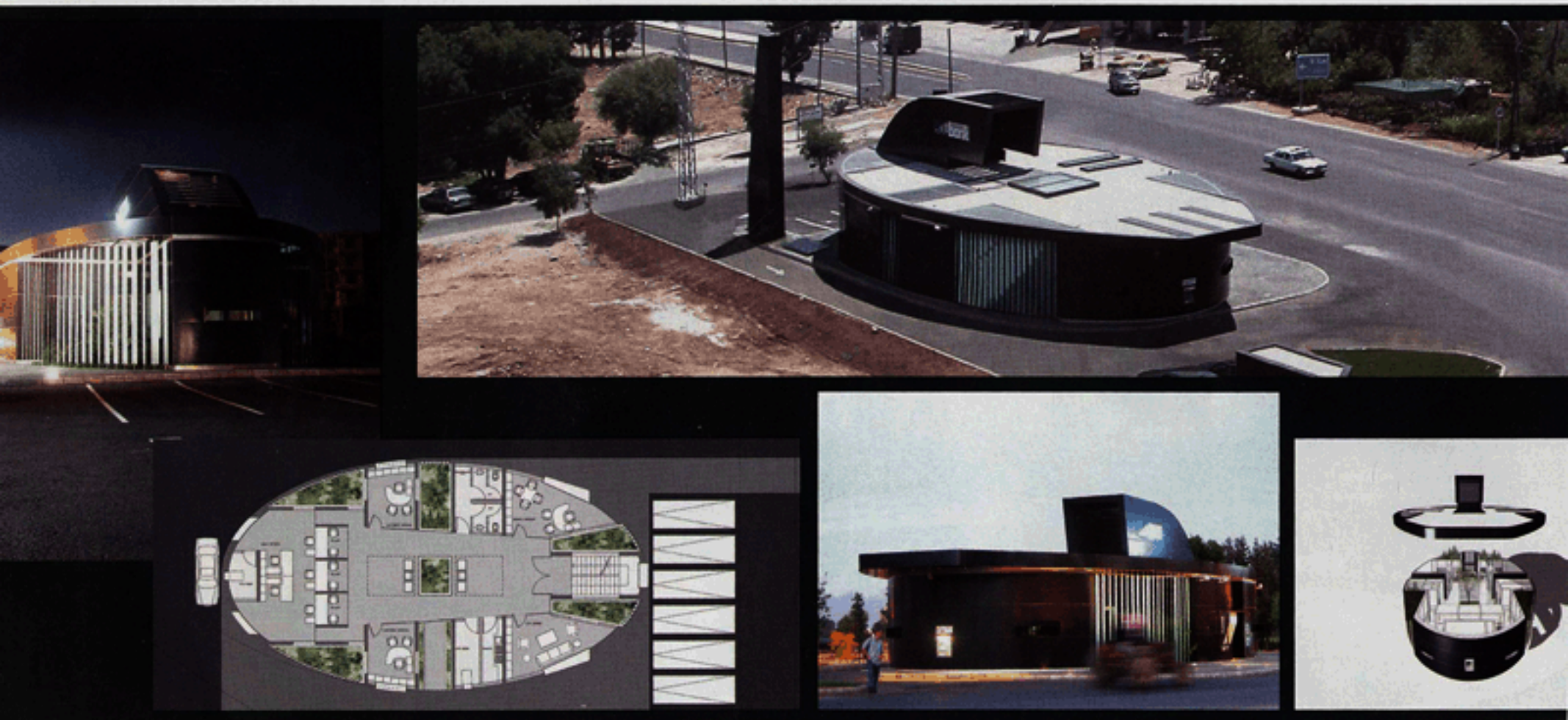
BK They are mainly residential buildings, which is new to me because until not long ago my work was associated to the entertainment industry.

RK If I understand you correctly, you are more interested now to work here in the Gulf and Saudi Arabia than you would be in Europe. Or not?

BK It's a difficult question. I have only been involved in one project in Europe since I started my professional career. It was my first project abroad and it was in Berlin. It was a great adventure.

HUO It was built?

BK Unfortunately not. It was very bad timing for us. There was no money in Berlin at the time and the whole thing collapsed. It was a money problem. We went pretty far in it and it took 70 or 80 per cent of my energy for over a year and it didn't happen. It was a very exciting experience... I was rehabilitating the existing buildings of the Pfefferberg and adding a couple of other buildings to the complex... It was an interesting project but it didn't get built. I had a fantastic client so we were doing much more than just architecture; we were involved in many different things to promote the site and to programme the site. This project came to me right after I was done with the B018 project. So to answer your question, it's not a fetishistic relationship I have with the Gulf. Back in '93 my main ambition was to build in Europe and the US. Today I don't look at it this way, I am happy here. I don't know for how long, but so far it is interesting.



BLC Bank, Chtaura, Lebanon, 2004
The B.L.C. Bank mission consists of a complete architectural identity package including design and decoration work. Our scheme translates the Bank's ambitious implementation strategy through highly visible urban interventions. The footprint of the building is shaped by the vehicular movement around it and the exposure of the Bank pavilion to the traffic.

HUO Do you see yourself embedded in a context with other architects of your generation here in the Middle East?

BK No.

HUO You see yourself as solitary.

BK I have much more sympathy for the generation of my father, who is also an architect and I feel much closer to what he did in the Sixties and Seventies than all the other guys of my generation in my part of the world.

RK Do you think that all the Middle East architecture efforts at that time were much more impressive than what is happening now?

BK Definitely. Nothing is happening right now. Total fiasco.

HUO And what's the link to other disciplines? Because Beirut has an incredible art scene. I have worked with several artists; there is Jalal Toufic in cinema, there is Atlas Group with Walid Raad. Are you linked to this incredible art?

BK Walid is a good friend but I've told these guys to slow down a little bit on the war and the sensations of the war. I think we have done a bit too much of that and we need to do other things now. #

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