

The reconstruction and recovery of a devastated Beirut is a complex task. And while politics often dominates the narrative, it's the more modest role played by culture and community that can really help people gain perspective. Here we see some of the art creating a sense of place, and design that instils hope and even happiness to a confused population.

Beirut has always been subjected to earthquakes, wars and corruption, but the explosions at the city port on the 4 August 2020 at 18:08:18 EEST surpassed it all. Around 200 people were killed, more than 6,000 were injured, thousands upon thousands of homes and businesses were destroyed, and the number of people made homeless has been estimated at 300,000.

Since 2014 Hanger 12, the epicentre of the explosion, had stored 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate next to fireworks – essentially a ticking time bomb. The potential devastation of this pairing was reportedly known to the Lebanese government and the port authorities – their ignoring of the extreme danger paints a picture of a dysfunctional government sullied by corruption, neglect and gross mismanagement.

Billions of dollars of damage coupled with the ongoing coronavirus situation and outstanding debts from past conflicts have left the people of Beirut in shock. And although cultural creatives are generally not the go-to spokespeople in emergencies, talking to affected artists and designers provides an insight into a possible path to healing for this broken community.

"If culture is a bridge between people, if culture is imagining the future of humanity, deliberately or accidentally, if culture is both identity and freedom, then culture definitely is a way towards healing from this disaster," says Pierre Bouassi, former culture minister and current Lebanese parliamentarian.

Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury calls Beirut "a wonderful toxic catastrophe", a city where he is able to take pleasure in "radical instances in which every second is counted as extreme". Troubled territories and regions where the state has failed to grapple with its urban realities have always fascinated him.

In 2004 Khoury moved his studio to the La Quarantaine area of Beirut. The neighbourhood is close to

the city port - which in the 1940s was a refugee camp for Palestinians, Lebanese and Armenians - and was destroyed in the blast.

"A deeply scarred fabric has been left in this city," Khoury says. "It is in desperate need of assistance." Two of the three towers that once rose proudly above the port and his studio were destroyed. "They cannot be rebuilt exactly as they were," Khoury says. "Rather, we now have to work with the architectural scars to see what can be done".

Mira Hawa is passionate about her city and has struggled to find the exact words to describe what has happened. "Whatever you see, whatever you read, it doesn't come close to even beginning to describe what it's like here," she says.



Bernard Khoury, Plot # 450 and Plot # 1072, before the explosion

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

*Bernard Khoury*



Bernard Khoury, Plot # 450 and Plot # 1072, after the explosion

Together with Sabine El Gemayel-d'Herbécourt and ArtScoops, Hawa helped set up the auction Artists with Beirut to raise funds. "The ground may have been taken away, but we cannot let it crumble," she says. "We must channel the devastation into something that can make a difference for those who need it."

Pascal Hachem and Rana Haddad run the design studio, 200Gr. "In the 38 seconds of the blast, the city's history was ripped away," says Hachem. "It's left scars and ghosts which months later are still raw and painful."

Since those devastating seconds, the studio has been questioning their place in the city and thinking about how to reinvigorate its character. "The city is an oeuvre, closer to a work of art than to a simple material product," wrote philosopher Henri Lefebvre, who the duo cite as a big influence on their thinking.

"When your first reaction to the blast is to run and seek safety," Hachem says, "it takes a lot of strength, a lot of mental power to step back into the devastation and know what to do, how to act, where to start."

The 200Gr studio is best known for work that grapples with the realities of everyday life – its struggles and triumphs. "We try to find a playful way to address a topic that might otherwise be overloaded and hard to fathom," says Hachem.

Since the explosion they have been piecing together an interwoven story of the city, its people and structures, bodies and bricks. They show a line-up of shattered eyeglasses each with a small written tag denoting the street, time and date each pair was found.