

# Derailing Beirut

## A conversation with Bernard Khoury



Interview  
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Photos  
DWS

**The first step towards any form of progress is awareness.** On the scale of the city, it is the role of urban planners, architects, artists and academics to ignite accessible debates that would ensure its evolution.

*Derailing Beirut*, a project by Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury in collaboration with architect and new media designer Yasmine Almachnoug is conceived to intimidate Beirut and its inhabitants into a conversation about the

contemporary imagery and imposed identity of their city.

The project consists of a scenario where a mega-roller-coaster circuit is built all over Beirut as a tourist promenade highlighting exoticized parts of the city according to popular media. The circuit is accessible via a rolling capsule managed by Said, a retired porter at Beirut International Airport who now wanders the streets of Beirut waiting for consumers of this constructed neo-orientalist ride.

*The Outpost* sits with Bernard Khoury to discuss derailing a city out of its stagnant falsified history, personal initiatives and redefining parameters of possibility.

**How would you describe your territories of operation as an architect practicing in Beirut?**

I'm very pragmatic in part of my architectural set-up. I work on real projects with real parameters. I'm interested in stretching the limits of what is possible, redefining the context in which I operate within feasible limits. That's my territory of operation; however, I am asked every once in a while to work in different territories, sometimes in art circuits, through commissions by museums or collectors or art galleries. When this happens, obviously, the context is very different, the assignment is very different and my mission is very different.

**What was the context of your *Derailing Beirut* project, and how did it affect your mission?**

This is a project that only exists in a very specific context that is the context of the museum for which the project is commissioned. This is not a commission given to me by the municipality of Beirut,

or the Ministry of Public Works. This is a commission given to me by the Maxxi Museum a couple of years ago for the opening of the extension of their museum. That exhibition included various artists commissioned to work on different themes. The theme I am more often imprisoned in is geopolitics.

**This project consists of a mega-roller-coaster weaving about the city of Beirut. Does it follow a certain trajectory?**

Yes. There is a story behind it. The intention was to map destinations in the city that are being fetishized. This very familiar neo-orientalist promenade of Beirut starts with the Corniche that has been used and abused by various contemporary artists of my generation, all the way to fetishizing the war with the Holiday Inn Hotel and taking you to 'wild' destinations such as Tarik el Jdeedeh or even Haret Hreik, which are certainly on the agenda of any contemporary curious tourist, as they are much more exoticized now than Solidere [Downtown Beirut], I would say.

**Such an exotic project in such a monstrous Beirut would definitely have a queue of stakeholders willing to invest in building it. Would you like to see this roller-coaster built?**

The project will never be built. It was never designed to be built. This project is a criticism about our city's identity and how this identity is being formulated. It is about how Beirut is portrayed in different media, the press and even in the art world. This is not about consuming Beirut. It is about how Beirut is being consumed.

**If you would take this roller-coaster outside of its context**



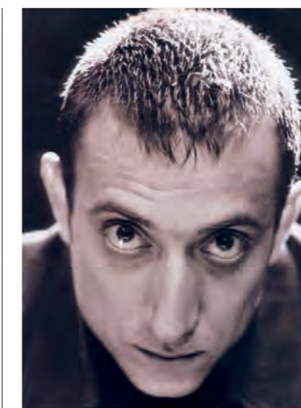
**and consider it as another layer of transport and mobility in Beirut, what could be the role of this roller-coaster?**

The role of this roller-coaster is not to take you from your bedroom to your office. The role of this roller-coaster is to take you through an exotic journey through all the fabrication of the fantasy that we talked about through the images that circulate about this city.

**What are your views on transport in Beirut?**

We have to acknowledge the reality of our environment, the total bankruptcy and impotence of the state and its institutions. It's very important to understand this and admit to the situation in order to take action.

I would take myself as an example. I move on two. Driving in Beirut is illogical. We live in a totally congested city. I don't think it can afford two tons to carry 80 kilograms—which is the



average weight of an SUV that is carrying the average weight of one person. In over 90 percent of my movement around in the city, I'm solo, riding my motorcycle, a machine that weighs 180 kilograms and is almost twice my weight. I think this is correct, obviously consuming less volume, burning much less energy and taking me from point A to point B much faster.

To make a long story short, because I don't ride when

The project was produced by Georges Daou, Ryan Mehanna and A.C.I.D.

it rains, I don't leave the office when it rains. I made a very conscious and strict decision not to move in the city in a car because it's no longer bearable. I only drive my car when I have long distances outside the city, which is very rare, or when it's late at night and the roads are not very congested.

**So your solution would be to ban cars altogether?**

If I would have my say, I would ban cars in Beirut. I was discussing this issue with the head of town planning in New York City and he was telling me that he was astonished by the fact that the municipality of Beirut obliges developers to build a certain amount of parking spots, within their projects, to ensure a certain number of parking spaces per square meters per building depending on a certain ratio. If the amount of parking spots is not satisfied, the developers are required to pay a fine by which the municipality would build public parking spaces. They have been collecting these fines for decades and no parking spaces have been built yet. In Manhattan it's exactly the opposite. They don't let you build any parking spots. They don't want you to drive your car and would do anything to discourage you from driving your car. You take the subway, the bus, the cab, your bicycle or your motorcycle, and this is where it ends. And because you cannot expect from our incompetent authorities any serious infrastructure for public

transportation that would eventually replace the car, you have to find an alternative that works on a personal level. The easiest alternative is to move on two wheels.

**Or on two legs?**

Moving around on foot is difficult.

**Well, Beirut is small.**

Not that small. If you can move on foot, that's great. When you have long distances to cross, take your bike. I think maybe we can hope for bike lanes at some point.

**Would you consider proposing a master plan or scenario on transport in Beirut?**

I would tackle it as an art installation where I could propose a hypothesis or a certain reality that serves the purpose of criticism. It would allow me to raise some questions or approach them from a different angle without necessarily aiming at putting definitive pragmatic solutions on the table, because putting definitive pragmatic

solutions on the table is not the answer for everything.

**One of the interesting parts of this constructed reality of *Derailing Beirut* is Said, the porter, and Eric Lambert, the photographer who came to Beirut to document the circuit. When were they conceived in the design process and what were their roles?**

Said is very central; he is the porter you see at the airport. He follows you and tells you he wants to carry your bag even if you're carrying four

kilograms. This is the guy you find at every street corner and at the door of every restaurant or nightclub. Said has become exotic too. Said is a very complex individual and I'm very sorry that we've dangerously simplified his portrait in this story. We should go back to Said.

Eric, on the other hand, is just a curious Frenchman. Don't you think?

**It's also an intriguing approach that to criticize a**



**“I made a very conscious and strict decision not to move in the city in a car because it's no longer bearable.”**



**fetishized Beirut you built a system and a reality that accentuates just that. Why did you choose that route?**

My answer is in the title of the piece, *Derailing Beirut*. Isn't it clear? If you can't stop the train...

**Jump on it?**

No... might as well push it to the point of derailing. Don't quote me on that—it's dangerous.—

Said's job consists of recuperating the rolling capsule at the bottom of its course and hauling it back to its departure point, while wandering the city awaiting the occasional tourist.