



PUTTING AMNESIA IN POSTWAR BEIRUT" TEXT BY IMKE LODE

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BY ANNE FRANÇOISE PELISSIER



El Khoury is an aeronautic engineer, a ship-building mechanic, an electrician of pleasure. Without him the 'combat architect' was about to disappear.

Rudy Ricciotti *Architect, Paris*

Khoury creates places of power and impact from ruptures and contradictions, without falling into pathos.

Kristin Freireiss *Founding Director of the AEDFS-West Gallery, Berlin*

He is a radical innovator who disregards classical Arab forms and styles to build memorials for a repressed remembrance of national history.

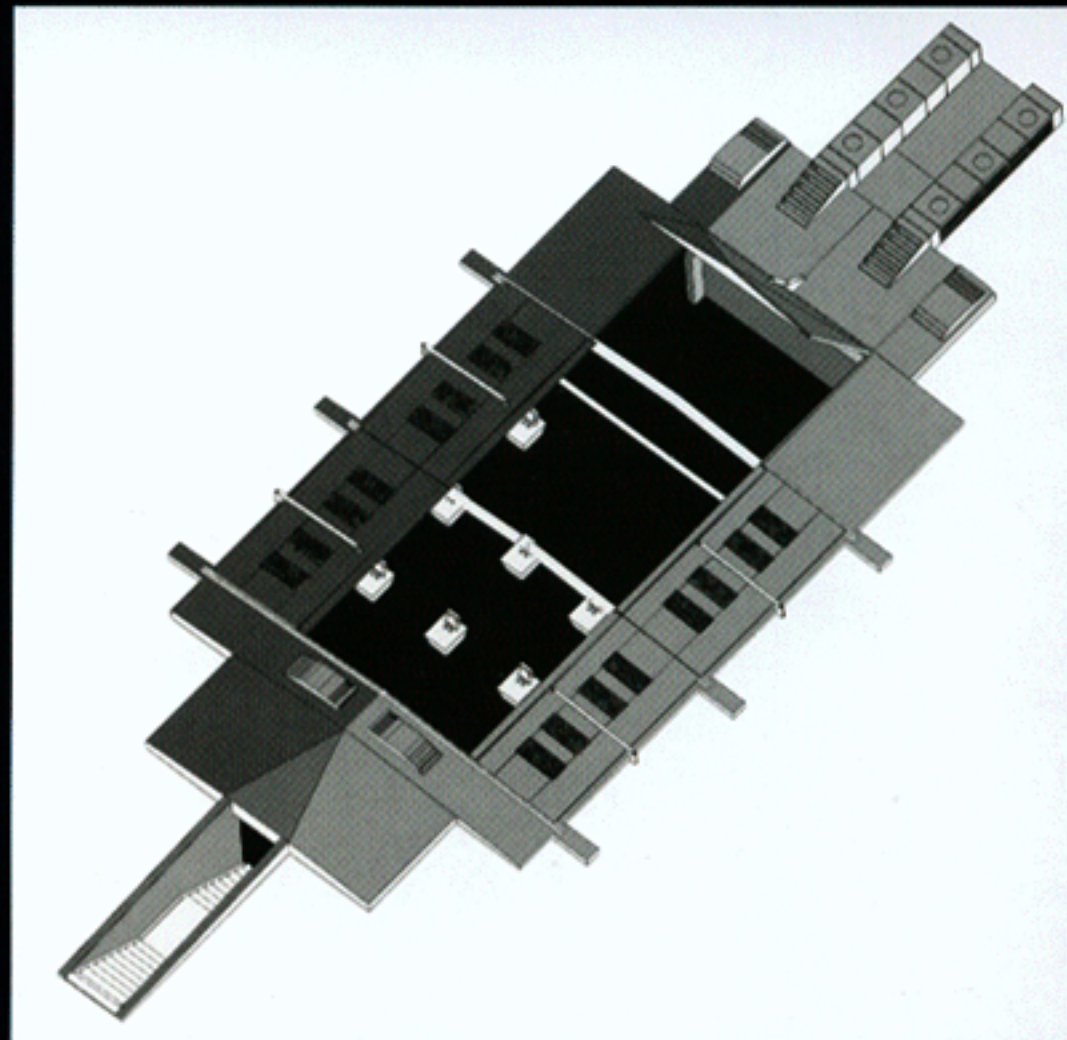
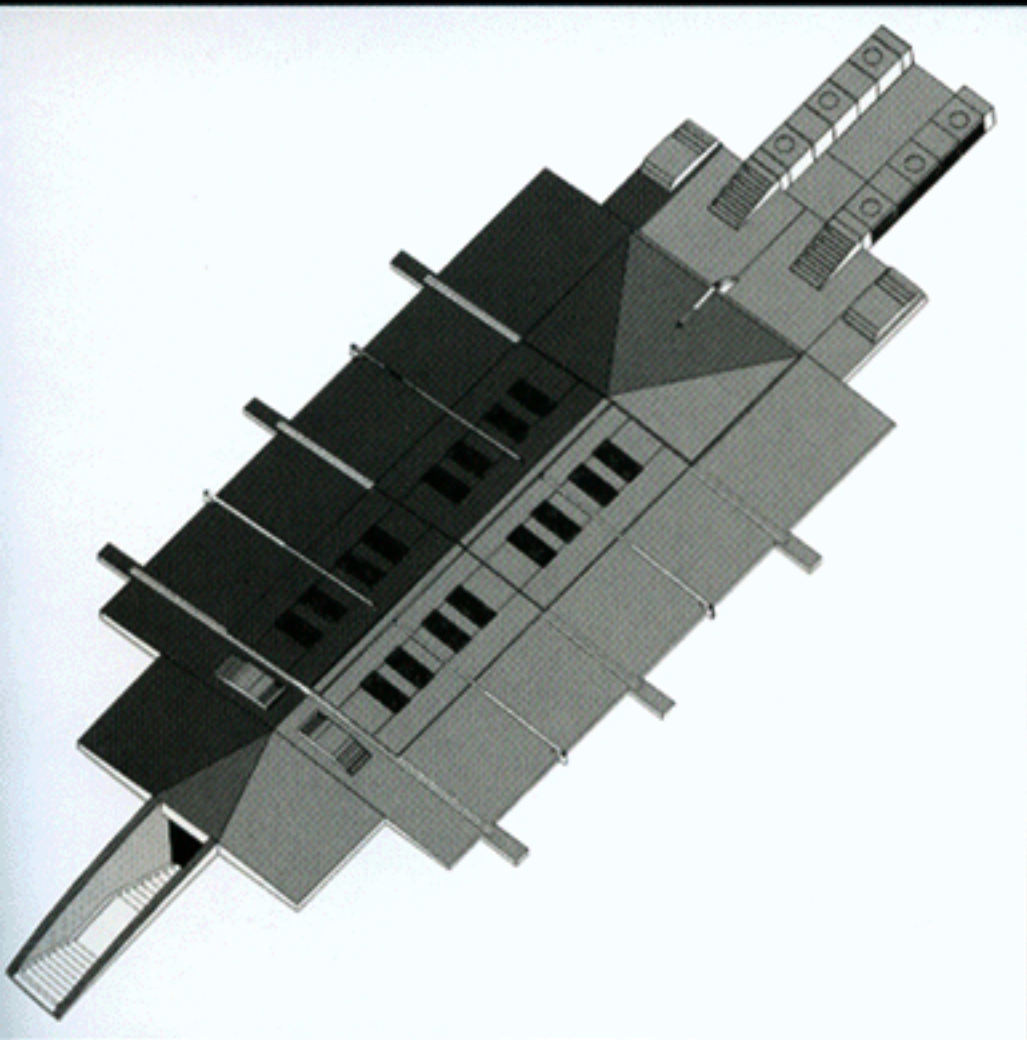
Johannes Odenthal *Creator of the exhibit, DiORIENTATION at Berlin's House of World Culture*

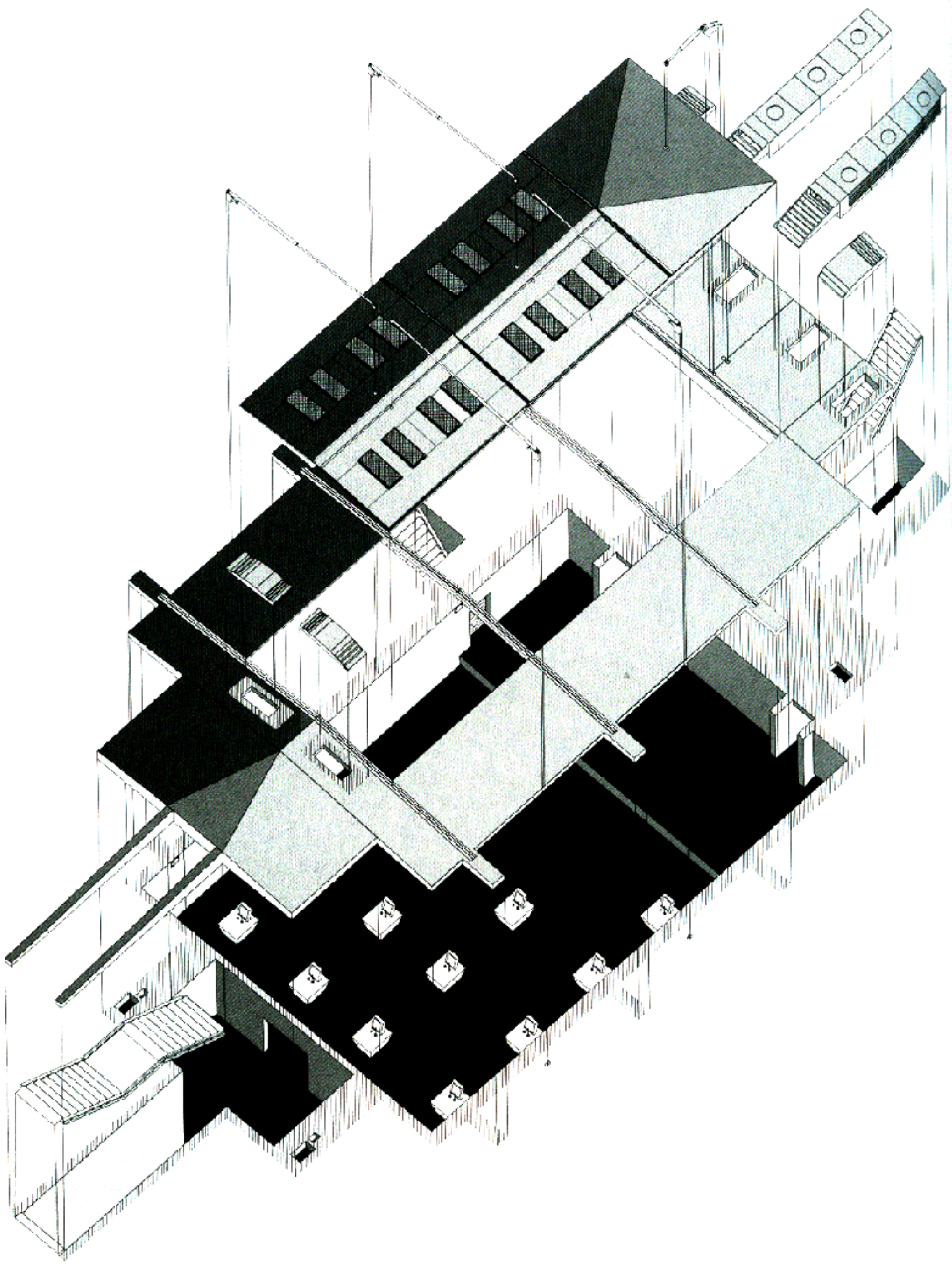


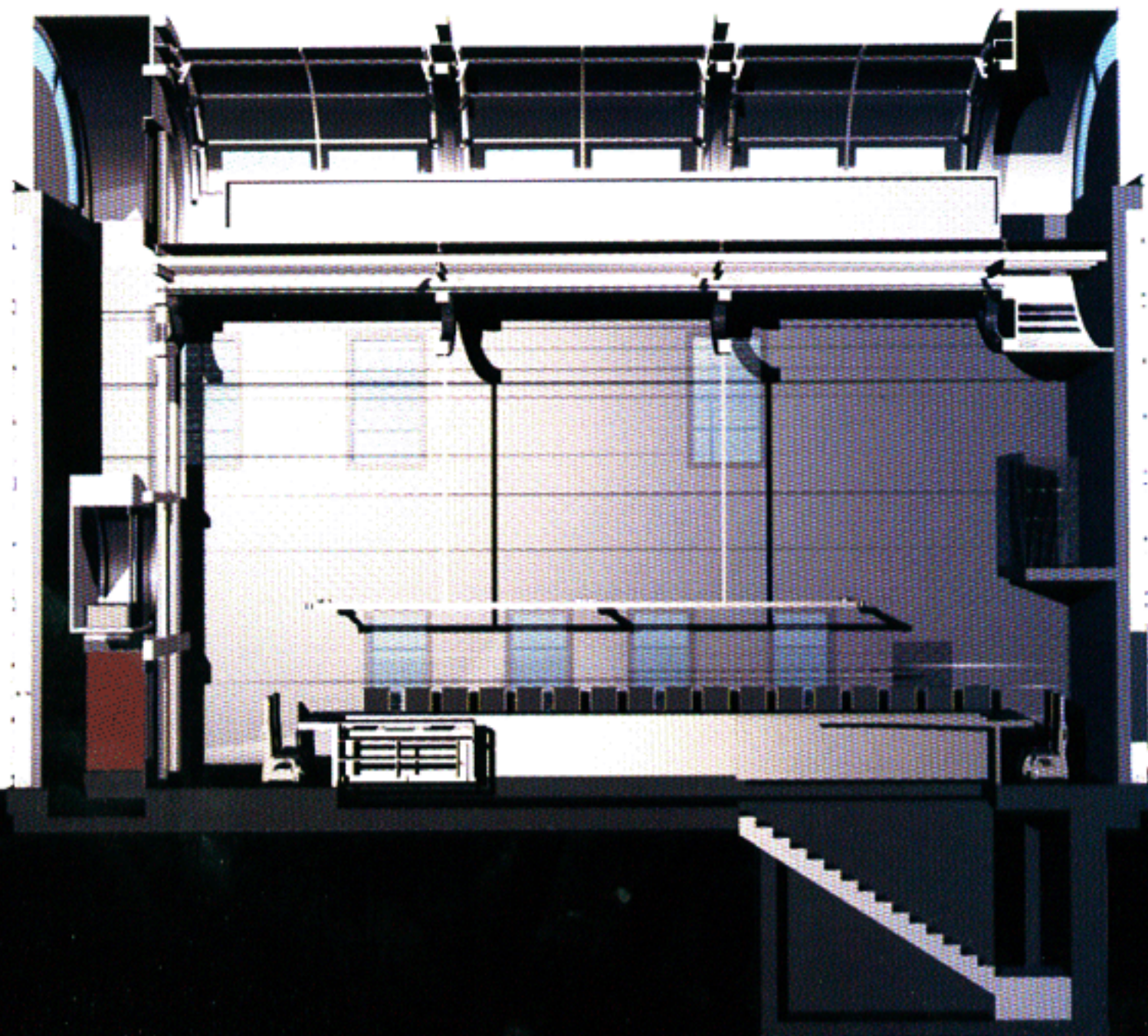


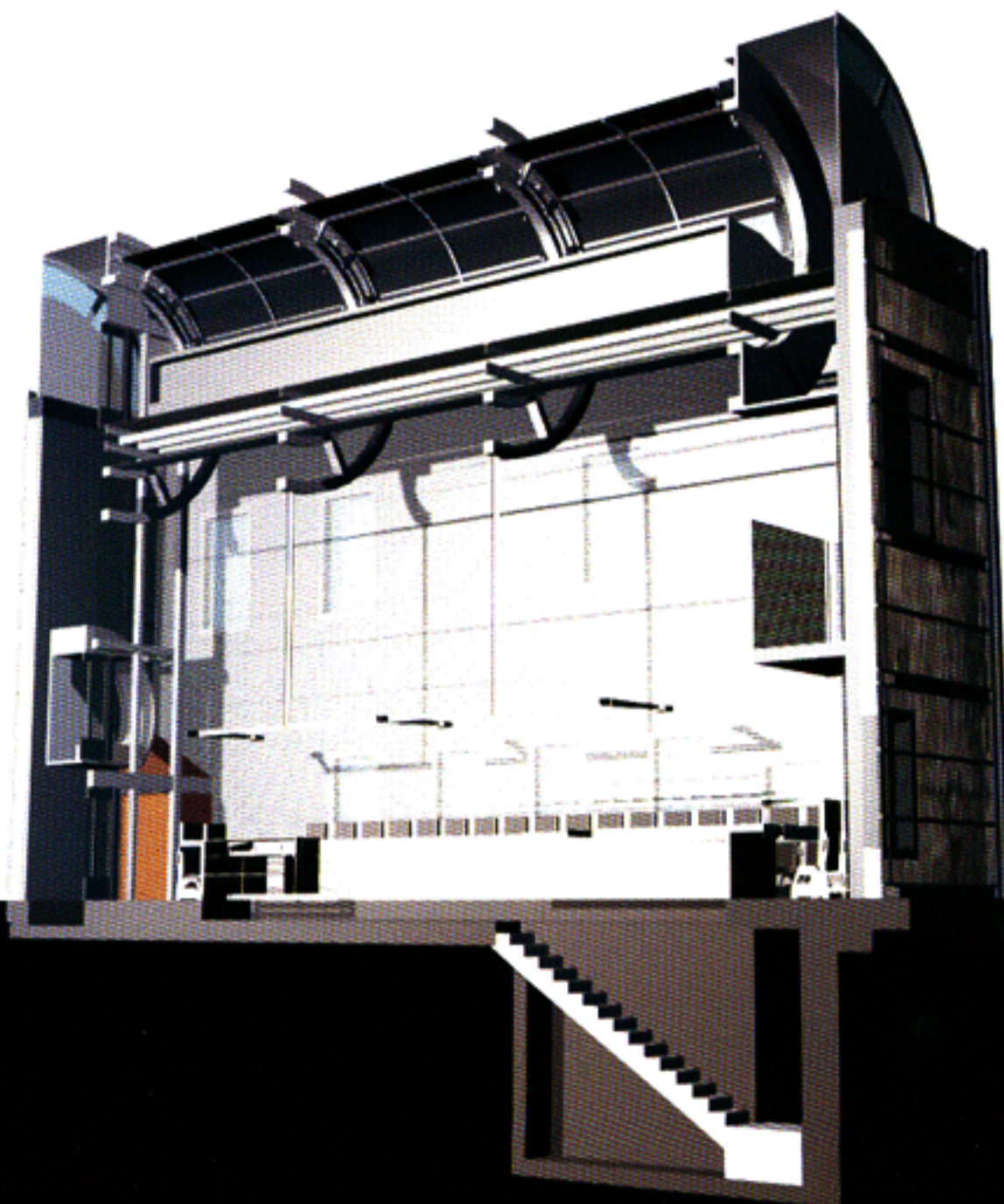














YABANI
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"During my studies at the Rhode Island School of Design I drove my teachers insane," says the intense-looking architect, Bernard Khoury, during our three-hour-long conversation at Germany's most renowned architecture gallery, AEDES-West. His one-man show, "Plan B—Projects in Beirut" opens in a few hours. "I wouldn't draw my projects until the very last minute," he explains, "simply because I hardly develop my plans in drawings; they develop in my head and in conversation at the site of the envisioned project." To the 35-year-old Bernard Khoury, the notion of "architecture parlante" is a most literal, highly contemporary and political translation of "speaking architecture"—not merely a tribute to the French revolutionary architect Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (1736-1806), who created architecture that reflected the utopian manifestations of a new social order by drawing plans for the restructured institutions of post-Revolutionary France.

To the Beirut-born architect, though, the social utopian dimension of his few built projects and fantastic architectural visions is rooted in the current economic and historical situation of each of his constructions' locales and their inhabitants. And if these situational reference points are constantly changing—and of a contradictory and provocative nature—then so must Khoury's plans.

A case in point is his most-talked-about built project—B 018, one of the hippest, most successful discotheques in Beirut. Like a bunker or military construction, at first sight it reveals itself merely as a roof of steel plates rising from a concrete circle, which is surrounded by two concentric rings. The inner ring allows cars to access the parking areas; the outer ring provides individual parking spaces in a carousel formation, marked by longish blocks of metal with lights for night-time illumination. The intense illumination of the parking space as much as the circling motion of arriving and departing cars are integral elements of the club's scenario, which most literally revolves around self-display and retreat. The dark sheet metal plates are conceived as a cap, structurally autonomous with five panels being opened at night through hydraulic pistons. The entrance is located on the side closest to the highway, which separates the bare urban lot # 317 in Beirut's "La Quarantine" district from the densely populated neighborhood "River of Beirut" across the street.

Situated underground, ten feet below street level, the nightclub's subterranean placement corresponds to the original topography of the site—a site that saw one of the most atrocious massacres of the Lebanese Civil War. What had begun on April 13, 1975 as a combat between Palestinians and Christian Lebanese quickly escalated and turned into a brutal conflict between Christians and Muslims of various factions—pro-Iranian and pro-Syrian, Shiite, Druse, Maronite, and others. It was in the same year that 20,000 Palestinian, Kurdish, and Southern Lebanese refugees found a home at "La Quarantine" (an area that had received its name during the French occupation due to its use as a quarantine zone for arriving ship crews at the nearby harbor). In January 1976, the Christian Phalangist militia invaded "La Quarantine," razing it to the ground and slaughtering thousands of refugees. The refugee slums and the kilometer-long bordering wall that isolated the zone from the city were demolished; the dividing line between a western Muslim part and an eastern Christian part of Beirut was sealed. Today, the scarcely built area is the scar of that Saturday in early 1976. Many of those who had disappeared or were kidnapped were suspected of having been executed and buried on the site of club B 018.

In 1998, eight years after the Civil War's end, musician and club manager Nagi Gebran was looking for a new space for B 018 (the code number of his former studio apartment studio situated 18 km north of Beirut, famous for its "musical therapy" sessions during the war). He placed Bernard Khoury in charge of the architectural concept, execution, scenography and furniture design of the music club. Ironically, the real estate broker with whom Khoury searched for a suitable site was one of the refugees' murderers at "La Quarantine." When he shared his vivid memories with Khoury, it invoked his own recollections of things he had heard and seen about the massacre—including news photographs that had stuck in his mind since that Black Saturday in 1976 showing the wall with the sniper hole used by the militia to gun down passers-by.

To the American and French-trained architect who grew up in Beirut, it thus became not just a personal or intellectual but political necessity to counteract the official post-war Lebanese urban planning policy of historical amnesia. Khoury brings his country's history and uncertain future

to his architecture, confronts them with each other in an incessant dialogue, in an uncanny celebration of both life and the remembrance of war crimes and death. It was precisely this aspect for which the first Borromini Prize-youth section awarded Khoury an Honorable Mention in September 2001. The panel of assessors was especially struck with Khoury's "unusual use of professional know-how from outside the field of architecture to define the constructive elements in his project in a personal way."

B 018's opening roof with 280 square feet of mirrored panels particularly caught the prize jury's attention, as it "permits exploration of the atmosphere of the surrounding space and allows the outdoor context to be breathed in and brought into the building's interior." In fact, the interior as much as the exterior of B 018 reverberates the contradictory challenges of establishing a contemporary entertainment establishment on a war-marked site. On gray stone floors, chamfered block tables are illuminated from within, supporting a permanently anchored mini vase, a candlestick, and a mahogany photo frame with pictures in memory of some of music's great names: Charles Mingus, John Coltrane, Oum Khoulsoum, Thelonious Monk, Billie Holliday and others. Supplemented with fresh roses and candles each day, these tables—and their seats of steel structures with dark stained mahogany—have often been perceived as memorials and tombs. Yet, upon closure of their vertical backs down onto the red velvet upholstery, the seats' flat horizontal surfaces are less intended to be linked to notions of graves but to Eastern Mediterranean traditions of dancing on tables (a tradition reinterpreted the later the night).

To Khoury, direct associations of his lounge's furniture and design with a Phoenician tomb or coffin reveal more of a certain European interpretation of architectural devices in a rather literal, "heavy-handed" tradition of coming to terms with the past. His intention, however, is more Beirut-style: multi-layered and contradictory. Yet, the inherently unstable connotations of the illuminated tables, the sniper-hole-like window in the entrance area, the red velvet curtains along the side walls, and the steel structure of the entire underground club do lead local visitors to associations with a tomb or graveyard and, surely, with the massacre of 1976—but isn't that intended?

What we are left with is precisely what characterizes the Lebanese architect's work with such vehemence: "Bernard Khoury creates places of power, of an impact which is created through ruptures, through contradictions that operate without pathos but almost light-handedly in a cunning way," Kristin Freireiss concludes in an interview before opening the 300th exhibition at her 23-year-old gallery, AEDES-West. Zaha Hadid—who has been affiliated with Germany's first address among architecture galleries for over twenty years—had recommended the still little-known Lebanese to the AEDES-curators and owners, Freireiss and Hans-Jürgen Commerell. "Khoury always creates new places, sometimes bizarre but always places of communication," Freireiss explains. "He drafts and creates in a way that design has already recognized as its mode of production but architecture still needs to face: to be part of the political, socio-cultural process of constant change, mobility, and streams of refugees."

The complex mix of ethnic and religious groups, their (inter)relations, and the fast-shifting economic power structures in contemporary Beirut are key topics that Khoury addresses in his architecture. Conceiving his plans, Khoury requires himself to engage with the future building's inhabitants in an ongoing conversation with the construction's geographical and political circumstances. They are also the themes of the exhibit "DisORIENTation—Contemporary Arabic Art from the Near East" at Berlin's House of World Culture, upon which the Khoury exhibit, "Plan B," is financially piggybacking. The architect has a particular approach to the contemporary Lebanese capital, though: "post-war Beirut is a hyper-contemporary version of the capitalist city in a state of anarchy, a fantastic but terrifying product of Western influences gone out of control." His visions for Beirut disregard classical Arab architectural traditions. He opposes the governmental reconstruction company, Solidère, and its plan to rebuild the former Paris of the Near East in a Disneyland spirit of Arab tourism, postmodern theme parks, or profit-oriented high-rise projects. Instead, Khoury engages in "a kind of politicized archaeological excavation of Beirut's most recent past," summarizes Johannes Odenthal, curator of DisORIENTation.

One of Khoury's other built projects, the restaurant Centrale (2000-2001), exemplifies this historically conscious form of construction, his poetics

of de-materialization and decay. In a historically protected 1920's residential structure in an area close to the demarcation line between West and East Beirut, he built an exclusive restaurant and, above the main hall and its only long table, a 17-meter-long bar. He intentionally left the façade un-plastered, rendering visible the building's past and slowly dilapidating skin through metal mesh between steel beams that were installed while gutting the house for the two-floor-high main hall. The restaurant's interior, on the other hand, creates an extremely formal atmosphere in its resemblance to an assembly hall. A huge conference table with high-backed seats and each plate illuminated with its own pilot light allows hushed conversation only with each seats' neighbors left and right. In this case, it is Khoury's ironic (not cynical, he insists) way of stressing the "importance of events" rather than the physical structure of his architecture—the culinary celebration of post-Civil War capitalist success by a fraction of a society living in historical denial.

Credits & Comments

Pg.72 Bernard Khoury, Portrait by Anne Françoise Pellissier.

Pg.75-76,79-81 *B018*, 1997-1998, Architect: Bernard Khoury; Consultants: A.C.I.D; Client: BA4.

B 018 is a music club, a place of nocturnal survival. In the early months of 1998, the B 018 moved to the "Quarantine," on a site that was better known for its macabre aura. The "Quarantine" is located at the proximity of the port of Beirut. During the French protectorate, it was a place of quarantine for arriving crews. In the recent war it became the abode of Palestinian, Kurdish, and South Lebanese refugees (20,000 in 1975). In January 1976, local militia men launched a radical attack that completely wiped out the area. The slums were demolished along with the kilometer long bordering wall that isolated the zone from the city. Over twenty years later, the scars of war are still perceptible through the disparity between the scarce urban fabric of the area and the densely populated neighborhoods located across the highway that borders the zone.

The B 018 project is, first of all, a reaction to difficult and explosive conditions that are inherent to the history of its location and the contradictions that are implied by the implementation of an entertainment program on such a site. B 018 refuses to participate in the naive amnesia that governs post-war reconstruction efforts. The project is built below ground.

Pg.82-83 *Yabani*, 2000-2001, Architect: Bernard Khoury; Assistants: F.Sarieddine, J.Al-Jabri, M.Maria; A.Abboud; Consultants: E.P.M.F.C., A.C.I.D; Yabani/Y-bar.

The Yabani project was built to house a Japanese restaurant and bar on a 285 square meters site located at the edge of the Damascus road on the former demarcation line that separated East and West Beirut. The traces of shelling of the recent wars are highly visible on many of the adjacent buildings that are still squatted by refugees. The Yabani building incorporates a two-storey concrete structure below ground level and a fourteen-meter high steel tower above ground. The tower contains a mobile reception room that travels vertically within a circular glass perimeter from the street level to the restaurant level below ground. The guests' seating is laid out in a circular configuration around the mobile transparent reception that animates the center of the plan. The vertical circulation of the guests' arrival and departure is intentionally over-exposed as the reception lounge becomes the focal point around which the seating plan is generated. The restaurant interior is exposed to the sky through generous "walk-on" glass windows located at ground level. The patrons can therefore enjoy their dining experience in total denial of their immediate urban surroundings. On the other hand, the Yabani project assumes its absurd presence and its impossible relationship with its urban environment through the exposure of the highly visible tower and the relationships it establishes with its immediate surrounding. Yabani is the product of a scenario that attempts to describe a fraction of a society living in marvelous denial. Leftovers of war and spectacles of desolation become a backdrop to the more impressive spectacle of a society being entertained. Yabani wants to be a monument for the entertainment industry, a building that claims a landmark status it cannot possibly assume.

It remains a bit doubtful, though, whether his conscious use of the local craft industry in his low-tech and non-standard techniques of metal work and the socioeconomic criticism expressed by his architectural scenarios is actually grasped by the visitors of his buildings. Luckily, he considers his work very down to earth and—like it or not—an involuntary part of the capitalist mode of building in the Lebanese capital. After all, he did not choose to work only for the entertainment industry, but this has been the only industry that has, so far, allowed him to actually build his architectural ideas.

Despite his Master in Architectural Studies from Harvard University Khoury considers his work to be less cerebral than circumstantial and anti-intellectual. Without claiming a hypercritical place outside of the hyper-capitalist framework of Beirut's "re-building," Khoury designs functional and profitable plans without compromising his respect for craftsmanship or overlooking the context of a site. These are the foundations of his work—plans not built on an aesthetization of ruins but, rather, a re-collection of memory in a conscious—and engaging—exchange with the present.

Pg.84-85 *Centrale*, 2000-2001, Architect: Bernard Khoury; Assistants: F. Sarieddine, M. Maria; P. Mezher; R. Saad; Consultants: A.C.I.D; Client: Centrale Restaurant.

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.

For the purpose of implementing the required space for the restaurant within the remains of the existing house, the internal partitioning walls of the building and the slab of the first floor level had to be demolished. In the process of voiding out the interior of the existing structure the outer envelope of the house had to be reinforced by placing horizontal beams that embrace the skin from the outer perimeter of the façade.

Our rehabilitation scheme implements this temporary process in the final configuration of the edifice. The steel beams used in the temporary reinforcement process are preserved. The new imply a new reading of the non-restored façade. Furthermore, we chose not to re-plant the damaged façade, as it would have been the case in a traditional rehabilitation, instead, it covered with a metallic mesh behind which the plaster finishing of the old façade remains in state of decomposition. The mesh now enhances the poetic dimension of decay.

In the double volume of the main hall lies one central table. The service personnel remain trapped inside the table and communicate directly through a flight of stairs with the kitchen underground. Every dish on the table is lit with its own pilot lamp. Such a formal aspect, similar to a conference table for a general assembly, is further enhanced by the proportions of the high back chairs that line the table to insure the secrecy of the assembly. Above the main hall structural beams inscribe a circular section that inhabits a 17m-long bar. The beams also act as tracks for the rotating movement of the cylindrical envelope of the bar space.

The construction process of the Centrale project relied heavily on the know-how of the local craft industry. Low-tech and non-standard techniques were particularly in use in the metal works. This is part of a more general concern we have with the making of architecture. It is a reaction to the prevalent construction industry that relies on standardized modes of production and an attempt to escape the typical process of construction by re-enacting traditional ways of making.

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