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Exclusive chat with architect Bernard Khoury

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↘ WORDS **Claire Glasby**   ↘ IMAGES **DW5 & traffic**

Later this month, Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury will be coming to Dubai to hold a lecture and exhibition at design gallery, traffic. After graduating with a masters in Architectural Studies from Harvard in 1993, Khoury launched his own practice, receiving numerous accolades along the way, including the Architecture+ Award and the Borromini award with honorable mention, for his forward-thinking and often controversial designs. While some critics have waxed lyrical that many of Khoury's projects have acted as memorials to the civil war that had affected his homeland, the man himself, however, is quick to assert that he both lives and works firmly in the present.

Now a member of the Dubai Design Advisory Board alongside such peers as Zaha Hadid, Khoury's lecture, *Beyond Modernity: Building in the Arab World*, hopes to look into the challenges that are faced by a region such as Dubai, where large-scale, rapid construction is a major driving force. *Location* caught up with Bernard Khoury ahead of his lecture to discuss his bad-boy reputation and his ideas for giving Dubai its own design identity.

What is it about your projects that have hit such a nerve?

I don't think my work is elitist. I think of my projects as devices that interact with their living environments. I don't want my work to be contemplated. I like to think of my projects as relevant contextual interventions.

My buildings are used and abused: they are sometimes loved, sometimes hated. My buildings have a life.

Can you explain a little about your responsibilities as a member of Dubai's Design Advisory Board?

My responsibilities as a member of the Dubai Design Advisory Board are not very clear to me yet, but there are issues I would like to raise on this platform:

I am not interested in the overrated superficial packaging of Dubai. I don't think we can build a sustainable environment by blindly implementing western models (and more precisely American models), or by relying on imported labels. I would not want to look at Dubai, or any other city in our part of the world as a collection of second-rate under-products of western culture.

I am interested in the development of a very specific modernity that should be more contextual. I don't think Dubai should rely exclusively on imports, I think our cities can generate their own breed of modernity. I would like to be able to take Dubai more seriously. ⅴ

Opposite page, far left The Centrale restaurant project in Beirut
Opposite page, left The award-winning B018 nightclub in Beirut, which is built on the site of a former refugee quarantine area
Top left The ingenious suspended 'urban villas' of the IB3 project
Above Bernard Khoury

"There is an obvious penchant for excess in Dubai. Excess has become the norm and the absurd and burlesque go unnoticed"
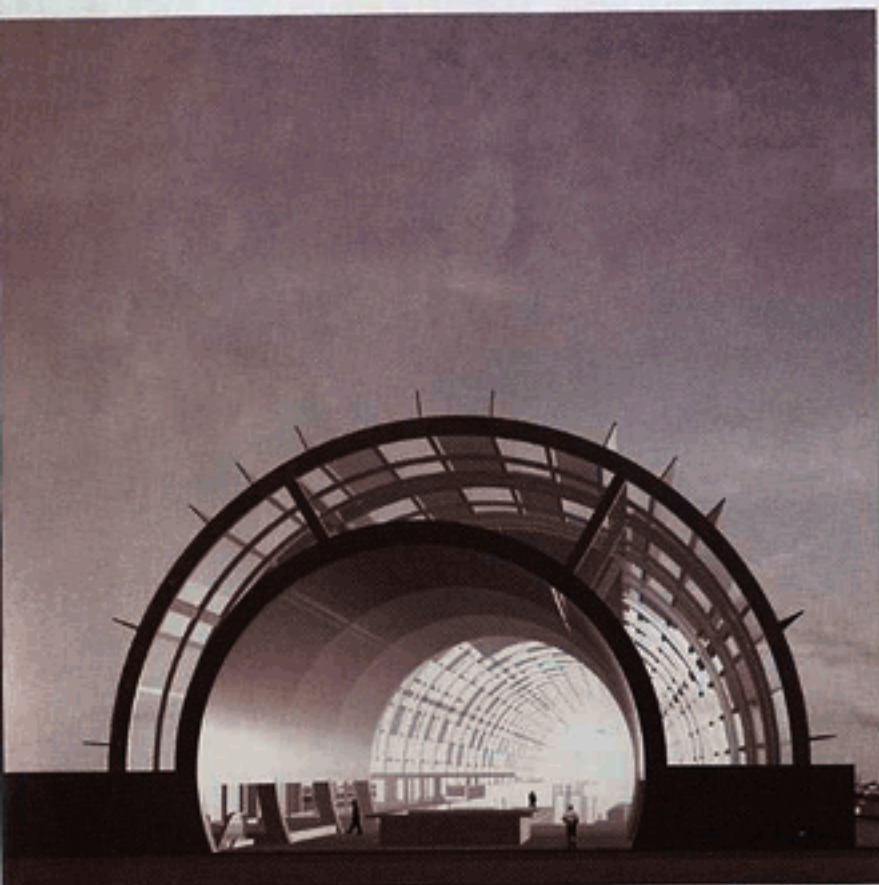
When you design a project, what goes into the planning process and how do you come up with a concept?

I have not developed any particular recipes or design methods that I would want to use repeatedly, I am not interested in that at all. Every project is a different story with a set of new situations that require specific tools and eventually specific strategies. My projects are context driven, and by the notion of context, I mean the dynamics of the context. I am interested in the less visible, in the not too obvious. I am more conceptual than formalist.

Is there a particular theme or motif that influences all of your projects, or do you start each one with fresh eyes?

I can't think of a particular issue that should be recurrent in my projects, but I don't believe in fresh eyes either. We come to a project with the lessons we have learned from past experiences and we hope to develop a strategy that is specific to our understanding and our interest to its particular context.

You have built a reputation for creating buildings that relate to the context and contradictions of where they are built. How does that translate to working on projects in Dubai?

Every context has its specificities and its inherent contradictions. Dubai is not very different in that respect from Beirut, or many other cities I have known.

The term "social discomfort" has been used to describe many of your projects in Beirut. Are you going to bring that concept to your Dubai designs? If so, what kind of impact do you think it will have?

This notion of "social discomfort" that you are eluding to (probably in reference to the Yabani project between east and west Beirut) is not something I intended to bring up systematically in every other context. In my Beirut entertainment projects, my intentions were not coming from a need to make my interventions louder and more visible.

There is an obvious penchant for excess in so many situations in Dubai. Excess of whatever has become the norm and the absurd and the burlesque go unnoticed.

My first proposal for Dubai, the Alargan Business Bay development, is far more "behaved" than most of the proposed towers in its vicinity. Dubai needs more understated, more serious, less obvious, less visible, more relevant and more pertinent buildings.

What is your main criticism of architects today? Particularly with regard to a rapidly developing city such as Dubai?

Which architects do you admire, both past and present?

I don't like dropping names, dead or alive. And my heroes are not necessarily architects.
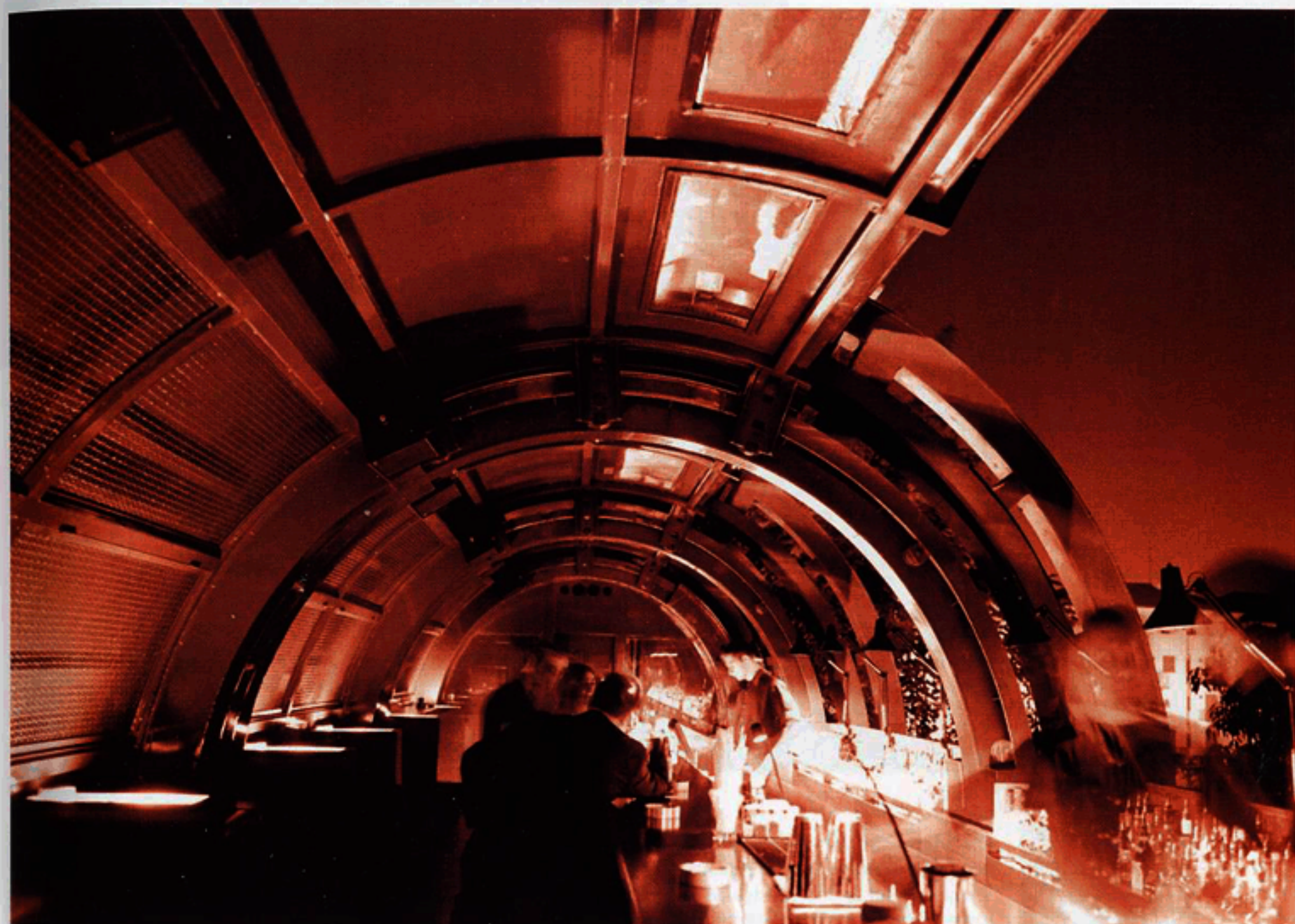
I find most of the architecture produced recently for Dubai very deceiving. I don't expect anything beyond mediocrity to come out of the big corporate American firms and even less from the second-rate consultants that come to our part of the world with their chilled recipes, twisted towers and cheap glittery designs. I also have a problem with importing star architects for the only purpose of putting a label on a building: that won't work either.

Which of your projects in the Gulf region has been your most exciting so far?

I don't have a particular preference for one particular project over others. We have been fortunate to operate on very different fronts in the Gulf. It is difficult to draw comparisons or preferences from such diverse and complex situations.

The press likes to label you as "controversial". What have they

got wrong about you? (or what have they got right?)

Some of the work I have produced has come out of politically charged contexts (particularly the early entertainment projects) and the Western media has sometimes looked at the work from a purely sensational angle. I have read and heard absurd and over-exaggerated sensational interpretations of these projects. You shouldn't believe everything the press feeds you, I am pragmatic. Believe me.

You have a number of high-profile ongoing projects in the Gulf. Are you currently working on anything outside of the region?

My first international commission was a relatively important project in Berlin. We also worked on a couple of residential projects in England. This year, we were invited to work on a large leisure development in Italy and we are currently completing a Media Park in Yerevan.

Ideally, where would you like to work?

In the present.

Are there any Gulf-specific considerations you have to account for when you are creating a new project (for example, the women-only spa in Riyadh)?

The project you are referring to [Surra-manraa', a women-only leisure facility in Riyadh] was developed around a unique and unprecedented programme. I also find interest in more typical programmes when we are given the chance to explore their full potential. Designing a mall for Fintas, Kuwait should not be the same as a mall for Chatta-nooga, Tennessee. What was developed and perfected for suburban America will not necessarily work for us. ▪▪▪▪

Bernard Khoury will be holding a workshop and seminars at traffic at 7pm on October 23. For more information, visit www.viatraffic.org