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WORK

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THE DISCREET CHARM

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OF BEIRUT



The context-driven work of an emerging architect reflects his deep ambivalence about the high-end reconstruction of Beirut.

by
**Stephen
Zacks**

When I walk into the third-story loft of DW5, Bernard Khoury's design studio, Lebanon's 38-year-old emerging star architect is sitting in a task chair talking with one of his attractive female assistants at the end of a row of partitioned black desks. He pivots in his chair and rolls for what seems like a hundred yards across the glossy bloodred floor to greet me. His devilish smile tells you maybe half of what you need to know about what it means to be the most fashionable and internationally recognized architect in Beirut—a city in a state of constant flux from a civil war that nobody is sure has really ended but where the building has never stopped, and the bigger and more glamorous the better.

It's an absurd situation, and Khoury has built his reputation celebrating it for the past ten years through a series of provocative and cleverly designed clubs, bars, restaurants—and most recently, a high-end residential tower a block from the dividing line between East and West Beirut, an area that has been policed by squadrons of soldiers with machine guns since Hezbollah began camping out in the central downtown square last November. He describes his projects as “interventions,” and their drama comes from their aggressive relation to the politically charged context, at the forefront of development and often within view of the fading remnants of war-torn ruins along the Green Line, though far from the sections of the city destroyed by Israel last summer in retaliation for rockets fired across its border.

“These hangout places have taken absurd dimensions in their decadence,” he says. “What I call the postwar bourgeois society lives in marvelous denial of the other Beirut that coexists side by side. These places are about pleasure and

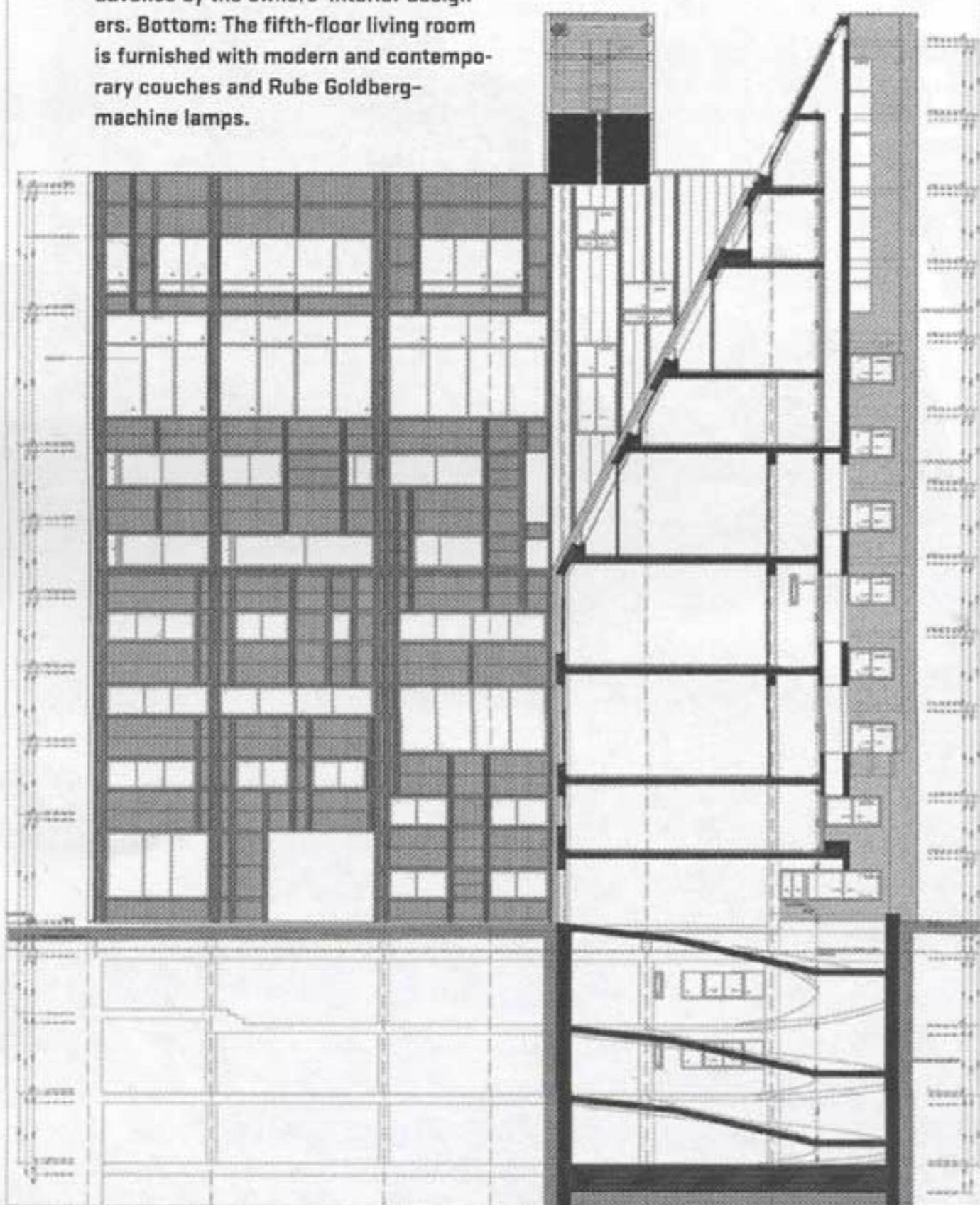
KHOURY

183, a condo building steps from Beirut's rapidly redeveloping downtown, is essentially a massing diagram in built form, with discontinuous windows reflecting each floor's separately designed interior. Right: Wooden slats add a warm texture and layer of insulation to the exterior.

Khoury on the roof of his studio in Quarantine, a former industrial port district that once housed large numbers of Palestinian refugees.

IB3 2007

An elevation (below) highlights the extreme space planning of Khoury's condo building on the edge of Gemmayze, in East Beirut. Each floor has its own idiosyncratic ceiling heights and window sizes based on plans submitted in advance by the owners' interior designers. Bottom: The fifth-floor living room is furnished with modern and contemporary couches and Rube Goldberg-machine lamps.



the difficulty of pleasure sometimes, the absurdity of those situations, and what it means politically and socially. They're about a very modern and almost postmodern capitalist society that has gone out of control but that still can be celebrated—in a critical way but still celebrated. They are not moralistic projects; they are not about what is good or what is bad. They are about the harshness and sometimes the beauty of those realities.”

Among the many absurdities of Khoury's early work is that until recently none of his built projects were meant to be still standing. They were intended to serve as temporary sites of pleasure and entertainment, and then to disappear when development caught up with them. Somehow, though, despite the constant building boom, they all survived, remaining popular party destinations through the periodic convulsions of Lebanese life, places to lose oneself in the city's uncertain landscape, romantic backdrops to its cyclical moments of destruction. Now as he enters the second phase of his career as one of the most sought-after architects in the Arab world, Khoury is designing permanent structures that—along with the work of international firms

being steadily imported into the region—are redefining the country's identity during a time of extraordinary political and cultural upheaval.

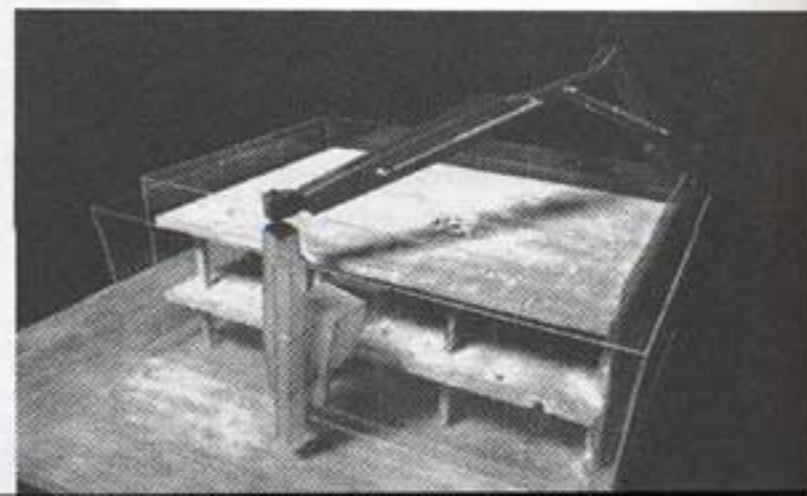
“We've had enough of this exoticism of war and this superficial curiosity that the West has for this part of the world,” he tells me as we sit down for lunch at Restaurant Paul, on Gemmayze Street, which has become flush with fancy bars, clubs, and eateries during the past five years. “At some point it will exhaust itself. There are people doing interesting things in Lebanon, but these have all outgrown



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EVOLVING SCARS 1991

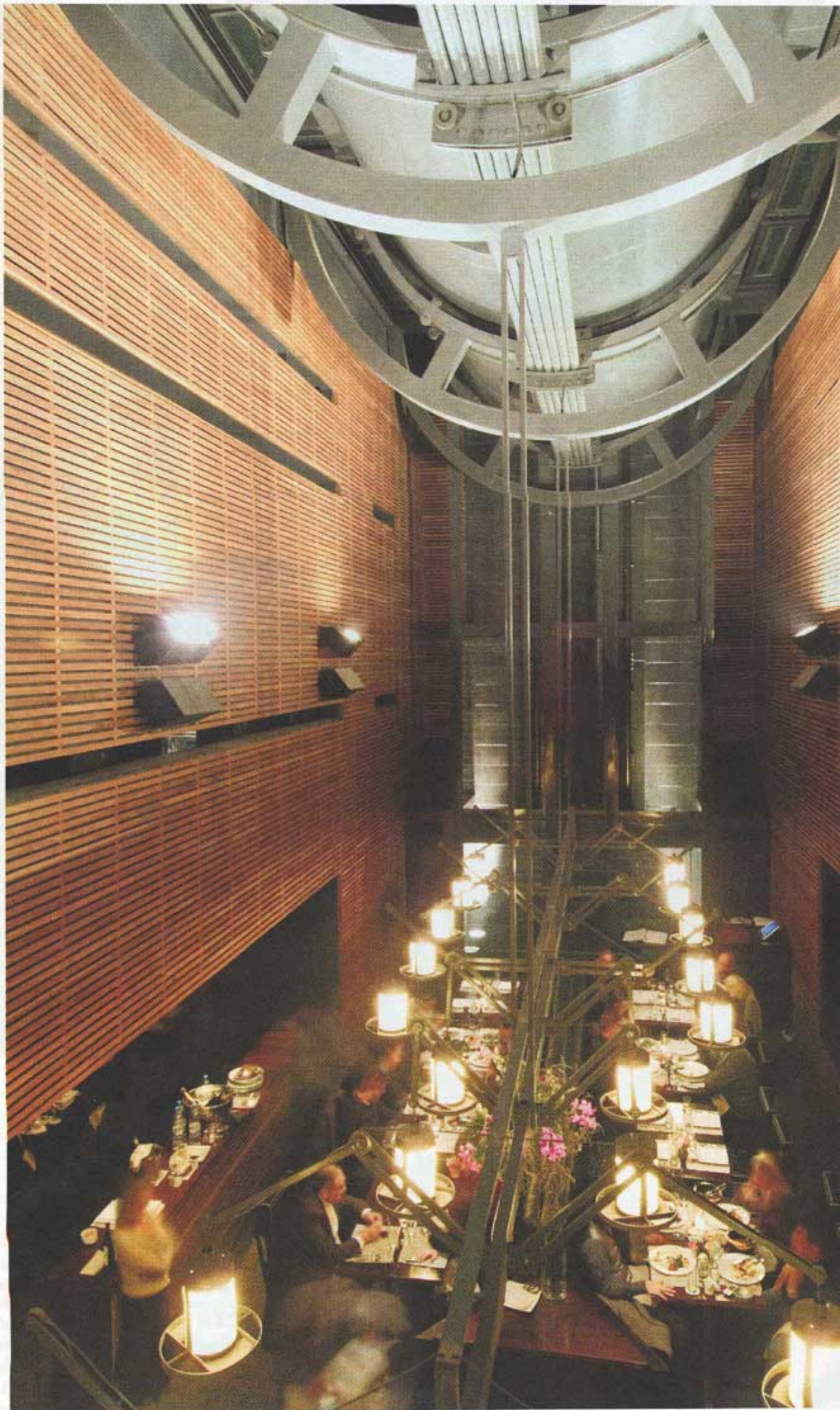
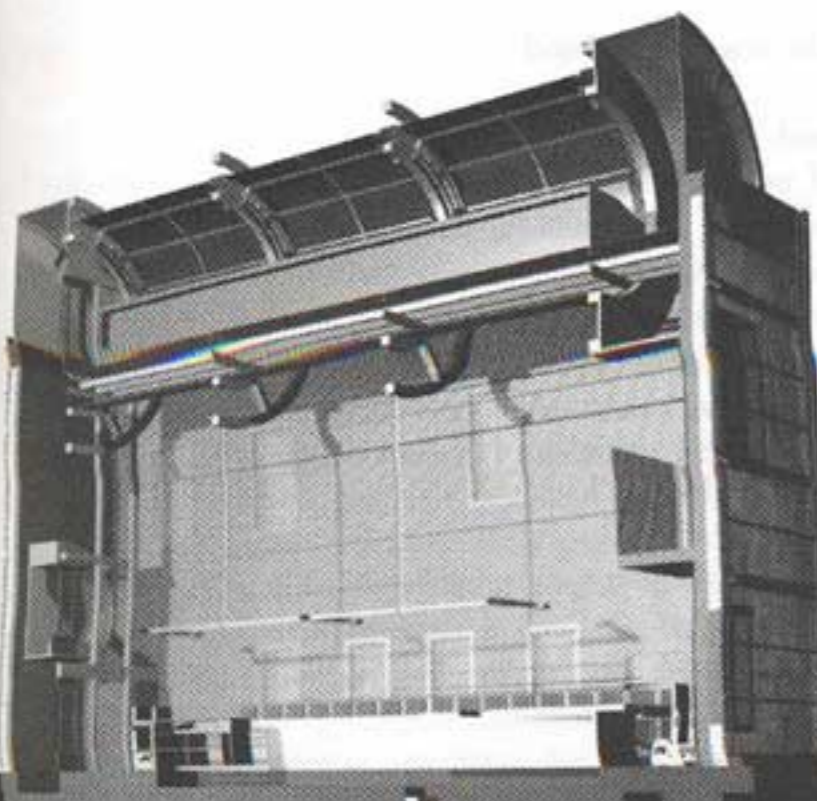
Khoury's studio project at Harvard GSD turned postwar demolition into an architectural performance piece.

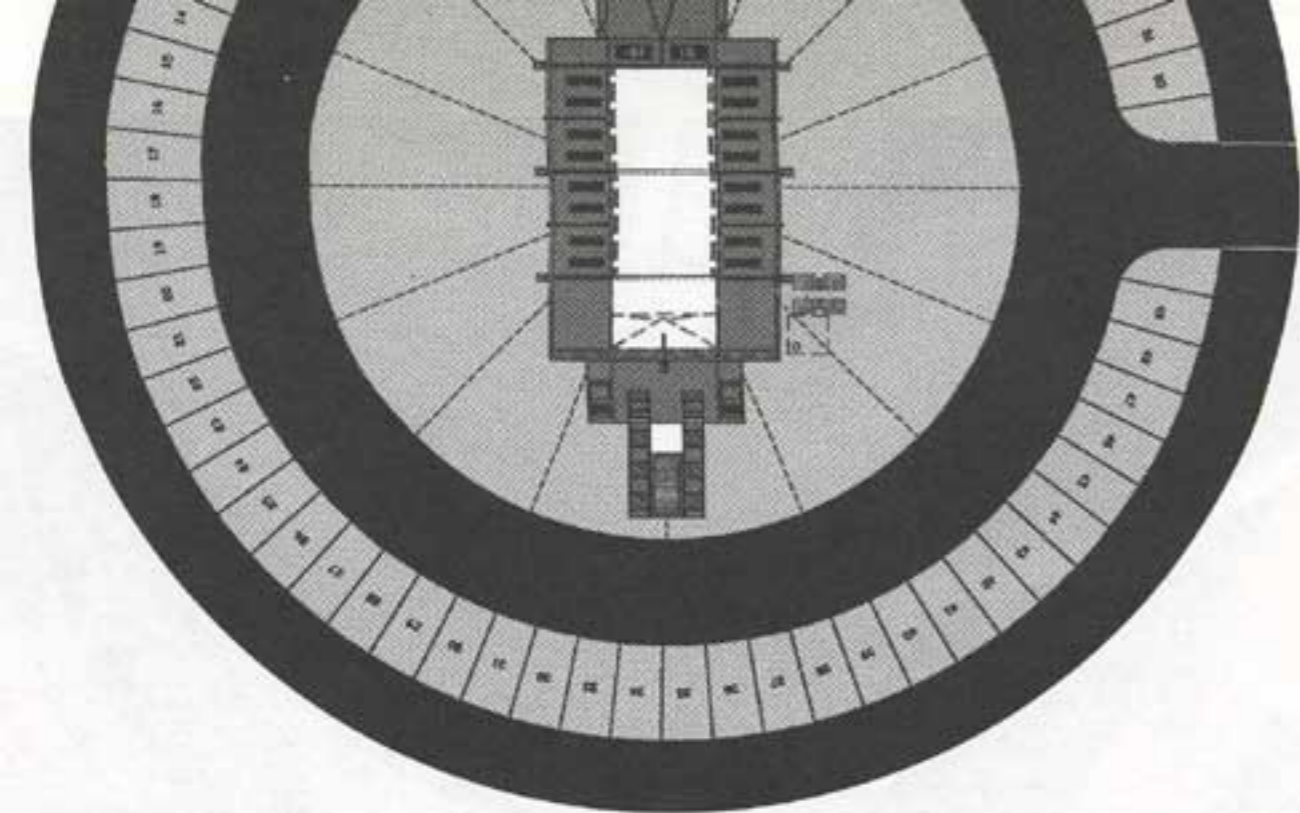




CENTRALE 2001

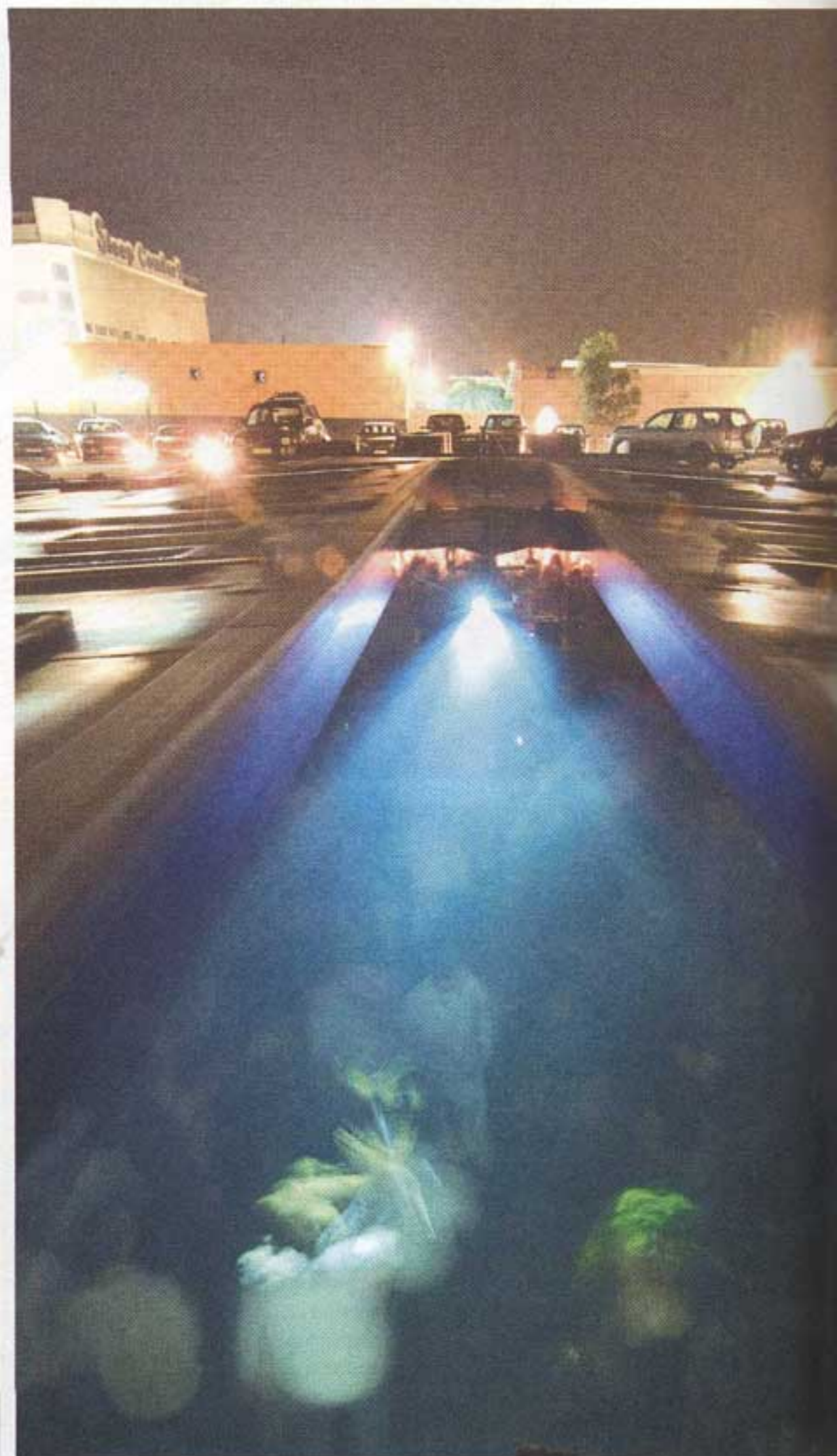
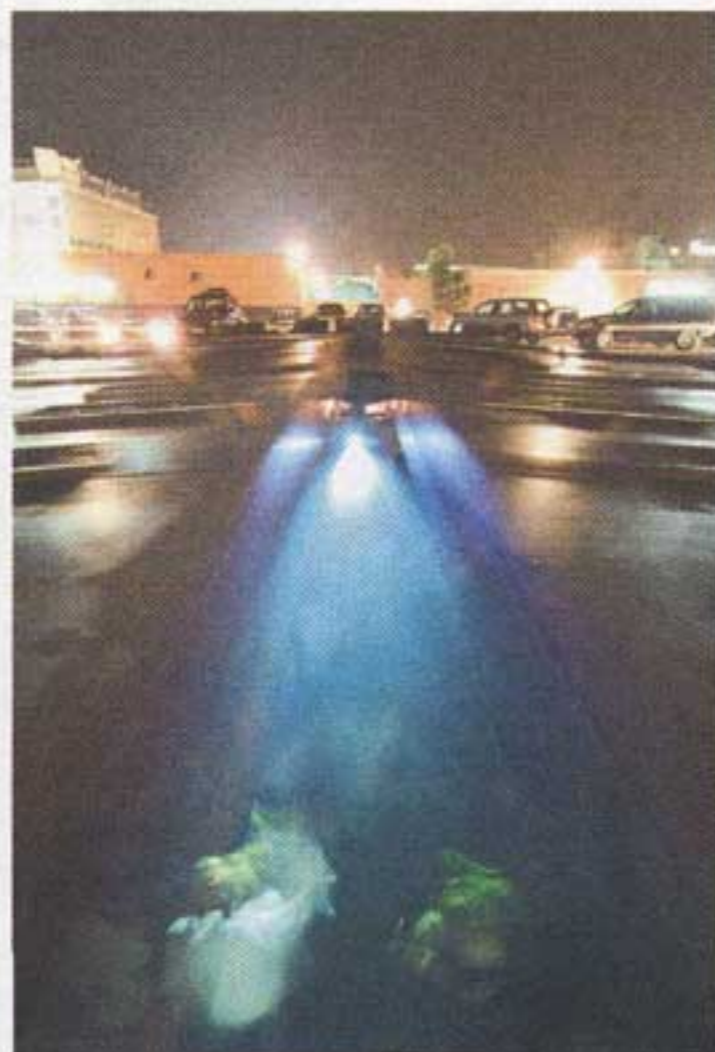
Khoury gutted the landmark building and wrapped its crumbling exterior in steel bracing and mesh (above). The restaurant (right) feels like an industrial cathedral topped by a shiplike bar (top). Below: A section shows the relationship between the two volumes.





B108 1998

The still fashionable—now after-hours—club in the Quarantine district is situated underground with a retractable roof, shown below and right as it opens. Aerial site plans with the rooftop open (above) and closed (opposite) also indicate the parking spaces encircling the club.



“My projects are not manifestos,” Khoury says. “They take a very specific situation and try to dig into that situation. But I am not being cynical here, because each of these projects has a dose of pleasure in them and that pleasure is extremely important.”

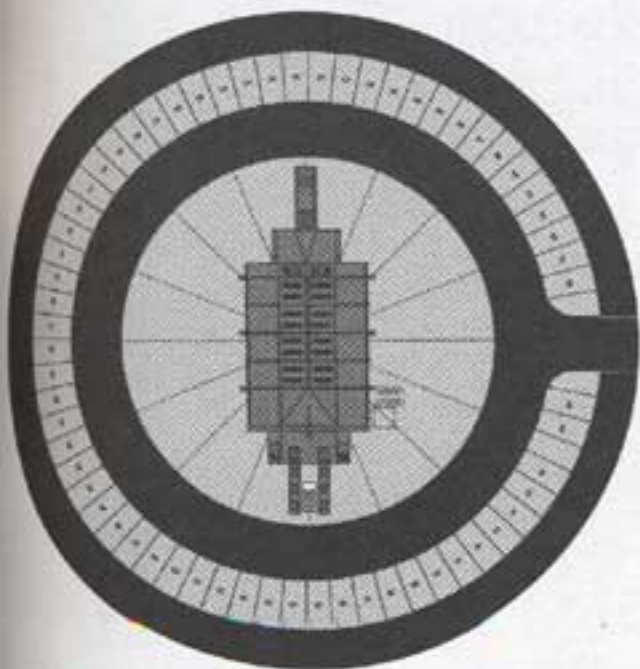
the subject of the war and the scars of war and that kind of thing.”

Khoury is well positioned to tell another story: he has a lineup of commissions for banks and apartment buildings in Beirut, shopping malls in Kuwait, a women’s spa in Saudi Arabia, a 30-story office tower in Dubai, and a new media center in Armenia that are all in different ways a reflection of the cultural and economic transformation under way throughout the region. In the Arab world, as in the United States and Europe, these changes have also produced a reactionary, sometimes violent backlash, and as an architect whose work is driven by context and site conditions, Khoury inevitably reflects these tensions in his buildings.

“Working in a context like Beirut, any work that you do will be perceived from a political perspective,” says Makram el Kadi

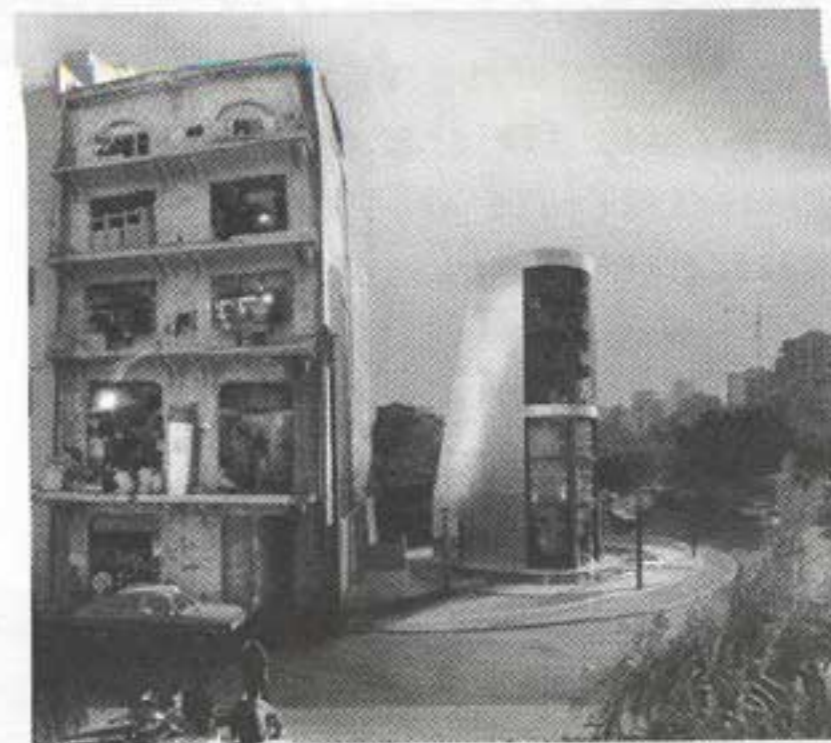
of L.E.F.T architects, a young Lebanese firm based in New York that is collaborating with Steven Holl on his project for the Beirut marina. "To begin with, building in Beirut is itself a political project. Some people argue that it's not appropriate to rebuild now when we are still in a state of war, when every summer we are attacked, so the effort of reconstruction is polemic from the get-go. The strength of his earlier work was based on the context of Lebanon, but now that he's expanding to the Arab world it becomes a much more difficult endeavor. How can you be really critical of something that you really don't know that well? That's a difficulty that he will have to address at some point."

Khoury still introduces his work by talking about *Evolving Scars*, his project for Lebbeus Woods's 1991 studio at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. At the time, Khoury was disenchanted with architecture school and had never done any work on Beirut, but Woods, who a few years later would use his radically experimental drawings to explore the politics of war and urban space, pushed



YABANI 2002

Located on the edge of the dividing line between East and West Beirut, the Japanese restaurant originally stood in sharp contrast to the adjacent building squatted by refugees (below). A model (above) shows the placement of the bar and restaurant below, with an elevator (below, middle) to dramatize entrances from the dining area (bottom).



him to go back and think about the city's postwar reconstruction. *Evolving Scars* proposed to take a hollowed-out two-story concrete structure stripped of cladding and pockmarked by mortars, enclose the facade in two layers of glass, and fill the glass cavity with the building's crushed remains. Visitors would be suspended midair inside a "demolishing device" and watch the structure be converted into a functionless rubble-filled glass wall—reconstruction as an architectural performance piece. The project already anticipated his criticism of the erasure of history in downtown Beirut as a result of its reconstruction.

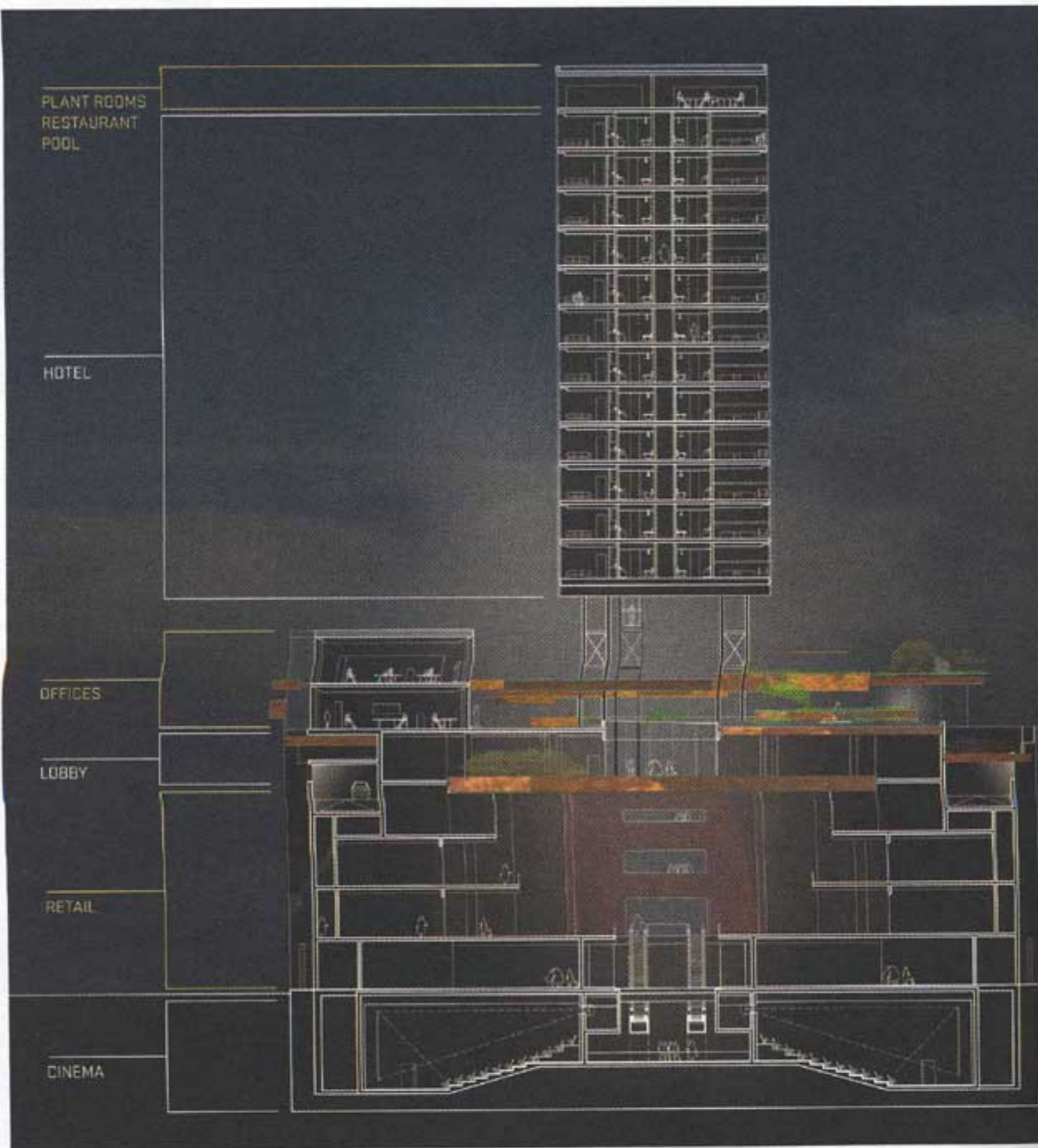
As we sit at the long bar at Centrale, with its curved steel-encased roof that rolls up like a submarine emerging from the sea, we look out over the largely New Urbanist encampment of the rebuilt central business district, which mimics the spirit of the mostly demolished French colonial architecture left in fragments by bullets, mortars, and bombs. "There is complete denial of the present, a complete denial of context," he says. "It's either buildings that have absolutely no architectural value whatsoever, which are totally stuck in a postcard romantic vision of the past, or the corporate crap that exists anywhere—a very sterile version of modernity."



“What’s very sad about malls in Kuwait and that part of the world is they’re the same as malls you see anywhere in the U.S.,” Khoury says. “They take that model and implement it without trying to exploit the potential of public space in Kuwait.”

ANDALUS 2006 (design)

A mixed-use development in Kuwait City, Kuwait, in collaboration with André Terzibachian, the complex includes a hotel, a shopping mall, a cinema, offices, restaurants, apartments, and terraces for the cooler months. In the absence of a dynamic urban context to react to, Khoury builds one into the project.



Khoury’s contrarian strategy for Centrale was to smash together the historic and the modern: instead of restoring the landmark to its original state, he gutted it, wrapped it in steel bracing and mesh to hold up the walls and keep crumbling pieces of sandstone from falling into the courtyard, and installed a shiplike container on top with an extravagant dark wooden bar that runs from one end to the other. “These projects are very specific to the moments at which they were erected,” he says. “They are not about remembering the war or romanticizing it or anything of that sort. They are about intervening on specific sites that are very sensitive and very charged. They are sometimes about the absurdity of the proposition of building in these specific locations.”

Off to the right, IB3, his new condo building, is visible through Centrale’s open roof; it’s just being completed, and the owners are busy outfitting their floors in styles that range from eclectic contemporary to decorative regionalism. The building is almost an exact counterpoint to Khoury’s first built project, B018, a nightclub in an industrial port district that once served as a refugee camp before its inhabitants were violently expelled. The club is sunken underground with a retractable roof, and it occupies none of the space available for the site’s development. The condo tower, by contrast, is essentially a massing diagram in built form; it takes

“I build for the rich, I don’t build for the poor,” Khoury says. “But how do you think about that, recognize the reality, and try to turn that into an interesting story?”

FINTAS MARKET

2007 (in progress)

The shopping mall in Fintas, Kuwait, in collaboration with SSH International, acknowledges the centrality of the mall as a social gathering place and turns it into an iconic public space that celebrates the role of shopping in contemporary culture.



BLC BANK 2004

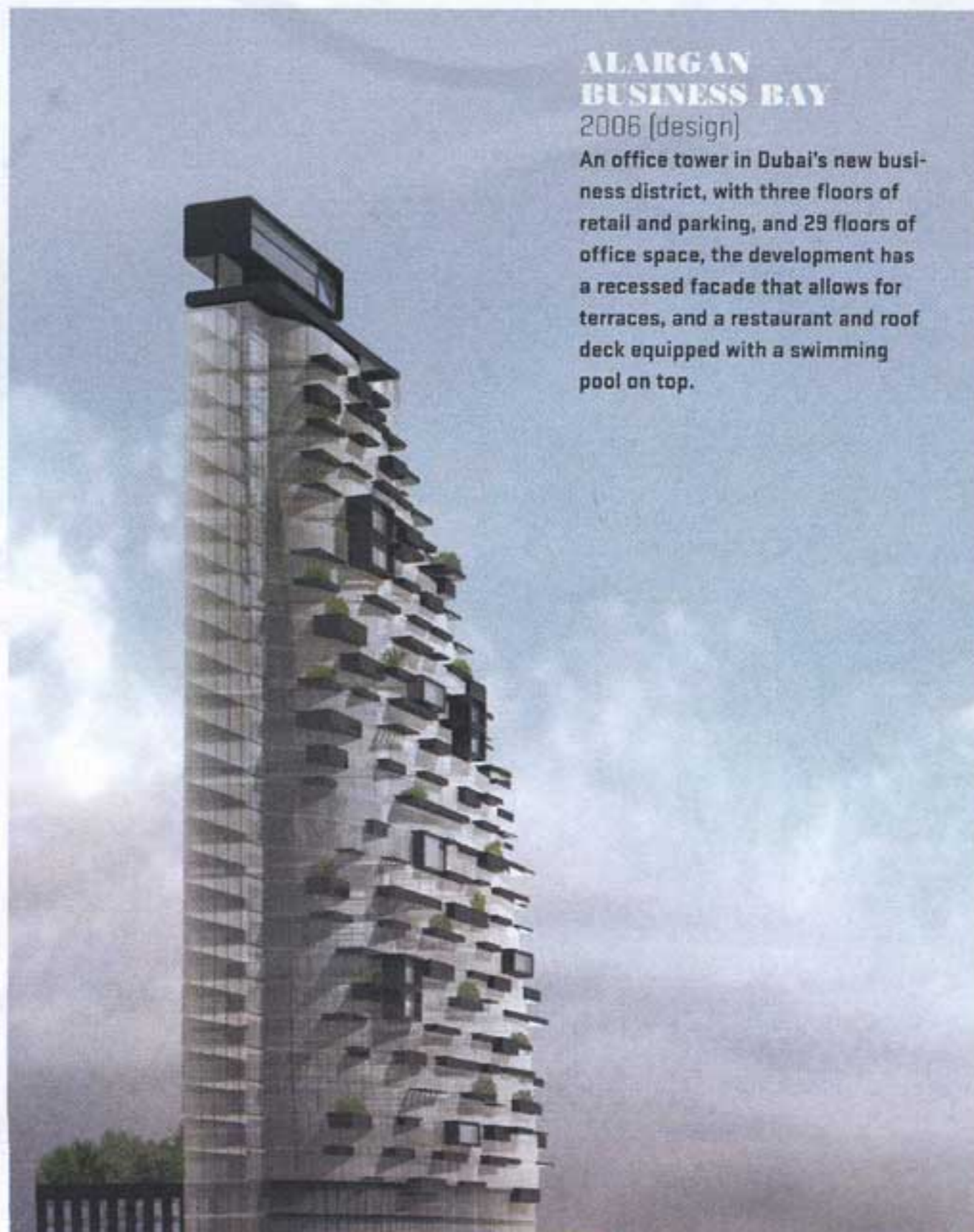
Part of a corporate-identity package for the bank, the pilot branch is located in Chtaura, Lebanon, near the Syrian border, and responds to the high traffic on an adjacent road.



up every square inch of area permitted by zoning guidelines, to the point of creating a strange four-story apartment at the top with sloping walls and narrow spaces conforming to setback requirements.

Like much of Khoury’s work, B018 and IB3 reflect a deeply conflicted perspective regarding the reconstruction of Beirut. At times he seems genuinely tormented by the social inequality inherent in the programs he is obligated to insert into sites weighed down by contested histories. His ambivalent response is to introduce elements that lay bare the social realities inherent to them, making the buildings appear to be self-conscious materializations of underlying social and economic processes. For B018, tables resembling coffins and the underground placement of the club were widely interpreted as references to the refugees massacred nearby, an unintentional association according to Khoury, but one that was predictable given the role context plays in his thinking. Still, as a member of the same elite for whom the projects are built and a high-end designer with similar likes and dislikes, he’s no less intent on crafting lush spaces that are destined to function as distractions from those realities, exclusive atmospheres in which every detail contributes to the experience of pleasure. “My projects are not manifestos,” he says. “They take a very specific situation and try to dig into that”

continued on page 127



ALARGAN BUSINESS BAY

2006 (design)

An office tower in Dubai’s new business district, with three floors of retail and parking, and 29 floors of office space, the development has a recessed facade that allows for terraces, and a restaurant and roof deck equipped with a swimming pool on top.

continued from page 127 means I draw it. It happened here that I didn't even draw it because I waited for all the different tenants to send me their files, and I took that and projected it on the facade, which gives you this totally discontinuous thing that doesn't try to look discontinuous. It comes from a logic that isn't about trying to make a statement."

"The first project in the Gulf I honestly took out of pure need of punishment," the architect says.

After the tour of his projects in Gemmayze, Khoury tears through the ring road around central Beirut in his black Porsche—a kind of international status symbol for architects—opening up the engine to weave through traffic on the way back to his studio. There he takes me through a slide show of his upcoming projects in the Gulf, including a cascading glass office tower in Dubai and a women's spa in Riyadh that of necessity conforms to the strict rules concerning female segregation. He turns it into a celebratory space below ground level with a translucent glass block ceiling that glows at night, a subtle come-on through a veil of light. "The first project in the Gulf I honestly took out of pure need of punishment," he says. "Most of my work there are malls and motels. It doesn't really sound exciting, but when you look at every project in its context and scrutinize its conditions, sometimes you realize that it is extremely explosive and very charged."

The day before, two Druze boys had been kidnapped in Beirut and found on the streets executed; the whole city is on edge worrying whether there will be reciprocal killings, or another outbreak of bombings and assassinations. That didn't stop two developers from contacting Khoury, one that night, the other the next morning, about developing new projects—as they did the summer before while Hezbollah fired rockets into Israel and Israel dropped bombs on the suburbs of Beirut. "This is the continuity of our daily realities," he says. "Work hasn't stopped. I live in a country at war, but Beirut keeps on being built. Reconstruction is not something that starts at the end of events. That is a dangerous simplification of the political situation. But those difficult realities that could be perceived as very limiting—what I call vulgar programs, money-driven sometimes, and short-term—are often the most interesting. If you can maneuver through that, you're really in tune and in touch with the realities of the society."

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continued from page 89 situation, push and reinterpret it, and flip around these realities in the most pertinent way. But I am not being cynical here, because I think each of these projects has a dose of pleasure in them and that pleasure is extremely important to me."

"Even in the decadence of a high-end residential bourgeois development," Khoury says, "there can be a certain beauty."

One of his trademarks is to outfit his elevators with plush seating and glass doors that open directly into the main spaces, creating a dramatic progression that almost feels like walking up a red-carpeted staircase to a debutante's ball. For the condo building, he exposed the social context while at the same time faithfully serving his clients by bringing the agendas of the developer and owners to the surface. "It is not your idealistic politically correct project where you are making a nice social proposal," he says. "No, you are catering to the rich—I build for the rich, I don't build for the poor. But how do you think about that, recognize the realities that you are dealing with, and try to turn it into an interesting story, which is what architecture is about? If you dig deep inside of a situation that may seem banal initially—a development for high-end residential bourgeois apartments—even in the decadence of something like that there can be a certain beauty."

Khoury decided to allow the building's form to emerge directly from the clients' interests: for the developer, a structure that didn't neglect a single square inch of exploitable space; for the owners, let them hire interior designers and plan their apartments first, then construct the building around the results. "I didn't buy it until they could give me this terrace—apologies for anything we have ever done to you," one owner says to Khoury as we tour her floor, which is just receiving its finishing touches. Each apartment has high ceilings in open public spaces adjacent to the terraces, and in the private spaces the floors are split to maximize the living area. Apart from that, the exterior is simply a reflection of the zoning guidelines and interior design, with wooden sunshades added to give a warm texture and sense of unity to the otherwise disjunctive assemblage of windows.

"There is something very organic about it—it is about the process, it is not about drawing," Khoury says. "I try to put together a concept, and when I am comfortable with what it continued on page 129