

The Architecture Issue

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MICHAEL SIMMELMAN: THIS GORGEOUS
NEW (BUT UNLIVABLE) HOUSE

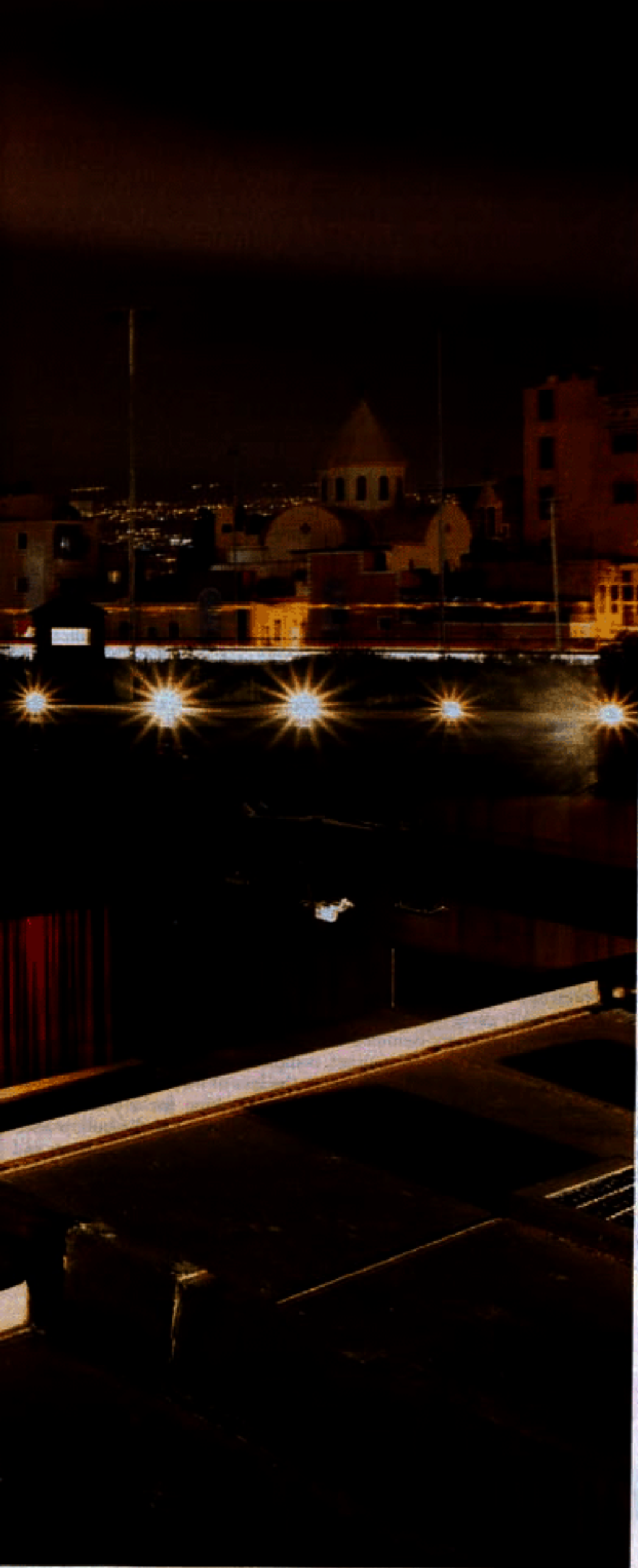


Building to a Fight

Why Architecture Is the Only Art Form We Still Battle Over

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REBEL ARCHITECT

Middle-East Pieces

IN BEIRUT, BERNARD KHOURY'S ARCHITECTURE NEITHER REMOVES NOR CONCEALS THE SCARS OF LEBANON'S CIVIL WAR. IT'S NOT EVERYBODY'S IDEA OF RECONSTRUCTION.

By Nicolai Ouroussoff

ESTABLISHMENT DEVELOPERS

For three days, Bernard Khoury and I had been navigating Beirut's matrix of decayed historic buildings, glittering new residential towers and noisy construction sites. As the sun began to set over the city, we stopped in front of a 1970's-era Brutalist office tower designed by Khoury's father, a prominent member of Beirut's Modernist vanguard whose practice flourished in the boom years that preceded Lebanon's 15-year-long civil war. The chiseled concrete form seemed to expand as the light shifted, its

Photographs by Alfred Seiland B018, a club designed by Bernard Khoury.

facade looming over the street, as if to express the confidence of the period when Beirut could lay claim to being the Paris of the Middle East.

It was the first time I had seen Khoury look wistful. "My father was a hard-core Modernist," Khoury said, explaining that the building still housed the showroom for the family furniture business. (Khoury's father, Khalil Khoury, is now semiretired.) "He is Mr. *Béton Brut* in Lebanon. Mr. Concrete," Khoury said, translating from the French. "He remained true to his ideals. He didn't shift styles like the other ones."

At 37, Khoury, whose hooded eyes and tousled hair make him look as if he is always brooding over something, clearly has some of his father's stubbornness, a trait that has helped to make him one of Lebanon's most recognizable young architectural talents. As he guided me through the city, he often stopped to point out what was not there — the commissions he lost, which continue to haunt him, the developments he hopes will someday rise. More than a decade after Lebanon's civil war ended, the occasional ruin is still visible: a block of new apartments will give way to a lot that has only recently been scraped clean of rubble, and not far from the newly erected commercial towers, some of the Modernist hotels that line the city's once elegant corniche are still riddled with bullet holes.

As for the reconstruction that is already under way, Khoury finds much of it deeply troubling. He has particular contempt for what he says is the pseudo-historic vision of the city favored by Solidere, a development company founded in 1994, which has rebuilt a large area around the Green Line, so named for the vegetation that colonized the strip of abandoned buildings dividing east from west Beirut. Where the war's most intense fighting took place there is now a chic shopping district in the French colonial style — red tile roofs, arcaded streets and sandstone facades — which Khoury, who has become one of the project's most outspoken critics, dismisses as a saccharine image of the past.

"It's a kind of censorship in the middle of the city, a fairy tale," he said, waving his cigar. "It has no relationship to our lives today."

Khoury's criticism of Solidere is not driven simply by disgust at one developer's commercialism. It is a reflection of the difficult path faced by a generation of young Lebanese architects who, having grown up first in a Westernized city — with all that Modernism seemed to promise — and then in the shadow of war, are now trying to piece together a vision for the future.

"My father is the most utopian person I know," Khoury said as we stepped back out of his father's building and onto the street. "But I could not do most of the things he did. It is no longer possible here." He paused for a moment, then added: "I don't believe in a sentimental past or a naïve ideal of the future. I have my feet firmly planted in the present."

Khoury's reputation as the bad-boy architect of the Arab world was cemented with the creation in 1998 of B018, an after-hours club built on the site

One journalist suggested that at Khoury's underground club, B018, jet-setters were dancing on the graves of refugees killed on the site by a local militia in the 1970's.

of a former refugee camp, five minutes from downtown Beirut. Designed for a childhood friend who was a club-owner and musician, the nightclub was built underground, in the middle of a circular parking lot. Its roof, created out of a steel panel lined with Plexiglas mirrors, opens up like a gigantic lid. As visitors pull into the parking lot at night, they catch the reflected images of people dancing on the tabletops below. For those inside, a dizzying stream of reflected car headlights frames the night sky.

B018, which was built in less than six months on a minimal budget, was conceived as a temporary structure. But the project garnered Khoury a flurry of international attention. Pictures of the club began appearing in European magazines; new commissions started pouring in. For many, the club became an emblem of Beirut's sudden rebirth. Others, mostly Westerners, accused Khoury of creating a vision of postapocalyptic decadence. One journalist even suggested that Lebanese jet-setters were dancing on the graves of refugees killed on the site by a local militia in the 1970's. (Despite the club's success, the property owner is now threatening to demolish it and sell the lot — another casualty of the city's recent real estate boom.) To those who accuse him of nihilism, Khoury says his aim is both less grandiose and more ambitious: to create

an architecture that is a truthful reflection of Beirut and that refuses to smooth over the contradictions that lie just beneath the city's new surface.

But if the contrast between, say, the crude low-tech machinery that controls the roof and the luxurious wood interiors reflects that love of ambiguity, it also hints at a respect for craft that ties Khoury to a long Lebanese tradition. And though it may be tempting to dismiss Khoury's work as a form of transgressive chic, inside the club's underground bunker, the overwhelming feeling is less of escapism than of delirious release — even defiance — in the face of a world that has been balancing at the edge of chaos for decades.

'I'm not moralistic. My designs are about joy. I'm very touched when I leave at 7 in the morning and see life coming out of that hole'

BERNARD KHOURY

"I'm not moralistic," Khoury said to me. "My designs are about joy. I'm very touched when I leave at 7 in the morning and see life coming out of that hole. My problem is that no one is building anything that relates to us today. Instead, we live under tile roofs, the way we represent ourselves in postcards. I think if you define the issues clearly — what is really going on — you have already done a lot."

If B018's notoriety stemmed in part from the violence it conjured, his design for the Centrale restaurant, completed in 2001, saw him wrestling with another form of destruction — the loss of memory that was a by-product of the pace of reconstruction. Working for a young, inexperienced developer, Khoury inserted his restaurant in the hollow shell of an abandoned early-20th-century building. The building's plaster and sandstone facade was crumbling. But rather than restore it, Khoury left it entirely exposed, encasing it in a wire grid that would catch pieces of the facade as it broke off.

Inside, Khoury gutted the building to create a towering dining room — a raw industrial space intended as a jab at the quaint vision of Beirut



ART CENTER COLLEGE OF DESIGN, PASADENA 1. It was a 1940's aircraft testing facility built to serve the booming aerospace industry in Los Angeles. 2. In 2001, the Pasadena Art Center hired the California-based firm Daly, Genik to turn it into a new campus. 3. The campus opened in 2004. It has skylights cut into a wind tunnel and a grass-covered roof.



TUBE WITH A VIEW Khoury at the bar of Centrale, a restaurant he designed. The bar looks onto a new apartment complex (far left), also by Khoury.

that Solidere was promoting just across the street. The restaurant bar is encased inside an enormous steel tube suspended more than 30 feet above the dining room. On one side of the tube, a mechanized wall lifts up so that patrons can gaze out at the city skyline as they sip martinis. But the design's sleek interiors also take sophisticated Lebanese society to task. "We wanted to add a sense of social discomfort," he said with a chuckle. "So we completely segregated the waitstaff and the clients. The waiters came up from the kitchen through a hole at the center of a long table." In a similar vein, the steel tube that houses the rooftop bar suggests both a giant piece of urban infrastructure and a war machine — a submarine floating among the rooftops. The mechanical wall evokes a gigantic eyelid, as if to imply that patrons should open their eyes not just to the view but also to what is happening to the city around them. While Solidere was restoring most of the area's French colonial-era facades, they were gutting the buildings and replacing the interiors with generic concrete slabs that could more easily be adapted by commercial clients. By treating his building for Centrale as a partly recovered ruin, Khoury was exposing what he saw as the dishonesty at the core of Solidere's

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preservation methods, which quite literally created a false front.

The more familiar Khoury became with Solidere's plans, the less he liked what he saw. By his own count, Khoury himself has been approached over the last decade to work on eight different projects in the area that Solidere was developing, but none of them were ever built. Most heartbreaking for him was the competition he lost for the design of a luxury marina to be located at one end of the corniche, Beirut's waterfront promenade. Later, his proposal for a renovation of a late-1960's-era movie theater at the edge of Martyrs' Square, one of the city's busiest public spaces before the war, was accepted by Solidere but then put on hold after the assassination of Rafik Hariri, Lebanon's former prime minister, in February 2005. Paradoxically, the protests in Martyrs' Square that followed the assassination did not slow the rise of real-estate prices in the area, and the lot was sold to make way for a massive commercial development. Yet recently, Khoury was again given a commission from Solidere: a building overlooking the souks, in the city center, which are being rebuilt by the prominent Spanish architect Rafael Moneo, a project for which Khoury also once competed.

Solidere was closely associated with Hariri, who, before the civil war, left Lebanon for Saudi Arabia, where he made his fortune as a developer work-



BEIRUT'S FUTURE Fences surrounding the construction sites for new residential buildings

illustrate the French colonial and Ottoman styles favored by the dominant Lebanese development firm Solidere.

ing for the royal family. In 1992, he was appointed prime minister, in part because he had the tools to rebuild Beirut and recapture its former glory. The fact that he ensured that Solidere, in which he had a major share, would control the reconstruction of the city center raised more than a few eyebrows but didn't stop the project from going forward.

That was perhaps because from a developer's point of view, the scheme Lebanon's postwar government devised was remarkably shrewd. One of the most daunting obstacles to reconstructing the city's historic core was

the complex trail of ownership. Under Lebanese law, several family members can inherit a share in family property. The area's torn and battered buildings, passed down through generations, often had hundreds of legal owners. Hariri oversaw the process of transforming the city center into a single gigantic corporation, offering local landowners stock in exchange for the rights to their property. The brilliance of the scheme was that Solidere could redevelop the entire 300-acre site all at once.

Angus Gavin, a British urban planner, was hired to oversee the devel-



opment of the master plan for the city center. Gavin sees Beirut's history as its greatest selling point. "During the civil war, everything drifted to Dubai," Gavin told me. "If Beirut is going to regain its former prominence, it has to play on its unique assets. That's why the history is very important, of course. Most of the city's archaeological layers exist within the boundaries of the Solidere development, which are the limits of the city of Beirut up to 1830. So we want to tell the story of the growth of the city since ancient times in the new downtown."

The core of the plan, completed several years ago, is an area in the old French quarter — formerly one of the city's most ethnically and religiously diverse neighborhoods and thus heavily damaged during the civil war. A dense network of arcaded streets converges on the Place d'Étoile, a pedestrian square anchored by a restored early-20th-century clock tower. According to Gavin, there are plans for a heritage trail linking the archaeological sites uncovered as the city began digging out of the rubble downtown.

Over the past few years, Solidere has also begun adding contemporary architecture to the mix, surrounding the historical core with a growing number of sleek corporate towers and retail areas. There are plans in the works for a marina by the New York-based Steven Holl and commercial and residential high-rises by Jean Nouvel and Arata Isozaki — all architectural luminaries.

To many Beirutis, the speed of reconstruction was seen as a sign that the city was finally returning to some level of normalcy. "Early on, no one seriously challenged Solidere," Khoury said. "The only resistance came from landowners worried about their property. No one asked about the political or social consequences of what they were doing." Initially seen as a sign of hope, the development eventually made many in the city's architectural community uneasy. However elegantly conceived, both the reconstructed historic quarter and the sleek glass towers that surround it share the features of a corporate, developer-driven city. Architects worried that the densely packed street life and vibrant social mix

that was once part of old Beirut was now being replaced by a generic, sanitized city — a world cleansed of its complex past to make it palatable to global consumers.

The formula is, of course, not unique to Beirut — Potsdamer Platz and Times Square come to mind — but in a region plagued by violence, it is a particularly tempting one. A sleekly engineered city of the future, Dubai, with its tranquil beaches and themed resorts, is marketed as a haven of calm. And its success, people here will tell you, was built on Beirut's im-

age as a city soaked in blood. According to George Arbid, a professor of architecture at the American University of Beirut, Solidere's project is a similar triumph of public relations. "Solidere's history was a panacea," he told me over dinner at a popular restaurant amid the faded elegance of Ashrafiyeh, a Christian neighborhood now threatened by new development. "They are marketing a nostalgia for a lost Lebanon. Once we provide you an image of the past, then we can go ahead and build our towers." The targets of that campaign, he added, are rich Arabs and Europeans. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the boosterism has only grown since Hariri's assassination.

"Solidere's plan is a symbol to the rest of the world," Khoury said. "We're not Dubai — we have a soul."

Khoury, whose name means "priest" in Arabic, was born in Hamra, a mixed Christian and Muslim neighborhood in West Beirut, and like many upper-middle-class Lebanese of his generation, he has spent his life drifting among various cultures. In 1976, when he was 7, he fled to Paris with his family. The Khourys returned to Beirut the following year, eventually settling in Jounieh, a Christian community to the north of the city overlooking the sea. But in 1986, the civil war still raging, he left for school in America.

By his own account, he was a mediocre student — "I was very bored" — yet he made his way from the Rhode Island School of Design to Harvard, earning a master's degree in architecture in 1993. "I'd never worked on Beirut," he said. "I wasn't interested in it. But in 1991, I took a studio with Woods." Lebbeus Woods, a New York architect, was known for his drawings of dark, almost apocalyptic urban settings. "Leb was interested in 'war architecture.' For a while I didn't do anything. I had serious doubts about it. War is easily sensationalized." But with the civil war coming to a close 5,000 miles away in Beirut, Khoury began warming up to Woods's challenge, eventually creating a study of the process of demolition that he called *Evolving Scars*. His design showed a generic concrete slab building wrapped in two layers of glass. A giant mechanical arm tore away at the concrete core, scooping it out and depositing it inside the glass membrane. *Evolving Scars* suggested a city that was cannibalizing itself, even as it worked to rebuild. Architecture, it seemed to say, can as easily reopen wounds as contribute to collective amnesia by smoothing over difficult memories. It was a theme that began to obsess him, and he returned to it again and again in his first buildings in Beirut.

Two years later, in 1993, Khoury joined a group of young architects, trained in the West, who had begun drifting back to Beirut, lured by a belief that they would be able to take part in the rebuilding efforts. But there was little support for their work. By his own account, Khoury spent most of his time dabbling in theoretical proposals that no one saw. More than once, he told me, he considered moving back to the United States for good. The fact that he was the son of a respected architect didn't help much. As with other members of the city's Modernist vanguard, Khalil Khoury was now a mostly forgotten figure, the buildings he produced in the 60's and 70's ignored by everyone but academics. The family's furniture business was faltering, and Khalil, defeated, moved to Miami three years ago. Although the building he designed to house the furniture showroom survived the civil war, the family worries that it won't survive the reconstruction. "His nightmare is that the family will have to sell the building," Khoury said, "and that a new owner will demolish it."

The fate of architects like Khalil Khoury is not only a story of personal tragedy, it represents a shattering of the notion that Lebanon could be

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BERNARD KHOURY





CULINARY STYLES Yabani, a sushi restaurant designed by Khoury. An elevator descends to the underground dining room. Opposite: Inside Centrale — the steel tube on the ceiling houses the bar.

part of a larger architectural conversation — that Beirut did not just aspire to be part of the international community but was a cultural crossroads for East and West. For Bernard Khoury and other young Lebanese architects, the work of moving between worlds had to begin all over again.

“I was living in an apartment with a suitcase by my bed and nothing else,” Khoury told me, describing his first years back in Beirut. “My dad was passing me a little money every month. I borrowed a computer from his office, but I knew I couldn’t rely on this forever.”

Most of Khoury’s early clients were small independent developers or — as in the case of the musician who inspired B018 — acquaintances from childhood. But as his celebrity has grown, Khoury has begun to attract wealthier, more prestigious clients, which may make it difficult for him to maintain his image as a renegade outsider much longer. Worse, the hype that now surrounds successful young architects puts enormous pressure on them to churn out flamboyant, eye-catching designs as fast as possible, and Khoury may simply be taking on too much.

Among his most recent projects is a wonderful little bank building in Chtaura, a town at the edge of Lebanon near the Syrian border. It has become a favorite place for wealthy Syrians, who hide their money in the conventional-looking French and Lebanese banks that line the main street. By comparison, the sleek elliptical form of Khoury’s BLC bank is closer in spirit to the aerodynamic luxury cars that zip past on Chtaura’s

FISHBOWL From the street, passers-by can look into Yabani as the chefs prepare food.



dusty two-lane road. The bank’s interior, pierced by a glass atrium and four small corner gardens, has the perfect symmetry of a classical temple. But just down the street, the facade of a cube-shaped rival bank, also designed by Khoury, is decorated with a grid of windshield wipers — a cute but ultimately silly idea.

The two bank projects sum up the best and worst of Khoury’s architecture. Both buildings are composed of bold, aggressive forms — something that links Khoury’s work to that of his father. But Khoury’s designs can sometimes be facile. His most successful work challenges conventional orthodoxies. Like Jean Nouvel, the French architect for whom he worked as an intern in 1989 and 1990, Khoury can imbue his architecture with a visceral power. The bluntness of his approach captures, with a haunting force, the conflicts that are reshaping the geography of the Middle East.

One afternoon toward the end of my visit, Khoury and I were in his office looking at a video projection of his work when a young Saudi entrepreneur — a hyper man wearing a black T-shirt, sneakers and a Rolex — interrupted us. The Saudi wanted to open a Gold’s Gym franchise. He was still searching for a site, but he claimed to have money. He told Khoury that he had been impressed by the success of B018. Khoury told him to come back with more details. A few weeks later, he returned with a plan for a housing complex for hip young Arabs in Jeddah. The houses, he said, should have mechanical roofs, inspired by B018.

“I never wanted to work in the gulf,” Khoury said. “I can’t go to a part of the world where I can’t have my drink, can’t look at women.”

Yet one of Khoury’s most compelling recent projects is a spa and hotel for a member of the Saudi royal family. The Saudi princess, in her early 30’s, first approached Khoury more than a year ago, saying she wanted to build something of value to women in Riyadh, the Saudi capital. Khoury quickly saw an opportunity to explore the relationship between men and women in Saudi society. Although he hadn’t discussed this openly with his client, he said, she seemed willing to play along.

“I know Saudis who in Lebanon dress like Westerners, and they pick me up at the airport in Riyadh and they are completely veiled,” Khoury said. “Then they go home and they rip off the veil again. Sometimes they change on the plane. On her way out of Beirut, a woman will get into the plane very suggestively dressed, go into the bathroom before the plane lands and she is totally covered up.”

Such experiences became the inspiration for Khoury’s proposal. Still in the earliest design stages, the spa is to stand along the main axis of Riyadh, under the shadow of the soaring form of the Kingdom Center hotel and office tower, an emblem of the city’s rising economic ambitions. Like B018, the entire spa is buried in the ground, its enormous translucent glass-block roof flush with the roadbed. The women — members of the city’s upper classes — will be dropped off by car on this glass carpet. From there, twin elevators will transport them down to the main entry — a lipstick red cube where the women can change into robes before continuing into the spa.

Khoury’s design is a witty meditation on seduction and sublimation. From the Four Seasons bar at the top of the Kingdom Center, the red cube will look as if it’s frozen in a gigantic block of ice. Once the female customers enter the elevator, they will be completely segregated from the world of men. But from below, they’ll be able to see the shadowy figures of cars and passers-by on the glass-block pavement above. In essence, the entire building is a series of veils; the shadowy world they cre-

As much as any debate over the city’s history, gulf money has altered the architectural landscape in Beirut — and has already had an impact on the city’s social makeup.

ate is intended to give the women freedom while imbuing the space with a certain eroticism.

"The name of the company is Surra-manraa — pleasure to who observes," Khoury said. "It is supposed to be heaven for women. But it's also heaven for men, of course, because they can imagine what's inside."

Khoury has clearly invested emotional energy in this project, and he worries that it may never be built. But his rising fame has already garnered him other choice commissions in the Persian Gulf. He is working on a project in Kuwait City that he calls the Formula One of malls — "a mall stripped down to its essence" — which looks like a rocket toppled on its side. And he designed a vacation resort in Oman on the gulf shore.

But it is in Beirut that gulf money has had its most subtle effects. The wealthy contacts Hariri forged in his early years in the gulf were critical when it came to his reconstruction plans for Beirut. After Sept. 11, 2001, many gulf Arabs, fearful of anti-Arab sentiment in the West, pulled their money out of Europe and America and began searching for places to invest closer to home. As much as any debate over the city's history, gulf money has altered the architectural landscape in Beirut — and has already had an impact on the city's social makeup.

The cosmopolitanism of the Mediterranean Lebanese is often at odds with the more conservative religious traditions of the gulf Arabs. One of the main challenges facing architects like Khoury who are building in the new Beirut is to learn to design around the needs of gulf clients: to navigate the relationship between women and men, between what is permitted in the outside world and what is permitted in the private enclave of the home.

"It is very different designing for a Lebanese than for a gulf client," Khoury told me. "Some gulf clients want a supermodern package — the newest-looking building, the most high tech. Inside, it's another story. The way you partition an apartment for a Saudi is very different than for a Lebanese client. In the gulf, public and private spaces are segregated. You can't open the door and be thrown directly into a living space. The private family room is completely separate from the main reception space. This is a big change. When my dad built, you could design a more open plan. It was total loft living. That's very rare now. It is like we've regressed in the last 20 years."

One of Khoury's early designs for Beirut's city center was a sleek bullet-shaped residential building. Commissioned by a Saudi investment group, the structure was to be separated from a commercial building next door by



GHOSTS OF VACATIONS PAST The bullet-pocked walls of Beirut's old Holiday Inn testify to the damage inflicted on the city's buildings during Lebanon's civil war.

an immense black wall and a private courtyard. The courtyard allowed Khoury to create dual entrances. One, along the main street, led up to formal reception areas; the other went from the courtyard to the family areas. The two realms never overlapped. The investors pulled out of the project two years ago.

By comparison, in Gemmayze, a charmingly dilapidated neighborhood of decaying mansions, apartment buildings and private gardens, Khoury is designing a slender 14-story residential tower for a Lebanese client which slyly upends the conventions of Arab architecture. The tower, shaped like a Bic lighter, is surrounded by rings of balconies enclosed behind a wood-clad steel mesh that will be decorated with potted plants, a playful take on the Mashrabiya — the large wooden screens that traditionally provide privacy in Arab houses. Inside the building, Khoury



has made no divisions between public and private, or male and female space. Instead, each floor will be left almost raw, fluid enough for tenants to design it themselves.

"People see Bernard as a hip, contemporary architect," Arbid, from the American University in Beirut, said, adding that he considers himself a fan. "But his work is actually very connected to the experience of Lebanon. Each project is a reaction to a very specific reality."

Indeed, Khoury's most radical proposal yet may simply be to provide a neutral framework for the city's chaos, allowing it to play out around him. Only a few blocks from his controversial Centrale restaurant, he is constructing one of the oddest residential towers in the city. The tower's bent form, which evokes an open book, follows the exact outline of the zoning envelope on a small leftover lot that overlooks the cloister of a Catholic school, which Khoury attended as a child. Two big potted trees seem to balance on top of the building, a riff on the overgrown gardens that are being torn up as the area below is redeveloped. Inside, Khoury set up a system to allow apartment buyers to lay out their own apartments.

"What you're looking at, I was barely involved in it," Khoury said with a hint of mischievous pride as we climbed over the debris in the construction site. "The clients had to decide where to place the windows, how many rooms, how many floors they wanted to buy. So each apartment has its own layout and character, some of them very strange. All I provided was the envelope and the spaces that tie them together — the lobby and gardens and things like that."

The result is a juxtaposition of mismatched windows and balconies carved out of a rigid symmetrical form, as if the building had been taken over by squatters. But it also beautifully reflects an aspect of the city's past. Many of the oldest buildings in Gemmayze went through endless renovations over the last century. Houses were cut up into apartment buildings, windows were punched through walls for the new rooms that were created, breaking down the symmetry of the facades. Khoury's approach suggests what Beirut might be if the arbitrary formulas created by developers suddenly dropped away, and the city became an honest expression of its competing histories.



BANKS AND A BLACK BOX One of two banks designed by Khoury in Chtaura, a town close to Lebanon's border with Syria. Opposite: Black Box Alzone, a Khoury nightclub in Beirut. At the end of the steel arm, a screen projects live images from inside.

On the drive back from a visit to his banks in Chtaura, Khoury and I stopped for lunch at a small French colonial-era hotel. A wall of the hotel lobby is lined with fading photos of the dignitaries who once stayed there — reclining in a wicker chair, smiling for the camera over lunch in the hotel garden. A century ago, the hotel was a busy stopping point for wealthy Arabs and Europeans. Lately, it had begun to be frequented again, by Lebanese and Syrians tourists. But after Hariri's assassination prompted a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, business died down, and we were the only ones in the bar.

As we talked, the conversation circled back to the difficulties faced by many of the young Lebanese architects who had decided to return home and practice in Beirut. A friend who came back to Beirut with Khoury struggled to find projects for three years before fleeing to Paris. Another colleague returned to the United States after just one year.

Those who persevered make up one of the most promising pools of young architectural talent anywhere. But they are typically relegated to small projects on the edges of the city. Well-known foreigners are usually

awarded the choice commissions. "Solidere has a list," Khoury says. "It includes all of the big international architecture stars: Jean Nouvel, Steven Holl, Arata Isozaki, Christian de Portzamparc. I'm not against these people, but against other less interesting architects. There's a sort of rule that Lebanese architects can't build in the city center. It is like the colonial era all over again."

Solidere's approach to Beirut's reconstruction doesn't just cost architects like Khoury money and professional prestige. To Khoury, denying those with a personal attachment to the city's past a voice in its future is yet another way Solidere has found to suppress the complexities that once made Beirut teem with life.

"When I first got here," Khoury says, "I entered a competition with a friend to design the souks. It was very naïve. We collected all of the images that Solidere was using to promote the new Beirut: sexy women in bikinis, old buildings in the French style, pictures of camels — we never had camels in Beirut. We put the images in a fake land mine and dropped it on their desk." ■