

BERNARD



KHOURY



BEWARE OF ARCHITECTS WHO ARE VEGETARIAN, NON-SMOKERS AND CYCLISTS.

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In the '90s he designed B018, the legendary underground nightclub in Beirut's war-torn Quarantine neighbourhood. Sunk in the earth like a secret shelter of a large grave—as some have described it—it has a dome that looks like a helipad from above, and during the club's working hours it opens so that the dancers suddenly find themselves under the starry sky. Passionate, unconventional and with a teenager's restlessness, Bernard Khoury does not mince his words about the future of architecture, the future of the world's well-fed people and the present of contemporary cities. His discourse, fervent and spiced with strong doses of vitriolic wit, reminds us that before our obsession with political correctness we used to be more enthusiastic and far more interesting.

Your building (plot #1282) from a distance looks like a battleship in a sea of dry and wild grass. Did you give that shape subconsciously or on purpose, and why?

Well, I am surprised and amused at the same time to see the different names that are given to this building.

I read somewhere that they call it a ghost ship as well.

Yes, some people call it a ghost ship, others call it a banana (laughs). It has different names. Before talking about the shape, it's important that you know how we came to this project. This project was initially an impossible one—and this explains its shape. When the developer came to me and showed me this piece of land, even if geographically it was well located, pretty close to the National Museum, it turned out that it was very cheap in price. The surroundings were not built. The reason why this plot is very cheap is because it has a long perimeter, about 400 meters, of which only 6,5 meters face into public space. This means that only the tip of the plot and 6,5 meters of width cross one street, which is public. The remaining 300-and-something meters are

bordering private plots, private properties. Now, all these plots will be built in the future according to a generic building law, which allows the neighbours to build all the way to the property line. In cases like this, what happens usually is that the neighbours stick to the property line, and erect a blind wall which can go up to 50 meters. Can you imagine the disaster this could be, a few years down the road, as the urban fabric is developed? There are no mechanisms of control, no master plan, no public authorities in charge of the evolution of this fabric. Which explains why Beirut's urban fabric has turned catastrophic. Because every single plot is built for itself, and does not respond to the general picture. You see it in Beirut, every time you set foot on a site, you don't have to go far to meet the realities of the complete bankruptcy of the Institutions, their absence, their incompetence. Everything is political at the end of the day. So what do you do in a situation like that? When 97% of your perimeter may end up facing a catastrophe, this is an extremely challenging project, I would say an impossible project, that couldn't happen anywhere else but in Beirut. We have voluntarily taken a masochistic posture, suicidal I would say, whereby we sat back from the plot limit, 4.5 meters inwards along the whole perimeter; by doing that at ground floor level, when you set the building back 4.5 meters from your neighbour, you are allowed to take legal light and air because there is enough distance. We didn't have to exhaust the property limit. So you start at 4.5m inside the boundary and then the building gets narrower as you go up until you reach 50 meters, which is the maximum height you are allowed to reach in Beirut. Due to the setback laws, the light and natural air comes down generously.

Instead of calling it a 'battleship', or 'a mean-looking animal', I would like to describe this building as a 'gentle monster'. A monster that takes its clothes off, because it is completely transparent, and opens its arms to the neighbours, over 100% of the periphery, all along the hostile limit of the site. Sometimes you know 'the mean looking creatures' can be extremely kind — look at me, for example.

I was thinking about you (laughs). Do you believe that famous architects who come to Beirut have the same problems with the State, like the ones you described?

Well, the foreign architects who come to Beirut are not really embedded in the territory. They can't see the dangers that we see and encounter in our streets. We act like pirates in rough seas in our city. But when these so-called 'international architects' come to Beirut, they are like naïve little kids that are lost in the dark. And they produce very naïve gestures, that in my opinion have no relevance so far. If you look at what has been produced in the so-called 'reconstruction era', let's say post-1990s, I see really nothing worth noting among whatever was introduced in Beirut from the international scene. This is not Rotterdam, Paris, Rome, Dubai or Shanghai. It's Beirut! It is a very rough territory, where

you have to be familiar with every single street-corner, with what's really hidden below the surface in order to develop relevant strategies and hopefully produce relevant meaning. Unfortunately, this is not accessible to them. These guys can get killed in these street corners, in these dark alleys of Beirut. This is no space for Rem Koolhaas, Jean Nouvel and Frank Gehry. There is no space for cuteness, for smooth buildings, there is no space for polished architecture here.

Your buildings have a lot to do with the memory of war, and I was wondering: usually people try to forget about it, but you insist on reminding this to them, sometimes with a black sense of humour like when you did the legendary underground nightclub—your first building, I think.

That was 20 years ago, in '98. In fact, April 18th 1998. Yesterday it turned 20 years old.

It's still young, though.

Well, it was supposed to be there for 5 years only. But keep in mind that, besides all the fantasies that the Western press expressed around this project because of the exoticism of war and what follows, to me B018 is not a war monument. Monuments are formulated with a certain level of certitude. B018 is not about that, it is much more about the difficulty or the impossibility of its proposition back then, in 1998, on that particular site. Maybe the reason why it is still alive today is because its presence is still absurd to the State. Let me clarify. B018 is not a project about the past, and certainly not a project about the future. It is a project about the present. About a very specific moment in time. A project about injecting life in an urban fabric that was completely dead and doomed. B018 is 300 meters from my office where I am sitting right now, and as I spend a lot of my nights in this office, what touches me most is to hear the base coming out of that hole at 3:00 or 4:00 o' clock in the morning. Bubum bubum bubum! It's like a heartbeat, an improbable heartbeat in an urban fabric which is doomed and empty all around, for reasons that are obviously political and very complex. I think what we managed was to bring life, an impossible task, to that area in the most unexpected way through a nightclub. I see it much more as a very naïvely optimistic gesture, rather than the macabre thing that the Western press keeps harping on about.

And what about the two canons on the rooftop of residence 2?

This is on the top of my house. They are lights.

Yes, I know. You have an extreme sense of humour, I must say.

Call it irony, but not cynicism. Yes, there is a sense of humour. I think architecture should retain this possibility of

providing pleasure in the most improbable situations. You see, pleasure should not only come out of very sweet conditions, we can also enjoy the sour conditions and it can be very pleasurable.

Is it easier for you to work on a new project in Beirut or in Miami?

Well, the notion of home is a very elastic one, but it can also be extremely specific. I think that being at home is not just a geographical question, and I could say that I can feel at home in places that are geographically very remote from my base of operations. We are currently working on a project in Miami, which happens to be very much home for me, because the conditions and the protagonists, the people behind the project are very close to me. So there is a condition of proximity that is on another level.

Do you speak with the locals in order to understand their needs before you design something for them?

I don't just speak with them, I have a very intensive relationship with them. I sleep with them, I fight them, I hit them, I eat with them.

When you have an empty space in front of you, how do you start, what is the element that motivates you? Is it a detail or an idea?

It is my encounters with the players. Where we can push this, where we can take it. There are a lot of ups and downs and moments when we are very upset with each other and moments when we adore each other, it's never a blue sky 365 days per year. Certainly not. There is always a lot of pressure, a lot of pulling, we learn a lot in this process. I don't come with certainties to a project. I always get out of a project not the way I was prior to coming in. Our interlocutors are in fact on many levels much smarter than us, and you need the humility to understand this. And there you can understand that architects are idiots, morons (laughs). We can begin to be intelligent if we understand that.

You are saying that 'ego' is the worst problem for an architect?

Come on, look at me. Do I have an ego?

Yes (laughs). You are full of it. Sorry! I cannot lie.

OK (smiling), I take it.

Why do you stay in Beirut? You could go anywhere in the world.

Because I am a good man, I have a lot of things to do, I am on a mission.

What is your mission?

I am a soldier. The soldier stays at the forefront in the most dangerous territory on the front lines, exposed to bullets and bombs. It would be easier for me to go and hide next to you, in your office, in your security, and so on and so forth, or in Rotterdam, or in Houston, or in New York, or in the 'sleepy' cities where I go to sleep. In fact, I rest in Europe. New York is to me the most comfortable and sleepy place on earth. I don't sleep in Beirut. The city doesn't let me sleep. I am always on call.

Who is the ideal customer for you?

I have been part of juries for important buildings in Europe over the last 3 years, and it's always been an incredible deception to see how the selection process works. Sometimes when I look back at some pirates I have worked for, I feel that you can accomplish much more with a generous pirate who has a heart, than you would with a very wise cynical bureaucrat who is completely a prisoner of his very reasonable, well-grounded certitudes, supposedly complying with the good values of the politically correct. This only produces very cynical realities, in my opinion. I don't see any interesting stuff being generated for the public sector in Europe. None. I don't believe in building museums any more or schools for the public sector, because these projects have been completely surrendered to consensus. They are consensual projects. They don't have the leeway to question sometimes very fundamental basic issues, that here, the most banal project, designing let's say a barbershop in Beirut, will confront you with. I am serious. I think it is from the rough territories that the most interesting things can be produced today. That's why I am interested in the Balkans, and in areas still under convalescence, or in some sort of crisis. Comfortable environments no longer produce anything. With the death of certitudes of modernism, I don't think anything can come out of the Western world today, not in architecture, not in Art.

What is the biggest trap for a well-known architect, apart from ego?

The dangerous levels of comfort.

How was the house you grew up?

There is no house where I grew up, because we kept moving. We moved a lot. I spent most of my childhood moving from walls to walls that were built by my father and furniture also built by my father, so I was in the cocoon for a long time, I don't know if I have really got out of it. My father was an architect and, if anything, a better architect than I am.

It was then that you decided to become an architect?

Yes, because I wanted to be my father and I wanted to kill my father, because sometimes you want to kill those who you adore.

What is the ideal city for you?

I don't look at cities today through the lens of the completely lost and dead practice which is urbanism within architecture today. I think that cities are constructed of layers that are no longer the stable material that consist of envelopes — the physical piazza, sidewalks, setbacks, permanent masses, and so on. Cities are something else. They are made of layers extremely complex, and surpass the very archaic tools that we architects and urbanists manipulate. Unless we understand this, the city will happen despite us and without us as architects.

Is there a solution to what you are saying?

Spend more time in bars and nightclubs and avoid museums which are the cemeteries of culture, avoid architecture's academic crowds, which are made of dinosaurs and decaying carnivores, and spend your time with those who are really active players in the making of our environment.

Which is your favourite part of the city? Which places really relax you apart from bars?

I like where I am sitting right now, I spend a lot of time here in my office. My bed also is not bad. I've a fantastic pool, not very big but that allows me to float above my surroundings at 50 meters of altitude, with interesting setbacks, that allows me to have a very decadent posture over my city and I love that. My living room is a frame basically, 6 meters by 12, and overlooks the city where there is an absurd, useless bridge, that crosses the city in the middle. I walk there once a month, it's absolutely useless, but it's the highest pedestrian bridge overlooking the city of Beirut. I sit in the living room with some very dear friends, where we spent memorable times. Other than that, the airport when I need to leave, and some very good restaurants. Even street food is very good here.

What does your motorbike give you that you cannot find in a car?

I've been a biker for the last 39 years. I started this when I was 11 years old. I think riding in a city on a motorbike is a different experience. It engages you with your surroundings, which the cockpit of a car doesn't allow you to do. And there is the element of danger which is fantastic, because the moment you start your machine, and you take off, you don't have the certitude that you are going to make it alive to your destination.

Why do you like that?

Because I am suicidal, but I don't want to die. It's the ultimate thrill. Beware of architects, who are vegetarian, non-smokers and cyclists. They do not believe in it. They are not good ones.

