

KEEN

Plot # 1282

Beirut, Lebanon

Bernard Khoury / DW5

Photography by Bahaa Ghoussainy, or as noted

As aptly described a “creature” as a building, this striking residential block in the northern outskirts of Beirut sits near an abandoned railway terminal, some military barracks, and bits of random agricultural plots... hardly the traditional territory for residential architecture. 1282's 'industrial lofts' fit into the neighbourhood a bit better. But it's the outward appearance of the building that sets the stage. The form is a black, mechanical assembly that celebrates its aggressive, sexy, post-industrial, somewhat dystopian looks. It is steel columns and beams and mesh; exposed concrete slabs that thrust out to sharp dagger-points at the two narrow ends; factory-style glazing and proudly uncovered mechanical systems; a village of narrow vertical circulation cores. It is almost alive in 'personality', like some tattooed youth in torn jeans and combat boots but with riveting facial beauty. 1282 commands your gaze even as it scares you a little.

The edifice is a skeleton: just the slabs, the cores (which each feed two lofts per floor) and the steel armature. It is shaped like a fat crescent in plan, allowing the 'bend' along the broad facades to give it more life, as well as opportunities for crimps and sharp corners. The architects haven't tried to 'smooth out' anything, or blur the curves... they want the edges and points. Floor-to-floor heights of over 5.5 metres allow for mezzanines or just high ceilings, the better to absorb the long views out all sides of the place. Because the surrounding area is undeveloped as yet, it feels something like a stranded ship in a sea of open horizons. That will change, but as other undoubtedly more conventional buildings fill in the neighbourhood, 1282 will keep its faceted, curved outline and sharp beaks as defence against them. None will venture within biting distance. In a sense, Khoury / DW5 is planning for predicted context by being anti-contextual. Much easier to do this now than later, because their scheme seems so, well, contextual at the moment, thanks to the flotsam littered all around it.

Beirut has suffered more than its share of chaos in the last few decades. The natural impetus is to respond with formalised calm; the urge to introduce and then protect; an antidote to breakage and decay. But artists have always gravitated to destruction or the incomplete, and here is an architecture that makes of it a kind of art. Pretty, no, but in its oddity and honesty, its own sort of beauty.





Photography by Ieva Saudargaite

