



Peace etc.

The second publication of the etc series.

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Peace etc.

"The war is, as I understand it, certainly not over."

Interview with Bernard Khoury on Post-Conflict Architecture

Bernard Khoury, (born 1968) is an architect whose many projects "died on paper", before he managed to get into entertainment related projects, which then allowed him to build "places for communication over the wounds and scars of the city"

How can a place, which was once a battlefield, become a „home“ again? What kind of symbols, what kind of scars and what kind of possibilities are to be found there? Is war, as an act of destruction, the worst thing that can happen to architecture (and respectively the architect) or does it rather present important evolutionary opportunities with each new phase of peace?

Architects build fortresses and bunkers, public places and bridges; places of both isolation and togetherness. With Daniel Libeskind, one of the most acclaimed, but also criticized architects of our time, being assigned to build the Jewish Museum in Berlin and subsequently the Imperial War Museum in Manchester and the new World Trade Center in New York, landmarks of destruction are constructed for peaceful visitors in times when there is hope. In a similar way and against a comparable backdrop, Bernard Khoury, one of the most promising young architects, involves himself in Beirut - a city that is, after years and years of civil war, bearing wounds that are in desperate need of being transformed into places for communication. In the following conversation, Khoury talks both about Beirut and his projects therein.

1. Did you also know Beirut before the civil war (1975-90)?

I was born in Beirut in 1968 and I have some great memories of my childhood there up until 1975 as well as after that period.

2. Did you remain in Beirut during the war?

I lived in Beirut for a good part of the war. I left the country with my family for one year in 1976, and again between 1986 and 1993 to complete my college studies in the U.S. Living in Beirut during the war was not a traumatic experience. The city was, at some times, a dangerous place, but people learn how to adjust to situations and we made the best out of it.

3. Did you feel it to be a dangerous place to live?

I have never really felt in danger because of my geographic location in Lebanon before, during, and after "the war". My family and I lived on both sides of the city so we were as at home in the East as in the West of Beirut.

4. What is the current state of affairs?

The war is, as I understand it, certainly not over but we are witnessing important developments both locally and in the region. Beirut is not a very peaceful place. It never has been and probably never will be. However I would not like to use the terms aggression or fear to describe people's behaviour and feelings at this point in time.

5. Nevertheless, have there been any preliminary moves to re-establish normal daily life following the official end of war?

The "post-war" era started with the so-called reconstruction process and with the dismantling of the demarcation lines which physically separated the different zones.

6. How did people, who had been enemies during the war, manage to live and work together afterwards?

Some of the enemies have not been able to establish peace with each other but others have been able to get along; their interests meet: they are able to either govern or find their place within the form of status quo. The political situation in Lebanon reflects the whole situation of the region. The local political figures as well as the so-called political parties have very limited political power.

7. What role has architecture played in the reconstruction process?

Architecture, as a part of the reconstruction process, has not been on any political agenda, since our local institutions have had other preoccupations. The private sector has undertaken most of the major reconstruction efforts, most notably a private company called "Solidere" that has managed the reconstruction of the Central District area of Beirut. However in general, the image projected by these efforts has been very simple and reductive, with the major focus being on central Beirut, although some attention has been paid to infrastructure and some other equipment. Through such projects, both Beirut and the rest of the country are likely to become the victims of a violent sterilization process.

8. Could you expand upon the role played by "Solidere" in the reconstruction process?

"Solidere" was created in the early 1990's and it is in charge of rebuilding the infrastructure as well as setting the rules and regulations of the city's reconstruction. In order to put its master plan into action, "Solidere" appropriated all the real estate within the Beirut Central District zone and compensated all the land owners by giving them shares (which can be traded at the Beirut stock market) in "Solidere", who currently own

the whole district. This radical and innovative notion of "owning the city" reflects the ambitions of "post-war" Beirut to become the hyper-contemporary financial capital of the region. This is, to my mind, a bold model that has no precedent in the history of urbanism. In the early 1990's I thought that a new form of urban planning could be derived from this logic but in fact the "Solidere" master plan projects traditional rules and regulations of building and planning that do not reflect the particularities of the conditions on which the whole project was based.

9. How have you responded to the situation in your work as an architect?

I am part of a growing number of "frustrated" young architects who feel that they are being left out of the major construction operations. We are now trying to become active by seeking out alternative means through which to intervene in the city. I feel however that I have had more luck than others of my generation because I have been able to work on projects that have had a meaningful impact on the public.

10. There has been debate amongst the architects involved in the reconstruction process.

There is no organized forum in which architects can operate and collaborate and so there has been no serious architectural debate over reconstruction. The master plans are being developed behind closed doors and are never discussed in public.

11. Architecture is an instrument of power and implementing cultural identity. Do you think a city that has been marked by war could be reconstructed in its former image?

Some architects are trying to recreate the supposed "original" image of Beirut. I think that the nostalgic attitude reflected in these projects is very simplistic, reductive, and dangerous. Such a post-card image of the city is, in my opinion, the product of colonial times. Beirut has other, far more interesting histories that deal with the complexity of its immediate past and also of its present. In my view, what make a city interesting are these specificities and hidden complexities and it is these which are being erased by the current major reconstruction efforts.

12. Do you think destruction is a catalyst for innovation?

Cities are always in a state of transformation. Major events such as wars can break the patterns of urban growth and this can be seen as either a positive or negative thing, depending on the way you look at it. Time will tell, if the partial demolition and subsequent re-building of Beirut has been handled with at least some measure of intelligence and pertinence. The case of Beirut is one that needs to be very closely monitored.

13. How did "B018", a project that is built in the grounds of a former military-prison camp, receive its name?

The origin of the name "B018", a place of nocturnal survival, lies in the post code of a residence of Najj Gebrane, a musician, who has, from the beginning, promoted this space as a place of continually transforming music culture.

14. Could you describe the historical context of the site?

In early 1998, the "B018" came to be "Quarantine", an area near to the port of Beirut, which, during the French protectorate, was a place of quarantine for arriving crews. During the recent war it became the abode of Palestinian, Kurdish, and South Lebanese refugees (which in 1975 actually amounted to 20,000). Until that time, the quarantine area had been isolated from the rest of the city by a wall. In January 1976, the Phalangist Militia launched a radical attack which completely wiped out the "Quarantine". It was at this point that the wall was demolished and all the refugees' barracks were dismantled. 22 years later, in this ruined place, lot #317 was chosen to house the "B018", which will remain here until 2003, the expiry date of the rental contract.

15. And what are the intellectual and creative processes motivating it?

Well, across the adjacent highway that provides the main northern access to the city, there are densely populated areas that lie along the river of Beirut. You could say that "B018" is a product of these circumstances since our proposal responds to our reading of this context as well as the immediate and present history of the site. The option of building within and below the surface of the ground emphasizes the absence of building within the former limits of the quarantine. Apart from that, we wanted to react to the disappearance of the wall that defined the borders of the site prior to 1976. Above all, the project addresses the complexity of the surface of the site in relation to its history and also the implementation of a building dedicated to entertainment.

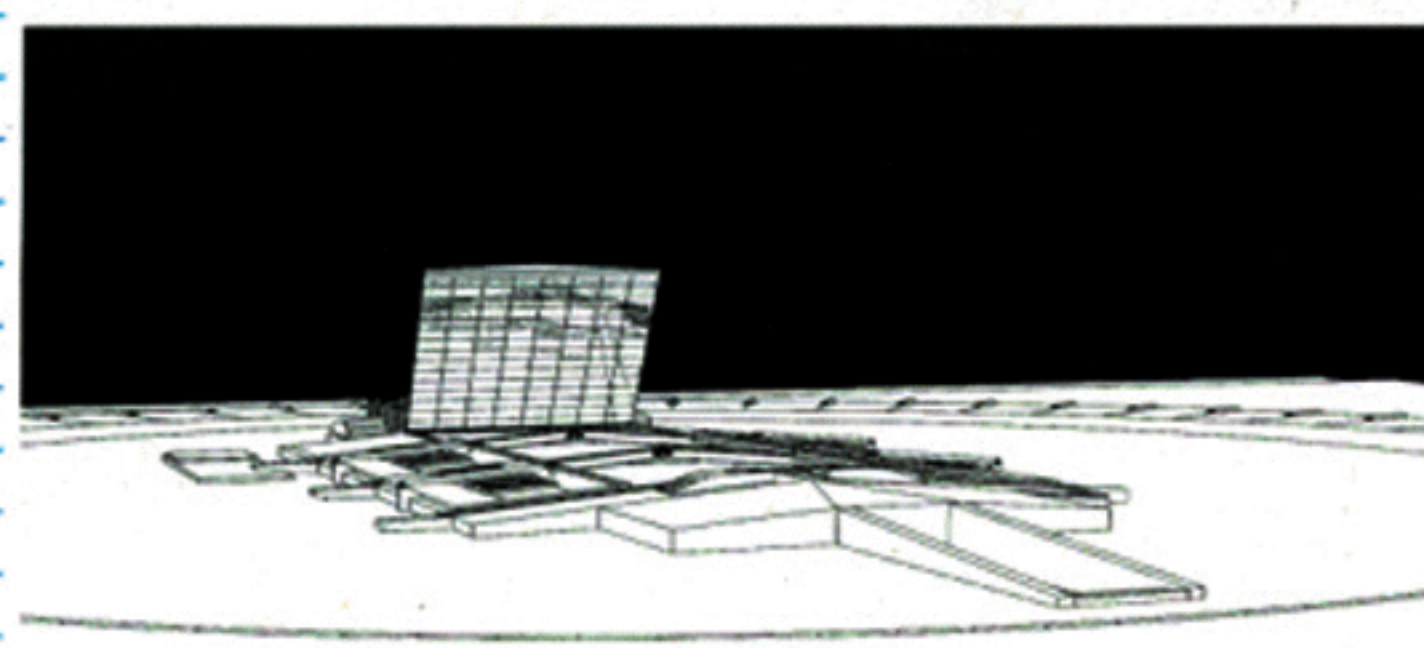
16. How have visitors responded to this site?

"B018" plays an important part in the night scene of Beirut but it is more than a commercial space, since it has been given a higher meaning by the public who use it. The fact that this place is still operating and going strong is, in some ways, proof of its success.



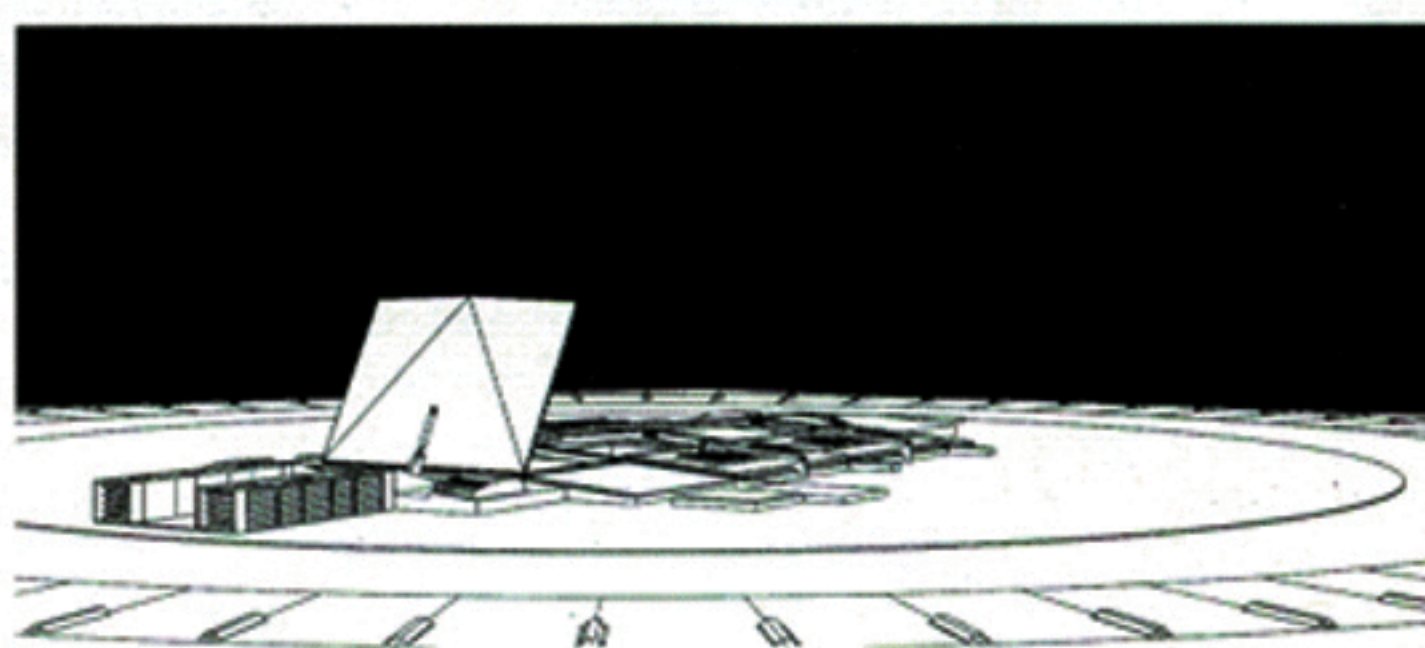
B018

A project that is built in the grounds of a former military-prison camp in Beirut.



B018

It comes to life in the late hours of the night when its articulated roof structure retracts hydraulically.



B018

It comes to life in the late hours of the night when its articulated roof structure retracts hydraulically.

18. There is a theory, which says that a certain type of architecture might reinforce or even create urban problems.

I would not give the practice of architecture so much credit.

19. What do you think of the World Trade Center competition and the winning design of Daniel Libeskind?

I am not impressed by the winning proposal for the new World Trade Center but I think anyway that the hypothetical project will most probably be affected by future limitations that will further dilute its present design.