

Building Beirut

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When *Time Out* decided to explore the field of architecture and design in Beirut, one name was inescapable: **Bernard Khoury**. Here, as this month's guest editor, the eminent architect has shared with us his vision of the city – and changed ours permanently. With **Natasha Dirany** and **Ellen Hardy**.



'Beirut is not a homogeneous city. It has too often been depicted with reductive terms and sensational stories that overlook its political, social and cultural complexities. This territory, that extends just over 65 square kilometres, has had all sorts of labels applied to it. For some, it was the fertile context of perpetual conflicts and inconceivable violence; others described it as a marvellous playground or a thrilling entertainment destination... I had my part in many of these hyped and trivial scenarios that, time and again, circulate in the press and other media. These stories will ultimately derail and will be deemed historical waste.

Regarding my own experience in Beirut, I prefer to spare you another revisit of my temporary entertainment projects. Instead, I choose to present to you a selection of my recent work and more precisely a few permanent projects I produced for the residential sector. These are some of my modest contributions to our local landscape that I hope will have a relevant impact on our territory.

More importantly, and in an attempt not to perpetuate or draw another expected representation of our dear city, I choose to present to you an overview of the works and the significant efforts of a selection of individuals from my entourage whose accomplishments, I believe, are making a positive difference.

Architecture and design are political fields. They are the material traces of a population and its culture on a given territory. In reference to Beirut, it is important to note that relevant architectural traces of our recent past



are being neglected. Within these pages, Georges Arbid, professor at the American University of Beirut, and co-founder of an association for the preservation and promotion of regional modern architecture presents to us an overview of local works that have historical relevance. His selection from the first generation of local modernists who were active in the construction of the city includes the Interdesign showroom building, designed by my father. Arbid has documented and put together an archive which at this point in time is our only reference to many structures from the period; buildings that are either being wiped off the map, neglected, re-manipulated or badly disfigured. It is important to revisit and give the architectural production of that generation the recognition it deserves. Our heritage

and its preservation should not be limited to what was produced up until the French Mandate; that would be a dangerous simplification of history.

The Beirut Art Center is another cultural and political experience worth noting in the sense that this exceptional project is brought to us by individuals who succeeded in their considerable efforts to compensate the gap left by the absence of institutional involvement in the promotion of contemporary art in our local environment.

The post-industrial methods adopted by .PSLAB and its design farm bring forward interesting and creative alternatives to the traditional processes that are commonly adopted in the sector of the lighting industry worldwide. The experience of young apparel designer Milia M is another relevant example of creative approaches that are very specific to our environment. With Beirut as a base, they have been able to operate on different territories locally and abroad while developing inventive strategies and methods of production that, in my opinion, would not be possible elsewhere.

If you take the chance of experiencing Beirut beyond its most obvious surfaces you will find a considerable number of creative and remarkable individuals whom I did not have the chance to include in this story. Their specific experiences will demonstrate the possibility of a definite modernity that can emerge from within our very particular environment. They are the players of a promising history. A history we all want to be part of.' **Bernard Khoury**

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Caption from 'Derailing Beirut' an installation produced by Bernard Koury for the Maxxiw Museum Collection in Rome (2010)





Bernard Khoury's residencies of reconciliation



‘A recurrent issue you will see throughout my residential projects is the will to break out of the hegemony that developers, and all those related to this industry, have imposed on the residential sector: blind cores, deep slabs, low ceilings, poorly-lit and poorly-ventilated dwellings that have no relevant or interesting relationship with the elements outside.

So you can see a common thread that runs through my projects; this will to open up my residences to their immediate environment.

In most of these apartments there’s almost this constant will to push you outside, to reconcile you with the city and with the elements. Our climate is something we should take advantage of – we are not in Alaska and we are not in Saudi Arabia.’



“ **Pleasure is something that’s very keen, the experience of pleasure through these spaces** ”



Interdesign

The Interdesign building was designed by Khalil Khoury in the early 70s as a showroom building for the furniture he designed and produced. Its construction started a few months before the civil war and despite many attempts to complete it, it wasn't finished until 1996.

