

At Home with the FT **House & Home**

Bernard Khoury's Beirut architecture thrives on conflict

His buildings reference the war in Lebanon and attract criticism and acclaim



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Chloe Cornish DECEMBER 28, 2018

There's nothing strange about guns on Beirut's Damascus Road. Bisecting the city's traditionally Muslim west and Christian east, the central artery is studded with army observation posts. But passers-by may look twice at a black apartment block with a giant pair of cannons appearing to stick out of the roof. The ninth-floor penthouse was designed by Bernard Khoury, Lebanese architecture's *enfant terrible*. Today, it is where he lives.

Khoury gained notoriety in 1998 for an underground nightclub sunk in Karantina, a Beirut neighbourhood, where, in 1976, rightwing Christian militia massacred around 1,500 Palestinians and Muslim Lebanese. The roof of B018 opens, exposing revellers to the stars. As Beirut has emerged from the shadow of civil war, plastering over urban scars of past violence, Khoury's buildings stand out as provocations. With overt references to war (one building resembles a grenade) and a radical interaction with urban space, they critique the city. In turn, his witty aesthetic, often wrought in glass and black metal, draws criticism as well as acclaim.

It is 11am and Khoury is yet to surface. His wife Nathalie, a designer, welcomes us into a living space hot with light. A black-painted gnome giving the finger and a miniature Lebanese army hut catch my eye. The Khourys, whose two children are in high school and university, moved in six years ago.

Finally emerging, Khoury, 50, wears calf-length black leather boots with silver buckles, combat-style navy trousers and aviator sunglasses, his hair and beard cropped. He would look ready for battle if he weren't holding a white porcelain mug painted with a blue tit. He growls apologies: after a trip to meet "one of the richest men in Kuwait", he didn't get home until 1am. Khoury, who spent part of his childhood in France and left Lebanon in 1986 to study architecture in the US, has a deep voice that sounds roughened by cigarettes.

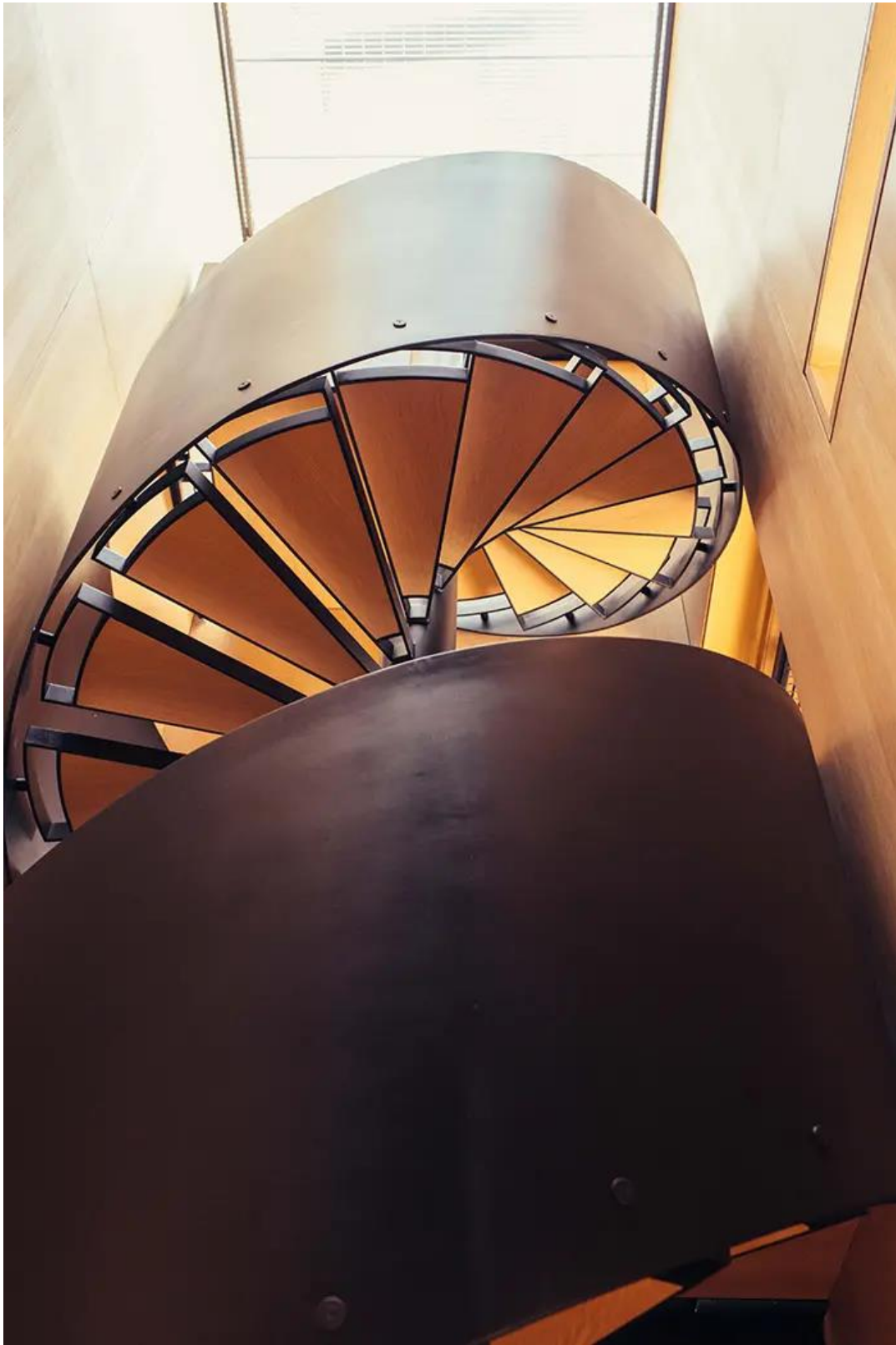


This swing was originally supposed to fly in and out of the apartment © Adib Chowdhury for FT

The penthouse is designed around a 12m x 6m window, which opens on to a balcony to create a "very carnal relationship" with Beirut, he says: "I wake up in the morning and I have it smack in the face." The din of traffic, calls to prayer and fireworks surges into the apartment as he pulls back the glass.

A leather swing hangs next to it. "The idea was that you swing out of the apartment and then back in." Worried for their children, Natalie laid down an ultimatum: "the swing or me". Instead, it swings parallel to the window.

Damascus Road, below us, once marked the line between warring East and West Beirut. We are "somewhere in the middle, which is where I belong", says Khoury. His was a Christian family "on paper, but we spent most of the harsh years of the war in West Beirut . . . we never really believed in the sectors for particular sects." The office of his father, also an architect, was bombed during the war.



Custom-made spiral staircase © Adib Chowdhury for FT

His apartment has views of the sea and the smog-veiled Chouf mountains, thanks to a low patch of buildings, a horseracing track and pine forest. Beyond that area, “this chaotic fabric that is Beirut is growing with absolutely no mechanism of control”, he says, adding that the city manifests “our political institutions and their bankruptcy, their incompetence, their corruption”.

Khoury's roots are in design. His grandfather established a furniture factory and his father, Khalil, was a celebrated modernist and principal architect behind Beirut's unrealised 1977 master plan. The apartment is panelled in French oak and every detail is custom-made, from wooden cabinets inlaid with metal to a hovercraft-style AC unit.



A gnome in a bookcase © Adib Chowdhury for FT

A spiral staircase leads to the mezzanine floor where Khoury's children have rooms. After peeping into the studio where the two women who work for the Khourys as housekeepers live, we reach the rooftop, complete with pool, panoramic view and cannons.

The cannons “point south towards the enemy”, says Khoury, not clarifying whether he means Israel or the Shia Islamist group Hezbollah's South Beirut stronghold. They are not real cannons, but lights that illuminate the terrace — yet they triggered a visit from the Lebanese secret service. They were worried, Khoury says, “that we would be bombarded . . . I told them, if it's the case I'll be a victim of my architecture”.



The sides of the mezzanine floor are connected by a metal bridge © Adib Chowdhury for FT

Two tanks trundle down a nearby street. Khoury says he is “fascinated” by military machinery’s “extremely intricate and sometimes interesting instruments and apparatuses. What they do with that can be sometimes sad” but, he argues, just because weapons bring destruction does not mean we should ignore their presence and power. “Pleasure can come out of sour situations also; pleasure is not always sugar-coated and sweet and naively innocent.”

Midday sun beats down; the pool looks inviting. “Besides the parties, it’s really a joy to swim in,” says Khoury. “You are in the middle of the shit Beirut and you float right above it . . . There’s something very immoral about this that I like.”



After studying at Rhode Island School of Art and Design and Harvard, Khoury returned to Beirut in 1993. Setting up practice in an office borrowed from his father, he intended to focus on public buildings. But “the city was totally in the hands of the private sector”, he says, describing a “miserable” first few years. He ended up building nightclubs and restaurants, which have shorter shelf lives than museums or theatres; that, according to Khoury, is how he became a provocateur. “When you’re building a nightclub, you’re not accountable,” he says. “You can be a bad boy. You can be extremely controversial and you can ask questions no one would dare to ask.” B018 was a temporary project and scheduled to be bulldozed by 2003. Yet as the edgy symbol of Beirut’s postwar renaissance, it survived. Khoury describes stepping into the pulsing nightclub for the first time as “orgasmic”.

His other risqué buildings have included a restaurant with a cylindrical mechanised roof built into a crumbling house and a sushi restaurant next to buildings where refugees were sheltering. They were designed to unsettle bourgeois Beirutis and established Khoury as a “dangerous architect”.



Plot #4371

Khoury seems energised by confrontation. “I smile when they tell me this building is ugly,” he says. His next act is residential projects; he says he is “at war” with the developers who churn out generic

housing and create “a bad social fabric”. “We have to annihilate this. We have to blow these people up, kill them,” he spits.

His residences — including structures likened to a battleship and a penis — have been “financially great successes”, he says, noting this wins no establishment prizes. I get the sense Khoury feeds off the violence and power struggles of Beirut’s streets. “I don’t sleep,” he says.



Yabani

He describes the Kuwaiti he met yesterday as “a very interesting man that a lot of people will judge as being completely immoral and decadent”, then leans forward: “But that’s how every interesting project starts; I started B018 with the man [who had been] in charge of the security of [Karantina] back in 1976 . . . the man behind the ‘cleaning up’.” He is referring to the massacre of 1,500 people. Khoury adds: “It was the first postwar critical project that was not the sugar-coated story of Lebanon rising out of its ashes.”

It’s almost 1.30pm, and Khoury has a meeting. He is known for traversing Beirut on a motorbike but dons no leathers or helmet today, leaving with a newspaper under one arm.

Favourite thing



© Adib Chowdhury for FT

Khoury selects a wooden model of a brutalist tower designed by his late father. Construction was halted by the civil war, and finally completed in 1996. “It is the most heroic idealised scenario of the modern project,” says Khoury. His father even designed the furniture. But Khoury senior became heavily indebted to revive the passion project, “a completely suicidal move”, and the family furniture business was failing.

When the company went bankrupt, its creditors took the block. Yet the bank “can’t make use of it because the building has no windows and you can’t put walls in”, making the tower a “modern trap for the capitalist machine that seized it and got f***ed with it”, says a gleeful Khoury.

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