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ADELE WEDER: What kind of particular challenges do you face as an architect in contemporary Beirut?

BERNARD KHOURY: Beirut is not radically different from a North American city. It's a contemporary city that faces many of the challenges you may face in Vancouver or in any other city, except things tend to be caricaturist here. The most important challenge for an architect is just to develop a strategy to survive in an environment like this, and still try to produce pertinent work. We don't have the institutional projects that are produced in the West, the exceptional architecture. We have to learn to survive in a totally capitalistic environment.

AW: You chose to train as an architect in America, and return to Beirut to practise.

BK: Training in America was a different story then. Lebanon was still a country at war back in 1986 when I left. Coming back to Beirut in 1992, I found it was a great ground to experiment on. We were facing a lot of complex and interesting challenges – politically, socially and culturally. Unfortunately, we missed a lot of opportunities, and many

of the things I thought could happen didn't happen. I thought that architecture and rebuilding the city could be sort of a collective effort.

AW: You made your name with a nightclub project, B018, or B Dix-Huit as it's called. It looks so monumental, knowing that it's at the site of a massacre and seeing how you've designed it: a subterranean scheme that evokes a grave or a vault or a crypt or even a gateway to Hell.

BK: I was surprised by some interpretations of this project. But B018 is not a project of war – it's a project of today. It's very positive. We brought life to an area that was totally abandoned, and it's great to drive by there at five or six in the morning on a weekend and see the life coming out of that hole.

AW: And critics have said, "Oh, those crazy Lebanese, dancing on people's graves!"

BK: I've heard that many times, especially in the Western media, because it's a very exotic, powerful image, easily digestible and overdramatic. B018 was not intended to be a monument at all. It was just a club, and we were very surprised with



Bernard Khoury was born in Lebanon but trained as an architect in the United States.



OPPOSITE PAGE B018, the project that brought Khoury international attention, is an underground nightclub built at the site of a massacre in Beirut. Its roof is made of five mobile panels (one flap and four sliding) that can be opened. Khoury also designed the furniture for the club. The tables feature photos of famous jazz musicians. The seats have a mahogany top plane that can be opened: in its vertical position, the top plane serves as a back rest; when closed, the seat becomes a flat surface to dance on.



ABOVE LEFT The nightclub is set within a circular concrete slab that anchors the roof panels. Surrounding the slab is a traffic lane and a "parking carousel" for 65 cars. Each parking spot is separated by a light fixture set into the ground.

LEFT Reflective panels on the underside of the roof's flap portion offer a bird's-eye view of the bar beneath. The 126 panels also let patrons catch a glimpse of the neighbouring highway and, beyond, the city.



the impact it had on the architectural scene. And then it became a monument despite and beyond our expectations. The notion of the monument is something that no longer interests me.

AW: Why not?

BK: Because the monument is always the product of some sort of consensus. It serves the institution that makes the monument possible. It was interesting to see how far we were able to go with entertainment projects, simply because we were not being monitored – we were not accountable for our projects. They were light projects.

AW: Let's talk about the everyday-life issues of the entertainment environment – smoking and noise and music, say. Do these aspects figure in your design approach?

BK: Yes, of course. I'm a smoker, I'm a drinker. Sure. We very proudly say: you can drink at the B018 until six or seven in the morning, and when you go back home your shirt doesn't stink of smoke. That's because of the simplest of ventilation systems – an open roof. And you can look up and see the stars, because we have a fantastic climate that allows us to open the roof almost 12 months a year.

ABOVE: A Beirut restaurant and bar, Centrale is housed in a 1920s residential structure under historical protection. In the rehabilitation process, Khoury reinforced the walls by placing steel beams across the facade and pouring a structural layer of concrete against their internal surface. Four ring beams, spanning the width of the space, brace the walls from the inside at the top portion of the building. Instead of replastering the crumbling sandstone facade, Khoury covered it with a wire mesh that "enhances the poetic dimension of decay." The steel beams, normally used as temporary reinforcement, are preserved in the final configuration of the building, giving the non-restored facade a new reading.



ABOVE: Centrale's 17-metre-long bar is suspended within the four ring beams above the main hall. The structure serves as a track for the rotating movement of the roof, which can be opened to frame a view of the city.

AW: Your work seems to subvert a lot of conventions: a bar on top of the roof, as in Centrale; a club below the ground in B018. Is that part of your approach, this contradiction and subversion?

BK: Difficult to say, because I don't think we had a recipe. But I sometimes resort to things that are vulgar and that are para-architectural. I like doing that, because I'm not a true believer in architecture in its most limited definition. If we need to resort to gadgetism to open a roof, I'm totally fine with that. I'm not afraid of the vulgarity of that.

AW: How does that apply to Yabani sushi bar, this beautiful restaurant in the middle of apparent desolation?

BK: With Yabani, it was clear we had to assume the absurd and impossible presence of the building in its context. We had a very small lot in an environment that was hostile to the program. We were literally on the former demarcation line [that separated East and West Beirut].

Our immediate surrounding was mostly unrestored [from the war]. After we were done, the buildings around started being restored, so the project lost a little bit of its impact. But at the same time, it is a generator, again, of life.

AW: You've done restaurants and now you're doing banks. I'm looking at the model of BLC Bank, and it reminds me of a submarine. It's sleek and stealthy looking. What kind of clients are these banks? Do they give you free range?

BK: You'd be surprised. Banks and restaurants are very much alike here. These clients can be very radical. They're very image-conscious and very, very sophisticated. They're basically the big players in our economy here. In Beirut, you have tourism and you have banks.

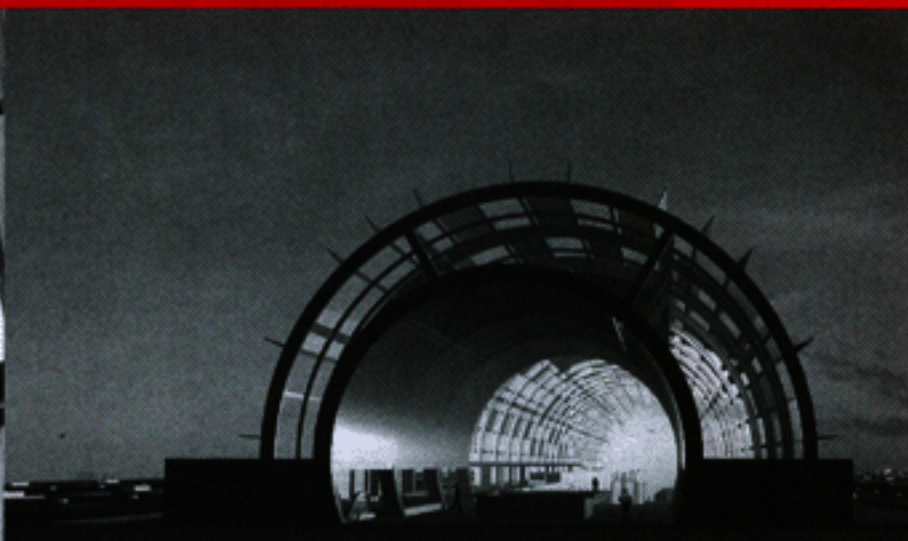
AW: Are you working on any projects outside Lebanon right now?

BK: There's a big commercial project in Kuwait, the Fintas Mall. It's a

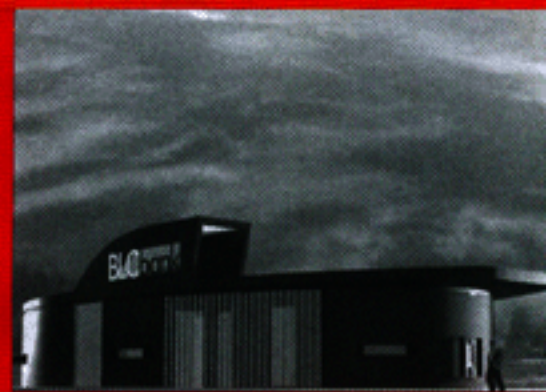
very extreme project because Kuwait is an extreme context, where shopping is the public space. You have more square metres of shopping space in Kuwait than you do in just about any other country in the world, per capita. We've reacted to that by trying to create the Formula One of malls. Very rarely in malls do you find yourself in natural light and almost-natural air with serious greenery. It will be a very pleasant space, very different from the space you find in typical suburban malls.

AW: You've also started a project in Berlin, the Pfefferberg complex. What are your goals with that scheme?

BK: It's about the recuperation of 21 structures split into four courtyards in a small city block in East Berlin. Built between the 1880s and the 1920s, it has not been restored yet and is obviously in very bad shape. It was an industrial complex during the Communist years, with a police station in it – a very charged history. I was called in to rehabilitate it,



LEFT During the restoration of the building that houses Centrale, existing interior walls were demolished, leaving a nine-metre-high main hall for the restaurant. The original design of the room featured one long, central table (since replaced), which made it possible to speak only to the diners directly beside oneself. High-backed chairs and lamps directed at each dinner plate enhanced the formal aspect of the space. A light fixture suspended above the table illuminated the belly of the upper-level bar.



BELOW RIGHT The BLC Bank, a submarinelike structure located in the town of Chtaura close to the Syrian border, was officially opened in July.

ABOVE RIGHT One of Khoury's current projects is the Fintas Mall in Kuwait. In contrast to the typical suburban shopping centre, this 500-metre-long curvilinear building will feature green space, natural light and almost-natural air.

RIGHT Located at the demarcation line that separated East and West Beirut during the civil war, Yabani was from the beginning a conspicuous project in an area unrestored after years of shelling. The building, which houses a Japanese restaurant, music club and bar, incorporates a two-storey concrete structure below grade and a steel structure that rises 14 metres above ground. The tower and horizontal facade at ground level are clad in aluminum sheets; large glass openings at ground level provide natural light to the restaurant below. Access is through a seven-metre-high curved glass entrance and a mobile reception lounge that travels vertically inside a circular glass perimeter.

BELOW Seating in the restaurant is arranged around the mobile reception lounge, making it the focal point. The view of the outside is limited, creating a dining experience in which patrons can be in total denial of the urban surroundings.



but obviously not in the orthodox sense of the term. The final project is a huge piece about 120 metres long, spanning across and through the buildings, creating an elevated second street through the site. Unfortunately, the project is on hold because of insufficient funding. Berlin is in pretty bad shape right now.

AW: What's next for you? Are you hopeful for your individual self and the context you work within?

BK: It's been pretty tough. I opened my practice about 10 years ago, and we still build less than 10 per cent of what we design. But we're excited about what we do and that's important. We have a couple of

small projects in London, and we're hoping that it will get us more work in that part of the world.

AW: If there is a sense of monumentality in your work, it's to the daily pleasures of life, it seems.

BK: I guess you can say that, yes. To try to make a very ordinary situation extraordinary. But I'm not the first one to say that. ■