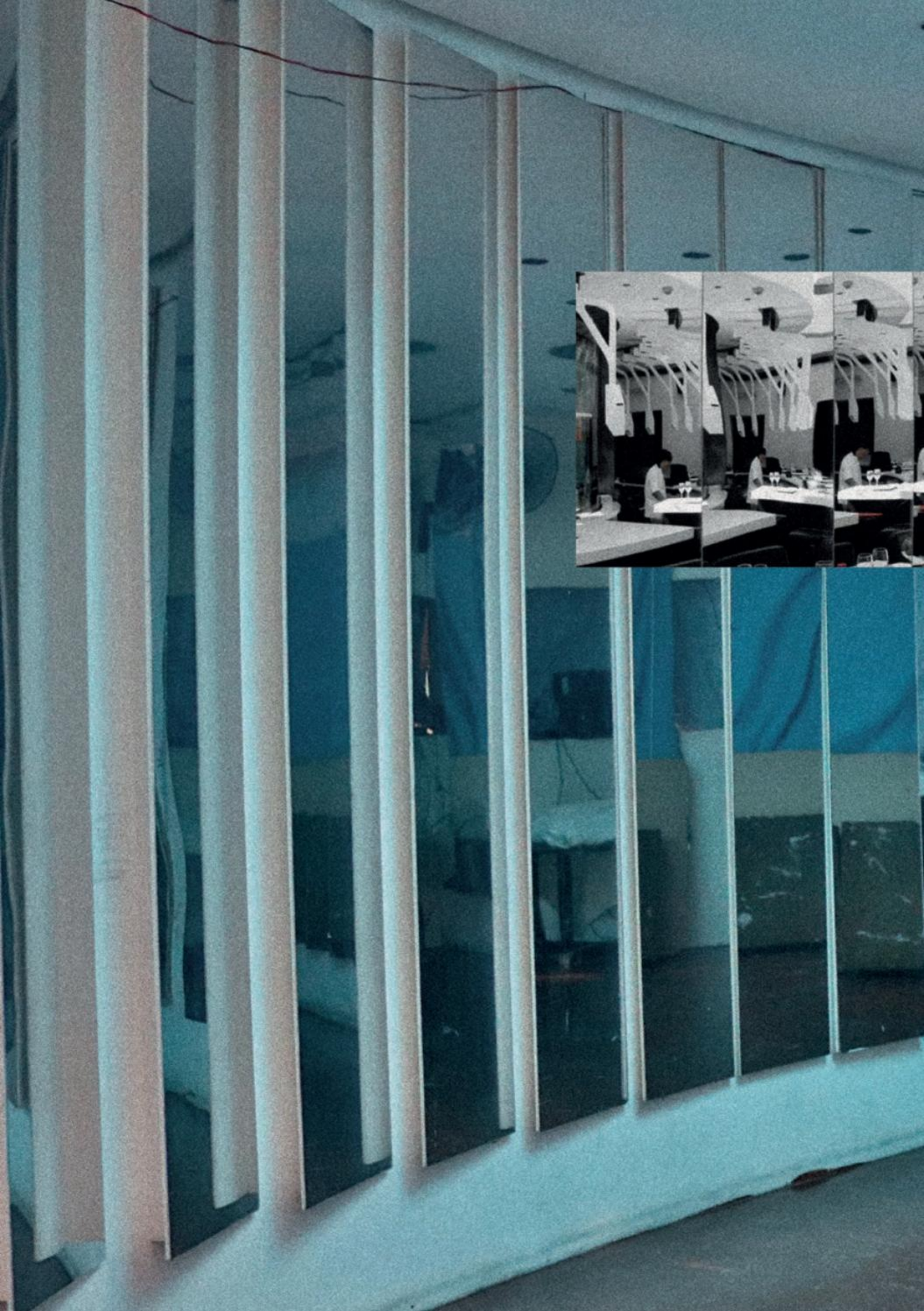


SHIFTING IDENTITIES

GIOIA
SAWAYA



September 10, 2019 was *not* a regular day.

Passing by Bechara el Khourys' street in the heart of Beirut, I stopped below the state-of-the-art building and looked around. I examined the area.

Something did not feel the same. Perhaps the presence of a gate that did not exist before in this specific venue sounded dubious? Or the erected fence that looked to me as if it was trying to hide something? Curious by nature, I wanted to go in. Hardly enough, I managed to enter.

What I saw however was a striking and unexpected sight.





As I
entered the
interior of
the space,
my mind
wandered:

What happened to the prestigious sushi bar where the rich once had expensive sushi servings? Is the extravagant space now used for family dinners?



02, 03. photo by architect Joseph Chartouni, 2003.





What

Yes,

happened

that elevator

to the

that once used to be a mobile reception space,

elevator

going up and down exposing panoramic views of the city while

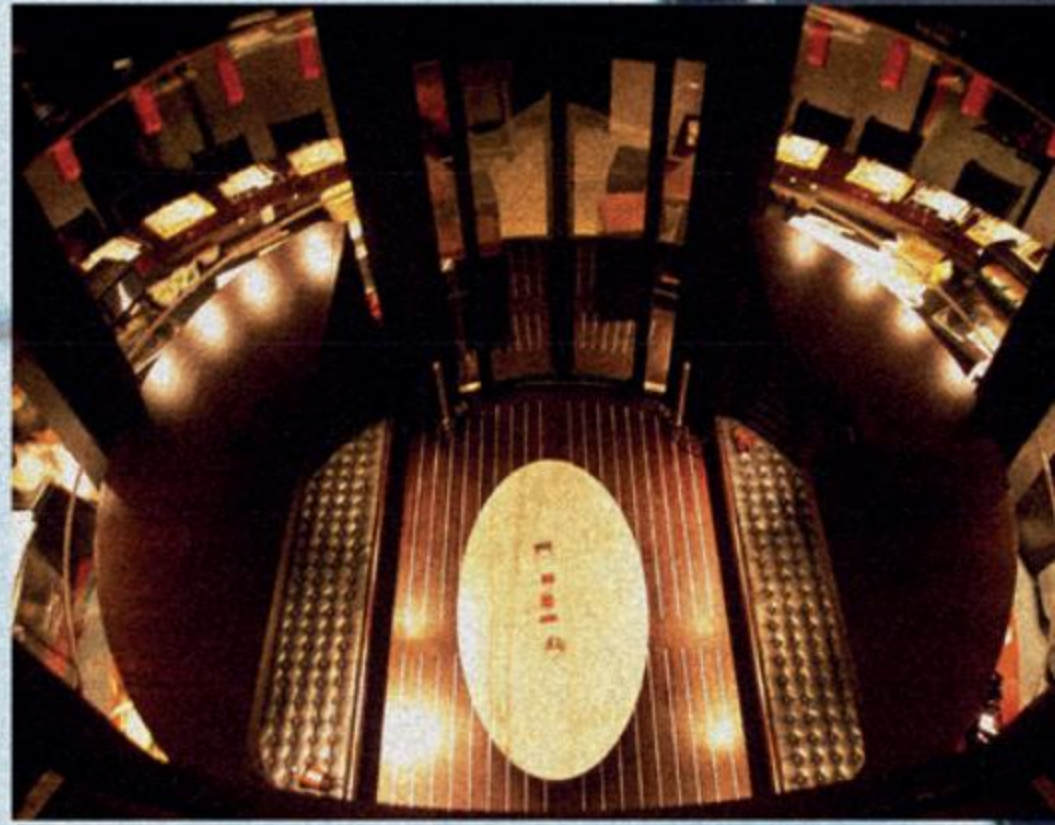
with the

a hostess accompanied visitors as they waited for a place to become available,

leather

... do they actually live in that?

seating?



04. photo by architect Joseph Chartouni, 2003.



05. photo by architect Joseph Chartouni, 2003.

Did they eat on that bar

that once served hundred-dollar sushi servings?

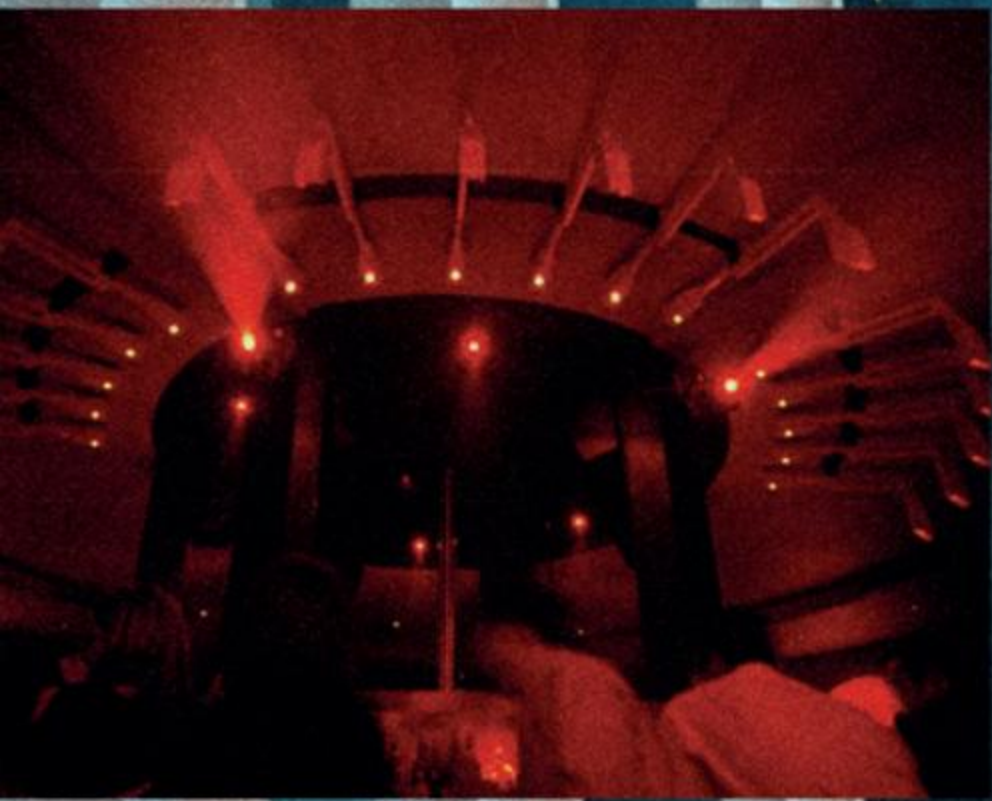


Did they use the tables too ?

For family dinners perhaps ?

Where
did
they
eat
?





06. photo by architect Joseph Chartouni, 2003.



Did
they
sleep
on the
floor?

where people once crowdedly danced
on Saturday nights?

As I was leaving, my mind simply wandered...

Where did
all the
lavishness
go?



07. photo by architect Joseph Chartouni, 2003.



08.

, 09. photo by architect Joseph Chartouni, 2003.

* the current state of the building presented in background images was photographed by the author, 2019.

These
photos
therefore
portray a
reality,

one that is composed of stories and fragments of the refugees
daily lives and intimacies underground

Located in the heart of Beirut and designed by renowned Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury, “Yabani” once occupied the front cover of local and international architecture magazines. Consisting of a modern underground space that was frequented by the rich in search for fine Japanese dining, “Yabani” has now become a shelter for refugees. The previous photos portray a reality, one that is composed of stories and fragments of the refugees’ daily underground lives and intimacies. They portray a fragility masked by a preconceived idea of perfection, and a vulnerability masked by a predetermined idea of infallibility. Today, “Yabani” has transformed. From a prestigious restaurant to a make-shift home, I, as an architect, had to witness this drastic transformation the space had undergone. “Yabani” can therefore be looked upon as an experiment, one that invites us to develop a new way of looking at architecture while turning away from the current trend of idealization, an architecture that extends beyond its initial function into a pragmatic rethinking of its possibilities, transgressing over time beyond the point of familiarity, and will perhaps

keep on
trans-
gressing.

