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## ARCHITECTURE

### WHALE OF A TIME

This page, Khoury on top of the Beirut City Centre Building, which he is starting to renovate

Right, in Khoury's underground B018 music club, a reflective panel is raised above the glass ceiling



# Past master

Transforming Beirut's 1960s concrete 'Bubble' into a new arts centre is only Bernard Khoury's latest venture in his mission to revitalise the city's war-damaged buildings  
**Photographers Oliver Chanarin and Adam Broomberg**  
**Writer Bethan Ryder**



For someone who doesn't like heights, Bernard Khoury looks defiantly triumphant atop the iconic Beirut City Centre Building (BCCB), aka the 'Bubble', 'Blob' or 'Egg'. And so he should, since Solidère, the real estate company that owns the 6,000 sq m plot, has charged him with resuscitating the concrete carcass to operate as an arts centre.

Until now, Khoury has been critical of the limited forms of architectural recuperation going on in his native city. He believes passionately in confronting the 'collective amnesia' over the war through the 'progressive mutation of war-damaged buildings'. 'I try to take the context and reformulate it,' he says. 'I don't like pretty things; my projects are not about style. Cute buildings don't have a place in Beirut; it's probably one of the ugliest cities on earth. We have to do something with this ugliness, embrace it.'

Many of Khoury's ideas on post-war city rehabilitation evolved while he was studying at the Rhode Island School of Design and Harvard. Urban context and the past are structurally interwoven in all his works: in the design of the bunker club B018 in the Quarantine district, which encompasses subtle references to the massacre of refugees by Phalangist militia that occurred there in 1976; and also in the subterranean Yabani, which keeps diners in complete denial of the immediate urban environment yet thrusts skywards to 'acknowledge its absurdity' as a \$50 per head sushi restaurant in a recovering landscape. These couldn't be better calling cards for the BCCB commission.

Solidère had initially intended to demolish the Bubble. Never mind that this arresting landmark, stranded on asphalt like a beached whale sullied by war, is a surviving emblem of Beirut's 'golden age' of modernist architecture. Designed by Lebanese architect Joseph Philippe Karam in 1965, it originally housed a theatre and exhibition hall with six underground levels for shopping and parking. However, its prime position overlooking Martyrs' Square in the newly gentrified Downtown district means this chunk of real estate has an estimated value of \$40million - a goldmine considered far too valuable to squander on a relic of the past.

Fortunately for Khoury, international opinion saved the whale and it has been granted a »



aeronautical engineer) half-buried in the desert, a tail fin signalling the entrance.

No architectural concept is deemed impossible to realise; Khoury relishes the challenge. Undeterred by building contractors who said that B018 would be impossible to construct, he improvised with materials used in truck-building, such as the hydraulic retractable roof system, to get the job done. 'I'm surprised we could do it, that you can work outside the building industry, but we really wanted to. I like the fact there are no tectonics to this. There is no way of measuring scale'.

His projects feature macho feats of engineering. At Yabani, patrons descend in a circular elevator activated by a computer joystick, their dramatic arrival witnessed by a ring of diners surrounding the lift shaft. At restaurant Centrale, converted from a former house, the rooftop bar is accessed via an elevator, which ascends in full view of the dining room to become inscribed into the horizontal cylinder of the bar above. Like B018, the roof of Centrale's cylindrical bar also slides back to reveal the night sky to barflies.

When completed, the entrance of the Fintas mall in Kuwait will include an extreme vertical drop ride. 'Seated on the sofa you will see only greenery and oasis inside,' he says, 'and then suddenly you are thrown up out of the building into the warm weather and looking at the desert, flung back to

reality, and then dropped back down into this artificial environment. To me this symbolised the madness of consumption. Most malls disguise themselves; we didn't play that game.'

On the drawing board are face-lifts for several banks, a lavish home - helipad and all - for a sheikh in Kuwait, plus a restaurant for the luxury Beirut store, Aïshti. Not forgetting the Bubble. Khoury's scheme involves cladding the exterior in reflective Plexiglas, to give distorted reflections of everything around it. Solidère is hoping the reincarnation will bring the magical 'Bilbao effect' to Beirut.

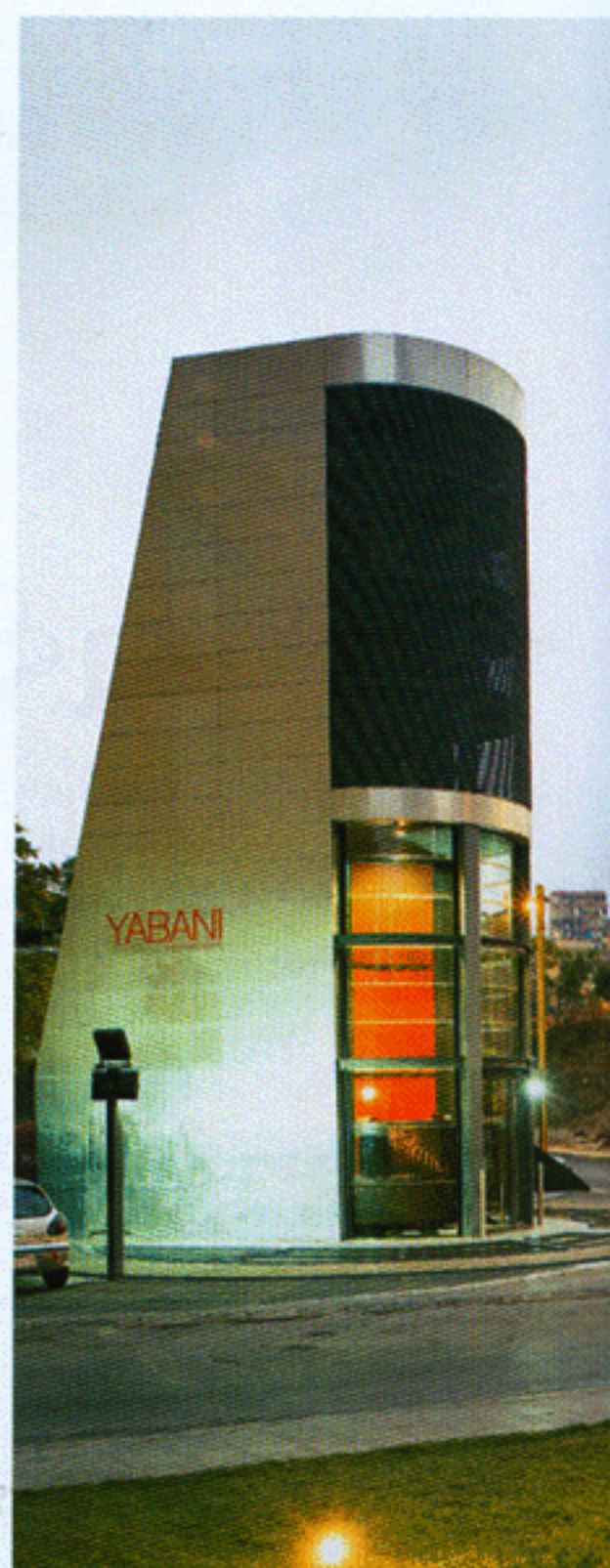
It's a city desperately in need of cultural institutions, something Khoury was acutely aware of when he returned from New York in the mid-1990s. Back then he was full of romantic hopes - today he's more pragmatic. 'All my life I've just wanted to build and I'm very interested in real things and stretching the limits of what is possible.'

Hence the reformed rebel accepting the Solidère commission establishment. 'I am still resisting them a little, but I'm a whore.' Beirut is not an easy place to get things built. As Khoury and other critical architects have found: better to get involved than be left in the dust with no role to play in the city's regeneration. It just goes to show, if you're going to be a rebel, better to be a rebel with a cause. The establishment just might listen. ✪ [www.bernardkhoury.com](http://www.bernardkhoury.com)

#### KHOURY FAVOURS

Clockwise from top, diners descend into Yabani via a circular elevator; B018 music club seen from above; Khoury at work

## ARCHITECTURE



seven-year stay of execution. 'Many architects who toured the city with Solidère - Philippe Starck, Rafael Moneo, Jean Nouvel, Michael Graves - they all asked, 'What are you doing with that?' Khoury explains. 'And so because of my other projects in Beirut, I was asked to come up with a temporary solution.'

Temporality is not something architects are generally forced to consider, but the entertainment projects that have made his name all have built-in sell-by-dates. This makes the 36-year-old, who bears an uncanny resemblance to Serge Gainsbourg and chain-smokes cigars, increasingly mournful. 'Unfortunately most of my buildings are going to be gone long before I die,' he says sorrowfully. 'Whether five or ten years from now, the real estate is going to catch up with me and all the plots will eventually be purchased. I didn't mind them being temporary when I started, I used it to my advantage, but I'd like to build a permanent building at some point.'

Khoury's grandfather was a carpenter and joiner and his father, Khalil Khoury, was one of Beirut's first generation of home-grown architects of the 20th century. Now 74, he resides in France. Two of his impressive later works include a concrete office building with windows sliced through at odd, haphazard angles, on Spear Street in Beirut's Hamra neighbourhood, and a stunning



### LORD OF THE MANAR

**Top and above, designed by his father in the 1960s, the Manar beach resort in Maameltein is now Khoury's home**

example of monolithic cathedral-esque Brutalism, the Manar beach resort in Maameltein.

Now a residential apartment block, this is where Khoury junior lives with his graphic designer wife and their two young children. The grounds are fully landscaped, with routes under the highway to the marina and pools, and there's a winter pool on the roof; the apartments have custom-designed walnut and black leather furniture (reminiscent of classic mid-century Le Corbusier and Eames pieces) - it's inspired modernist living.

Khoury senior tried to dissuade his children from following in his footsteps, yet his youngest son rebelled. In a sense he's continuing his father's legacy, by diverting from the norm and steering clear of creating projects with recognisable typology. The projects built so far ape industrial, military machines rather than buildings. B018 and Yabani are like giant, mechanical boy's toys embedded in the earth; the former resembling a subterranean UFO or secret army HQ, the latter protruding like the tail-end of a silver rocket.

Of future projects, the Fintas, a shopping mall in Kuwait is the most spectacular. Khoury calls it the 'Formula 1 of shopping malls'. Likening it to a Lotus 7, he says it's been stripped back to the pure essentials so as to function like a high-powered machine. Plans reveal a colossal 380m-long glass super-rocket (it was his father's ambition to be an