

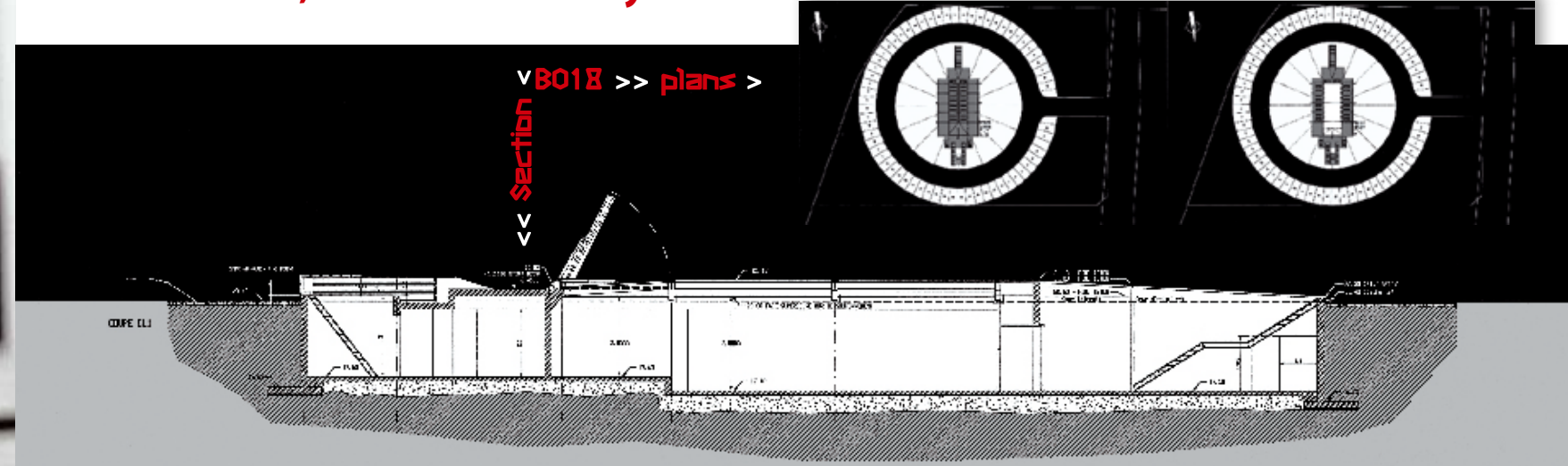


Bernard Khoury: Beirut's Man In Black



< open roof << B018 >> closed roof >

A specimen of man that has become synonymous with what's Avante Garde in Beirut, Bernard Khoury is unshaven, bed tousel, and already half way through his first cigar of the day, and it's not even 11am yet. Wheeling himself along the architectural assembly line of computers where his staff works, the spitting image of Beirut's structural tomorrow nervously tousles his hair, and says little to his apprentices. His posture is lousy, his mood pensive, he claims to be ill. Whatever .the case, he looks absolutely brilliant



Since Khoury started his independent practice in Beirut, in 1993, he has developed a diverse portfolio of projects both locally and abroad, emerging as a major international figure in contemporary architecture. His more radical projects, like the BO 18 nightclub and Centrale and Yabani restaurants, have received international attention. His work has been featured in international journals and in publications on the new generation of international architects. In 2001, Khoury received an honorable mention at the Borromini Prize in Rome for his BO 18 design

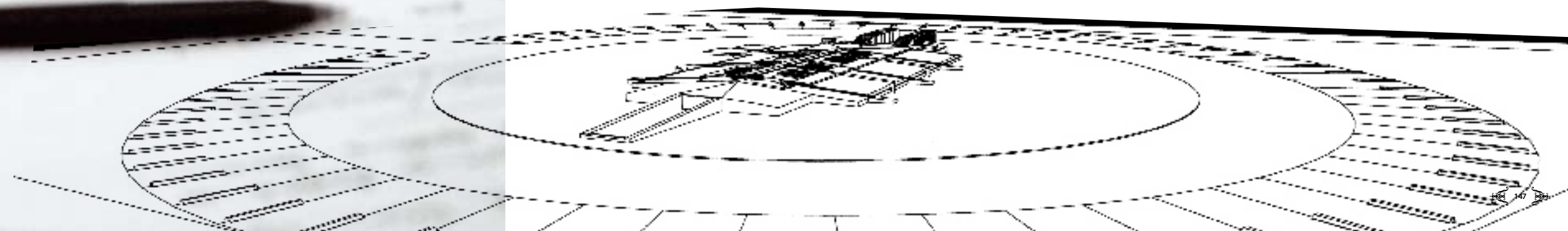
One popular generalization of Khoury's work, especially in the Western media, is that many of his designs are seen as memento moris to the traumatic events of the civil war. Khoury says this is a very simplistic view of his work. He argues that, on the contrary, his aim is to counteract the sterilizing effect of some of the

reconstruction efforts that have taken place since the 90's. He feels strongly that some of these attempts will do more to turn Beirut into a kind of museum, and one almost Orientalist in nature

In a lecture given at MIT this year, Khoury commented on his award-winning B018 project

The danger in architecture here [in Lebanon] is that everyone acts as if nothing happened. History is simplified. B018 refuses to participate in the .amnesia that governs other Lebanese postwar reconstruction efforts

When Skin met with Bernard Khoury at his offices in Beirut, we asked him why he feels so strongly that Beirut's should live in the present, instead of the past

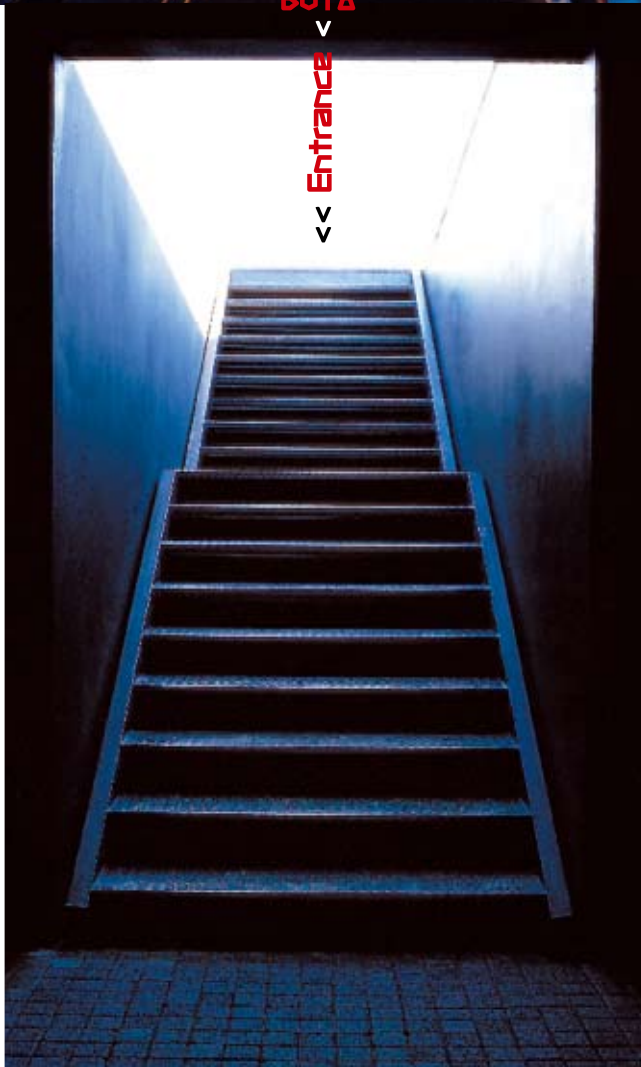




Interior
BO18



Centrale



Entrance

Skin: What are your thoughts about the way people have interpreted your buildings?

BK: There has been a lot of talk about my making direct references to the war. I would like to make it clear that I am very interested in the present.

BO 18 in particular has been seen as a memorial for the massacre in the Quarantine area on which it is built. This is more of a Western fantasy, a piece of Romanticism, a very simplistic view of what this city is about

Skin: On the other hand, Yabani, for instance, really stands out on the former demarcation line between East and West Beirut, and it sits next to an old dilapidated tenement inhabited by refugees. That's a pretty blunt juxtaposition isn't it?

BK: Yabani, was built on an original site. When it was finished back in 2001 / 2002 the area surrounding it was pretty desolate. The challenge I was interested in was the difficulty of implementing it on that site.

The difficulty is in building places of entertainment on sites where the war is still very visible. You can put your finger of every site that bares scars of the civil war and every site has its difficulties. The work I do is not representational; it is about making places and what they contain. I don't have that romantic view of the war. I am not interested in that naïve approach

Skin: The roof of BO18 can be opened up, and visitors suddenly find themselves in the open air, under the stars. BO18 has been described as: "By day, an unused manhole cover, and by night a glittering oyster, with music and light emerging from its open shell." This seems like quite a romantic experience – most people I don't think would expect that from you

BK: [chuckles] The main thing that touches me about BO18 is seeing the life coming out of that hole in the early hours of the morning...it is something very touching to see.

Skin: I suppose the point is that you actually do design beautiful and optimistic buildings. Your ideas are beautiful, rather than simply radical and modern, which is what people pay more attention to when talking about your work. But at the same time you never hide the contradictions of Beirut. Instead you focus on them and exaggerate them...So what is your idea of your architecture?

BK: I don't like representation. I don't like representative architecture, I don't see the point in symbolizing things that have been or might have been. I prefer looking to the future. Centrale, for instance is a completely different beast behind the skin of what was there. The dining hall becomes such a pretentious space – but it is very consciously done. It is fair to say that it might also be a slight criticism of Bourgeois Beirut society, although I count myself as one of them and am proud to be one of them. Centrale is not a public park, it isn't a national museum, it is a dining hall, an over pretentious space, and something that isn't naïve in the way it is put together.

Skin: You have worked on the recuperation of an old traditional houses that happened to be located literally on the demarcation line. But you referred to this house in a past interview as one of these so-called 'Lebanese houses' which are mostly, in my opinion, a result of colonial occupation. Are you worried that Solidere want to use these old houses to bring back a sort of picture postcard look?

BK: Believe the reconstruction process should go beyond reconstruction and urbanism, it is about facing present and very fundamental issues that make up our society. We've seen all sorts of representations of what Beirut is or should be. Those picture postcards of Beirut that you can buy are a very good representation

of what we are now and what we could become – A society cannot begin to build a cultural agenda when it always insists on returning to that very naïve, reductive representation. Everything seems to stop at the French mandate. Everything since then has been cleared and wiped out. Sterile, modern projects imitating basic corporate American buildings are prevailing; and then you get the transvestite brand of Ottoman and French Mandate style and there it stops – history is contained in the picture postcard ideal

Skin: What is the reasoning behind this approach do you think?

BK: a short term outlook, a very basic outlook, and a very corporate type of policy. You put on a face that pretends to be something that it isn't, a pretty brochure which might sell well today, but not in the long term. What sells a destination is the specificity of the location. Every major city has its specificity. What I am afraid will happen with Beirut is that it will become this thin layer of crap that the world is not going to buy. And I am one of those people who are trying to prevent that

Skin: So can you tell us what future projects you are currently working on?

BK: have expanded in the last 2 or 3 years. At the moment we have more than 25 projects in the pipeline – resorts, hotels, banks, residential buildings. I find it interesting to tackle relevant issues beyond the entertainment industry. With the entertainment industry you can be very blunt, it is almost expected of you, but this does not mean that you cannot try the absurd in other areas of the building industry.

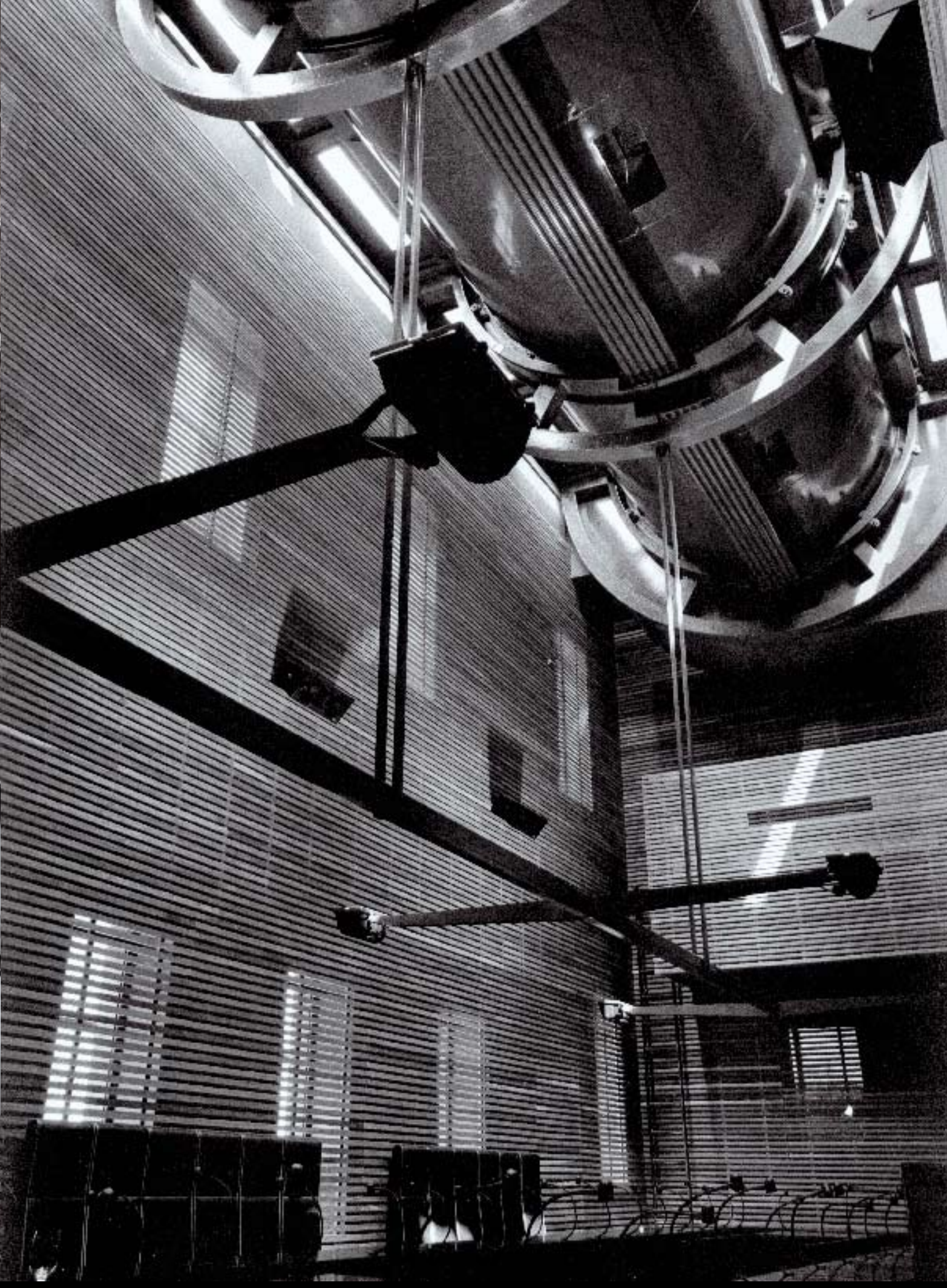
BERNARD KHOURY WILL BE COLLABORATING ON AN ART SHOW - OPENING EARLY JULY
- THAT WILL GO ON TOUR WITH THE SEMPLERS SFEIR CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERY



 **Centrale** >>



photographed by Bryan Denton





Yabani

