





Left: The dome, aka the Beirut City Center Building, as it was in the early 1990s. At right, how it will look after Khoury's rehabilitation is completed

Beirut's icon of modernist architecture set to be revamped within a year

Solidere reverses its decision to demolish and taps into the talent of upstart young architect Bernard Khoury

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

Bernard Khoury is not a tall man to begin with, and his poor posture isn't helping. He is slouched so deeply in the chair at his old office behind Sodeco Square (he moved last month) that his desk hits him at sternum level. Were it not for the stub of a cigar in

his left hand, he'd look like a little kid romping around on adult-sized furniture.

On the 35-year-old architect's desk lies a red cloth three-ring binder detailing his firm's design plans for the much-loved and much-hated domed building in downtown Beirut: an old, disused movie theater known variously as the egg, the bubble, the blob, or by its official name - the Beirut City Center Building.

HOROSCOPE

Aries (Mar. 21-April 19)

You could find that you are appreciated or valued for your feelings or your ability to act and aget things done. Everything may be pouring in at once today, and it's all good news.

Genini (May 21 - June 21)

Your awareness at this time is toward a sort of community-oriented achievement or mindset. Planning for a stoplight or a crossing guard at the local school is where

Leo (July 23 - Aug. 22)

Studying the facts of a situation helps you to become clear about your part or your feelings today. You have accomplished quite a lot in your life. Now sit down and figure out what you want.

Libra (Sept. 25 - Oct. 22)

Being yourself, and living your life to the fullest, brings you joy. You do not seem disturbed over workplace problems; there is always a good response from you when asked to perform a difficult task.

Sagittarius (Nov. 22 - Dec. 21) Communicating and exchanging ideas are experiences you may enjoy now. You are a person with something to say, and you realize that others have information that

is essential to your goals. Aguarius (Jan. 20 - Feb. 88) You shine when it comes to pulling a group together in order

to complete a project today. You

have an easy way with those in

authority and can often talk your

way into better working benefits.

Taurus (April 20 - May 20) You have a built-in sense of what is expected of you, even without guidance. A new beginning may

mean a new job or new surround-

ings. With your imagination, it is

Cancer (June 22 - July 22)

Lots of young people come across your path today. This may mean you are lecturing, teaching or speaking about your work. This is a time for imagination, creativity

Wirgo (Aug. 25 - Sept. 22) You are in a planning mood and are very clear-headed and able to view all the paths. Go ahead and

make those decisions. You can see the road ahead and will make the right choices.

Scorpio (Oct. 23 - Nov. 21) Others could challenge you in some situation that results in opposition and blockage. Not perhaps a good time to try out new things or break away from an old way of working.

Capricoru (Dec. 22 - Jan. 19) Make sure the goals that you set for yourself are realistic, and within reach. Sensitive issues may come to your attention, and if you busy yourself with your own work, you may avoid some difficulties.

Pisces (Feb. 19 - Mar. 20)

You will feel much support from those around you, whatever you want to accomplish. Inner searching and a sense of being vulnerable could tempt you to spend more time on personal matters.

Pockmarked by years of war and stranded by decades of structural neglect, the dome is a stark visual icon, instantly recognizable as an emblem of 1960s-era modernist architecture, a relic of Beirut's bustling past, an object lesson in the city's

tempestuous political history. Khoury plans to liberate the shell of the building from its concrete slabs and brace it with two-meter-wide scaffolding on all sides to hold its ravaged skin intact. As such, the dome will become an entirely different icon, a ruthlessly contemporary building housing an un-precedented hybrid of commercial and cultural life, an attempt to encapsulate the city in

|| The real estate firm has agreed to freeze any sale of the site for 5 years

flux, now and in the present tense, all young, energetic, ad-

venturous and risky. That Solidere - the private real estate company that owns the vast plot on which the dome Khoury to rehabilitate this site

is significant on two fronts. One, it signifies a shift in Solidere's strategy for rebuilding the downtown area, suggesting that cultural initiatives may be creeping up on the company's agenda and that after playing it safe for years Solidere seems willing to take a risk on an architect like Khoury.

Two, it signifies the taming of Khoury himself. Whether one deems him a genius or a charlatan, Khoury has, over the past 10 years, emerged as an architectural force to be reckoned with. Mainly, he has worked outside the establishment on projects that would make other, more uptight architects, blanch. All along, he has been one of Solidere's most unrelenting critics. As much as the dome project represents Solidere's decision to come round to Khoury, it also represents Khoury's decision to come round to Solidere.

Originally designed by ar-chitect Joseph Philippe Karam, the dome was built in 1965 as part of a larger complex of towers and cavernous shopping arcades that was predicted, at the time, to become the largest commercial center in the Middle East. The outbreak of civil war in 1975 dashed all that, and the dome suffered heavy shelling and severe drainage problems.

When the war ended, the dome was pegged as a site for the new Finance Ministry. According to Angus Gavin, head of the urban development division at Solidere, "We had signed a contract with the government. We had the nose of the dome knocked off; the floors below

gutted and built up."
This was in the mid 1990s. When Rafik Hariri's first government came to an end in 1998, the new government tore up the ministry contract, and Solidere lost millions.

In May 2003, Solidere announced that it would tear the structure down. The 6,000square-meter plot - just down from Fouad Chehab Avenue (the ring) and flanking Martyrs Square - is a prime piece of real estate that some estimate to be worth \$40 million, though Gavin says that figure sounds

'a bit high.' Solidere decided that the only way to maximize the site's exploitation factor - how many how much space could be rented out - was to bulldoze the dome and attract a developer willing to erect something new,

grand and totally different. Then in February 2004 Solidere reversed course and commissioned Khoury to devise a rehabilitation plan that would, in effect, save the building from imminent demolition.

Khoury proposed to preserve the shape of the dome and to knock down all the support structures around it. His dense matrix of scaffolding" around the dome will remain as a semi-permanent design element giving the site a paradoxical sense of temporariness. Underneath the dome and across the site, Khoury plans to lay a bold red ground in epoxy paint or asphalt. There will be six floors below ground and raised skylights arranged like an ultra-modern French garden allowing natural light - and public curiosity - to reach down into the first level. A tower that was partially constructed for the Finance Ministry will be gutted, and in that void, Khoury will build another space with a retractable roof a trademark of his work (BO18 and Centrale).

So why Solidere's sudden change of heart? The most obvia vision of the city that is enous reason is financial. At this chaotic, full of life. point in the reconstruction "Beirut is a hyper-contemprocess, downtown Beirut is sat-

use a well-worn cliche, like squeezing blood from a stone. "(The dome) is a big site," admits Gavin, "and it's not likely to find a developer for some time." Another reason is that over the past year Solidere in particular and Beirut in general have become architect-crazy. The roster of internationally renowned architects and designers who have descended upon Beirut for work is extensive and growing - Jean Nouv-el, Philippe Starck, Stephen Holl, Ricardo Bofill, Michael Graves and more. Each of these high-profile architects has seen the dome and told Gavin, "You can't tear this thing down." It's too precious, too odd, too cool,

too much of an icon. "It's almost become overexposed," says Khoury. But whatever the nuance, Solidere has basically capitulated to the architects it's banking on to keep the

urated with big-ticket develop-

ments under way and finding

money for further projects is, to

cranes moving downtown. What's more, the project allows Solidere to capitalize on the reputations of both the site and its chosen architect. Parallel to its official history, the dome has long been used as an alternative cultural venue, inhabited by raves, parties, temporary art exhibitions and experimental theater programs. Young people have claimed it as an underground space of their own, and

|| No one knows just what exactly the space is to be used for

Solidere is not oblivious to that generation's loyalty and purchasing power.

Plus, Khoury has proven himself in precisely this type of think of the post-war, tempo-rary use of buildings (in Beirut), he has an international reputation for doing this," says Gavin. "He's a talented architect to begin with, but he's a real genius at that." Many people within professional and academic circles alike concede that Khoury is talented but maintain that he's dangerous. He believes in

tirely of the moment - messy,

porary city," he says. "It's capitalism beyond the limits of possibility. We have to stop negating this reality. We have to get into the ring otherwise the city will continue to grow. Khoury's main criticism of Solidere has always been that you can't just predict the city in its mature state; you have to consider the temporary points in between, because that's where the real texture of the city exists. It may be more intellectually luscious, more creatively alive and ultimately more true to how Beirut really functions, but it's an uneasy vision to slot into a business plan.

This line of thinking does work well for the dome project, however. No one knows what the site will be used for. The designs have been approved, the requisite permits have been attained and construction is under way. But all Khoury and Gavin can say is that they hope to complete the site in a year and that it will be a mixed-use commercial and cultural center. Both men are involved in brainstorming sessions with potential "cultural operators" who may take on leases in the new space.

It's worth noting that the rehabilitation is temporary, as Solidere has agreed to freeze any sale on the site for five years only. The idea is to get commercial ventures - such as bars and clubs - to subsidize cultural initiatives.

"If you play it right," says Gavin, "you could have the Bilbao effect (in reference to Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum that famously revitalized the economically depressed Basque town in Spain) and be part of a major regeneration program. You need animateurs," he adds, "very trendy people who know how to put things together. If this project is a success, it will establish a need. If it's a huge success, it's going to be kind of unstop-

pable, isn't it?" Does this mean Khoury's emporary rehabilitation could become permanent? Gavin says yes, but then adds quickly with a sidelong glance, "there or in a different location." There's always a curious condition slipped into the language of Solidere.

STAR SCENE

Safir Heliopolitan celebrates 1st anniversary with style

Leila Hatoum Special to The Daily Star

BEIRUT: The Safir He-liopolitan Hotel in Raouche celebrated its first anniversary Wednesday with a grand reception in its Emerald Ballroom, which was filled with white balloons for the occasion.

1,500 VIP invitees from the social and political elite
– such as Tourism Minister
Ali Abdullah, Ali Ballan and Mona Zantout - as well as people in the hotel industry and press were present.

The hotel's three restaurants - The Views, El For-nayo and the Italian Bistro had open kitchens installed in the ballroom for all guests to view and experience the different cuisines they offer.

As a live band played, a huge sculpture of a birthday cake was revealed in the ballroom, surrounded by more balloons. The balloons each contained a gift, rang-ing from weekend stays at Safir Heliopolitan's branch-es throughout the Arab world to complimentary meals and room discounts.

Ali Sulaiman and Chebel Harmouch





Ali Abdullah, Ashraf Ballan and Rita Abi Saad



Lara Kafrouni









Dine with a Star From Monday 5th until Saturday 10th of July Au Fremier has the pleasure to host the "Star Michelin" chef Alain Reix from "Jules Vernes - Eiffel Tower" Presenting an exciting "New French Style Cuisine" daily for lunch and dinner. Cooking classes chaperoned by the chef on Wednesday the 7th and Thursday the 8th of July INTERCONTINENTAL. from 11:00 till 14:00. Gala dinner held on Saturday the 10th of July 2004 Information and reservation Banque de la on 961 1 368 300



The "Nature of Dawn" dance symbolizes the crane

5,000 years of Korean culture set to ravishing choreography Didim Dance Company travels to perform at Casino du Liban

Paul Cochrane Special to The Daily Star

BEIRUT: "Doom, doom, doom thakka, thakka, thakka" went the drums as the Didim Dance Company of Korea performed their "Journey Of A Soul" at the Casino du Liban theater Wednesday night.

Over 1,000 guests were treated to an exceptional display of traditional Korean music and dance from the famed troupe, organized by the Republic of Korea to bring the Lebanese and Korean peoples closer.

"Culture transcends the barriers of geographic distance, touching the heart and soul of the people without the need of a common language," said Korean ambassador Young-sun Kim at the opening of the performance.

Indeed, the show captured the audience with its evocations of a distant past, with a flute playing to the rhythm of three white-hooded women playing stones with large, wooden percussion sticks.

Beneath a huge replica of a cymbal, alternating in color throughout the night, female dancers swirled in bright costumes of embroidered silk, banging drums like musical dervishes. As 10 dancers moved in rapid unison to the edge of the stage, completing the dance,

the audience applauded. The second dance, the "Nature of Dawn," represented the crane, a bird held in high historical and spiritual regard by Koreans, with the dancers dressed in pink silk with tiaras using flower decorated fans. The choreography flowed in perfect coordination, reflecting the pinnacle of 5,000 years of

history and culture. Symbolizing the flowing movements of a crane in flight, the dancers looked like a very elegant Mexican wave - far removed from those currently seen on TV in the Portuguese stadiums for the EuroCup.

In one of the most powerful musical displays, five male drummers played large bass drums, with smaller drums attached at the rims. The music was historically intended to ward off fears and doubts, encouraging life and a strong spirit, and with the thudding boom of the drums reaching a crescendo, the theatre throbbed with a rhythm of life.

The "Morning of the Lotus Flower" dance began to clashing symbols, an immediate evocation of the Far East, just like the lotus flower itself. The 15 female dancers were dressed in shimmering silk with lotus emblems, holding large pink lotus flowers that were used to great effect to represent a field of beautiful movement.

The "Salpuri" dance, performed by a single woman in white with a long red ribbon, was a beautiful folk dance of emotion and spirituality, stemming from Shamanism, the ancient, animistic religion of Asia in which mediation between the visible and spirit worlds is effected by shaman priests.

The final piece, the "Symphony of Drums," involved the whole line-up of 27 players and dancers, playing four types of drum, from large bass drums to smaller numbers. The stage floor was even used to create sound by seven women banging sticks, and the bass drum players moved backwards to allow the women to beat the men's drums.

When the audience thought the show had finished, an electric beat of folkloric, rawara Arabic music played through the sound system, with the players drumming along.