

B018 creator disdains the 'colonial postcard'

Escape 'their interpretations of our culture,' designer tells *Daniel del Castillo*

Cloaked in layers of black and with a constant cigarette, Bernard Khoury is not your typical 30-something, postmodern poser of Beirut's subterranean club scene; rather, he is its impresario and architect.

While Khoury's name may not ring a bell with ultra-chic Beirutis, a simple name certainly will: B018, Khoury's internationally acclaimed design masterpiece which has singlehandedly redefined the concept and rituals of night life in Beirut.

B018 has endowed both Beirut and Khoury with such visibility and mystique that music and the culture of architecture in the city are still reverberating in its wake.

The irony, of course, is that B018 is spatially and temporally an underground club. Its dramatic rise and fall and ultimate resurrection is the stuff of contemporary legends.

The original old-school B018 was nothing more than a bar in the chalet (No. B018) of Najj Jibrán, the prophetic godfather of the scene. Jibrán's 60 square meter chalet in Maameltein evolved into the popular edifice

it is today through devotion and a vision.

"Naji had this great concept of musical therapy sessions and held them in his apartment. They became so popular that people started bringing their friends and their friends to the point where there were upwards of 60 people who came to listen to the music

'Beirut outside the traditional bourgeois aesthetic of Monot Street'

and drink," Khoury recalled.

"The idea was so great that Naji wanted to take it public. He had a lot of guts because the music he played wasn't commercial," Khoury said. "He was the first guy to play music you never thought you would hear in Lebanon."

Taking it public was not exactly the case - as anyone who made the trek to B018's rustic environment will remember. It was located in Sin al-Fil, access-

ible through dirt roads and next to piles of junk - but that was part of the point, to eschew urbanity. And the night the old B018 unceremoniously shut its doors, the creative work for constructing the current configuration of B018 was already under way.

Enter Bernard Khoury. As a denizen of B018 and Jibrán's counter-cultural compatriot, Khoury was ready and eager to lend his architectural training to design, build, and audaciously stamp his stylized irreverence on the place.

Khoury's war fetish returned when a tuggish real estate agent showed him the plot of land in Qarantina. Although the tragic history of the massacre on the site did not draw Khoury to it, he did pay homage through dark funeral idioms which mutate into surreal contradictions of themselves.

It was more than merely his pedigree education at the Rhode Island School of Design and Harvard's School of Architecture that gave Khoury the tools to build his radically interpretive club.

It was also the perverse energy that flowed through a

perceptive child growing up in war-ravaged Beirut.

"The house we lived in when I was a baby was on Clemenceau Street right near the Holiday Inn. During the early years of the war we moved into the Commodore Hotel. I was the only kid there; there were no other families," Khoury said, recalling the primitive electronic games he played with the hotel's resident war correspondents.

"After the Israeli invasion in 1982 - Khoury was 14-years-old at the time - I remember following a French paratrooper who had come to de-mine a part of the Beirut Central District. I was absolutely fascinated. I had developed a fetish for the war. I followed him around collecting debris from offices and buildings," he said. "I got over that fetish in architecture school and saw the danger of estheticizing the war."

Harvard helped Khoury define himself. "It was there when I first dealt with the war as a subject. The installation project I designed and built, Evolving Scars, was about the recuperation of condemned buildings."

"I addressed the impossible postwar moment and looked at taking the leftovers of the city and treating them as ruins," he explained. "It was a case study."

Khoury's post-Harvard era brought him back to Beirut in 1996 where he established his own architectural firm and drew up plans for the postwar boom that everyone waited for, but which never materialized. Because of a variety of Lebanese circumstances, only one of the 16 projects he designed was built during that period, creating an oppressive sense of ennui and resignation for Khoury.

"At the end of 1996 I went back to New York. I felt like abandoning my profession because of frustration," he said. "I came back to Beirut for a vacation in 1997, and just happened to be at the old B018 on its final night when the opportunity (for the new B018) came up. I knew it was right. I thought the pro-

ject would take about six months to complete and then I'd leave again. I even kept a suitcase next to my bed."

As a 32-year-old *wunderkind* and architect for a lost generation, Khoury abhors the plasticization that is infecting Beirut at the bourgeois level.

"There is fascinating potential in Beirut. I love cities that are what they are legitimately, the products of things that happened in specific frames of time."

"Beirut isn't the Paris of the Middle East. We can't make a Rome out of Beirut. For museum cities, there are far more interesting places around than Beirut. I want to believe there is another type of Beirut to be served outside the traditional bourgeois esthetic of Monot Street."

Despite, or perhaps in spite, of the international critical acclaim of Italian, German, Dutch, French, and American architectural journals, Khoury has received scant fanfare in the Lebanese press. B018 has garnered more foreign attention than Solidere but among the Lebanese, Khoury is little more than a widget-maker.

B018's underground beacon has, though, attracted the travel-

Nightclub has garnered more foreign attention than Solidere

ing cognoscenti and resulted in new ventures for Khoury, like a massive 21-building industrial project in Berlin which is entering its final phase of design. The potential for a second B018 somewhere within the Berlin project is a possibility but still years away. In Paris, Khoury is creating an itinerant 38x5 meter river barge which will house a floating concert hall and state-of-the-art recording studio. It will have the ability to cross European rivers and canals to sail from Paris to St. Petersburg.



A former traditional Levantine stone house is being metamorphosed into a modernist wine bar

This year, less than 30 percent of Khoury's projects are Lebanese. There are, however, two projects - both situated along the former Green Line. Each reflects Khoury's obsession with reclamation and the "recuperation" of old buildings.

A former traditional Levantine stone house is currently metamorphosing into a modernist wine bar. Rather than destroy the fading pink and ochre patina of the heavily damaged home, Khoury is applying a permanent wire "skin" mesh to the entire facade in a fusion of continuity and change.

Oversized mechanical cylinders will rotate open and shut to expose the sky. The other project, also on the fringe of Solidere, will be a metallic-looking slightly futuristic Japanese restaurant which will strive to reconcile its form and place in its setting.

"I'm interested in the specificity of events and projects. I can't articulate a manifesto of what Beirut is, it's more complex than that," Khoury said.

"I don't recognize the way our historical heritage is portrayed, I understand that architecture is a just fragment of our culture. I'm sick and tired of the cliché of Beirut."

This cliché, Khoury insisted, is orientalist in nature.

"I welcome the rehabilitation of the Beirut Central District," he said. "The logic looks fine; it's a pristine logic that has been well sold like a good financial project."

"What are missing, though, are aspects of society that are important for Lebanon. They have turned these 1920s-30s era buildings into dollhouses - (originally) they weren't even built by Lebanese," he pointed out. "They were built by foreigners who drew the facades according to their interpretations of our culture."

"I have no problem with that, but after 80 years of this supposed republic, the only reading of this (Lebanese) heritage is a colonial interpretation of a postcard city. And we have fallen into our own trap of trying to fit into a colonial postcard created by others."

Khoury's rabble-rouser instincts have led to a markedly different esthetic than the dominant "sweetened version" he sees all around the city.

"I try to make the train derail," he said simply. "Challenging this (convention) begins by accepting the culture you are in and revisiting everyday events with a serious interest. We need to evacuate this clean, polished image because we aren't living in a clean polished society. There is no point in pushing this. I don't believe these (conventional) projects will cast a shadow over the city; there is too much potential here."



Bernard Khoury: "I try to make the train derail"



B018 at Qarantina, where dark funeral idioms mutate into surreal contradictions of themselves

Different paths, contrasting styles - same commitment to news

In the fourth part of a series on women in the media, Lara Sukhtian talks to LBC's May Chidiac and Future Television's Najwa Kasem, two of the most recognizable faces on Lebanese television

May Chidiac and Najwa Kasem have both made it in the competitive domain of television news. Anchors at LBC and Future Television, respectively, both are graduates of the Lebanese University.

But their motivations and reasons for where they are today are worlds apart.

"I always wanted to be on television," says Chidiac, sitting in her modest Gemaizeh apartment zapping from one news channel to another. "As a child, I used to watch the news anchors and imitate them all the time wishing I could be in their shoes."

Chidiac graduated with a degree in journalism in 1984 and got a job at Voice of Lebanon radio station immediately after. Just one year later, in 1985, she returned to her first love when she began at the

Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation as a reporter and news anchor. Fifteen years later she is still with LBC and is one of the most recognizable faces on Lebanese television.

"In the beginning it was frustrating," she says, "because the war restricted our movement as reporters."

It was her undying curiosity and dynamism that kept her going while her love for the profession continued to grow.

"Everyday there's something new," she says, with the look of someone who is unquestionably excited about her work. "It never gets boring and that's what's kept me going all these years."

Today Chidiac is a busy woman with a news anchor position and a regular morning show at LBC, as well as a weekly teaching job at Notre Dame University. But although she loves her work, she does have her regrets. In her late 30s, she would like to be married and start a family.

"Many times, men have asked me to leave my job or they wouldn't marry me," says Chidiac. "I realize things have changed and society is more accepting of career women but unfortunately we still have a long way to go."

Among her other complaints, Chidiac believes that while "it's necessary to be capable and intelligent to achieve seniority, it's not enough."

For Najwa Kasem, the path was not nearly as deliberate. Becoming a journalist was not a childhood obsession but rather, she entered the profession by chance.

She had originally decided to study architecture but during her last year at university, she became restless.

"There was no excitement in architecture," Kasem says as she lights a cigarette in the green room at Future Television. "Everyday was the same thing."

During her last year of architecture, she took a temporary job with New TV.

"My mother had always encouraged me to enter the

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field of journalism," she says. "So I took the job to see what it was like."

As it turned out, she loved it. Now 32, Kasem has been at Future for eight years.

A longtime fan of politics, she was an active student during university, joining the volunteers of the Lebanese Civil Defense and took part in many anti-war events.

"I guess since the (1982) invasion, my heart was never really into architecture," she says, "but rather in politics, people, and places. I just didn't realize it until a few years later."

"I was only 14 years old but the invasion changed my life forever," she says, as she recounted the images of Israeli tanks rolling through the streets of Beirut.

"The simple life quickly ended, reality kicked in and my curiosity flourished."

She believes the war helped her career as a journalist.

"Because of the never-ending events that took place in a period of about 15 years, I feel I have a deep understanding of my people, my culture, and the politics of my country. And all these are necessary sources of knowledge for success in Lebanese journalism."

Another quality which has helped her to become an objective journalist is her knowledge of the different religious sects in Lebanon.

"I was taught to respect other people's views, cultures, and religions," says Kasem, who was raised in a non-sectarian home. Although Kasem believes in

the important role women in the media play, like Chidiac she acknowledges the difficulty of a full-time career and a family.

"Women with careers in journalism need a man with patience and an open mind," says Kasem, who is also not married. "But most importantly, starting a family requires complete dedication which, when the time is right, I will give."

For now though, her career takes priority.

Chidiac and Kasem also agree about the continuous pressure on looks and weight.

"At some point, you become a prisoner of your physical appearance, always making sure not to leave the house without being made-up," says Kasem, sitting comfortably in jeans, a shirt, and no make-up.

"But with experience and personal growth you learn quickly that your looks are nothing to obsess over."

Kasem and Chidiac laugh at old tapes of themselves.

"I see how I used to dress and all the make-up on my face and I can't believe it was me," says Kasem laughing. "I like my down-to-earth, serious news look much better," she says.



Najwa Kasem: "pure chance"



Chidiac: "childhood dream"

"But all good things must come to an end," said Chidiac, grabbing a piece of chocolate.

"And when my time is up, I will walk away peacefully with no regrets."

For Kasem, however, age has nothing to do with it.

"As long as my audience trusts me, the television screen accepts me, and I'm doing my

work, I will continue to be an anchor and a journalist. Anyway, I think the audience feels more comfortable with older journalists because of experience," she says.

"This is a serious business and as long as we can get the story to the public in a comprehensive manner, then we're doing our job, and we're doing it well."



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