

ARCHITECTS OF CHANGE

An urban legend

– For **BERNARD KHOURY**, sustainability is not at all what the mainstream perceives of it.

Words by M.M.

Photographs courtesy of DWS

I arrive 20 minutes before the interview – me the religiously tardy. I am trying my hardest to leave a good impression. As I make my way to the sprawling studio of architect Bernard Khoury in a former warehouse near Beirut's port, I realize my hands are sweating, and I instantly berate myself for my choice of shoes.

He greets me fully garbed in his trademark black. His office is very sparsely adorned. There are some pencil scratches on the wall. Sitting across from me is the bad boy of architecture, the Lebanese Ian Schrager – some of the Western labels attached to Bernard Khoury. Seeking to describe Bernard Khoury in a few reductive or phantasmal terms is the very thing this man loathes.

He hates, for instance, the sensational and romantic representation by the West of the capital Beirut, which creates an oversimplified fabrication of history. He hates how his BO18 project, an underground nightclub on the site of a 1976 massacre in Beirut, has been “over-exaggerated” by the West. “Some of the stories I read about this project have got to do with the fantasies the West has regarding the war and our history in general,” he says of the 1998 venture. “We should look at BO18 as a project of the present, a project very much alive and we should stop fantasizing about its macabre aura otherwise we wouldn't get anywhere in Beirut.”

He also hates it that all buildings look the same in the capital. **“It is a continuous interpretation of bad building laws. American corporate machines build blindly these big buildings and they became the benchmark or model in Beirut,”** he told a crowd at Arizona State University, Phoenix in 2009. **Much of Khoury's work is a reaction to war and urban space. Among them, the way Lebanese society dealt with memories of the war. His entertainment projects in Beirut** – Yabani on the former demarcation line, Centrale restaurant at the edge of the Central District, as well as BO18 in the Quarantine – are about recognizing and confronting different social realities, he says.

“Architects shouldn't think of their work as representations of the city, instead, they should be real players in the city. City planners think of the city through morphological terms, I think of a city as experiences,” Khoury pointed out at a 2008 seminar on sustainability in Melbourne. The Harvard graduate spoke of his theory of **“Evolving Scars,” a sustainable concept of rehabilitating buildings by displaying traces of war and putting them to new uses, instead of tearing them down and denying their past.** When he returned home in 1993, he believed he “could be one of the many soldiers in the collective reconstruction efforts to rebuild our cities.” He was wrong, as he would soon realize. Having given up on institutions “because they simply don't exist,” Khoury concentrates on the private sector. “Cities are built by the private sector through projects that are primarily driven by financial profit,” according to him.

Khoury is not an advocate of a particular school. He is a school. But knowing his dislike of institutions and “isms,” I am sure he would disapprove of that description when he reads this.

Throughout the 25-minute conversation, Khoury does not put his cigar down. He either fiddles with it or smokes it. He speaks in a low tone and does not like to be interrupted. This is not going to be easy, I think to myself.

BEYOND—You have lamented that your Evolving Scars theory remained on paper. What were the difficulties in applying it?

BERNARD KHOURY—It wasn't a project that was meant to be literally built. This was an experiment done in reaction to events taking place on the ground. The possibility of the existence of this project is the result of the possibility of formulating our own history, something I raised back in 1991 and the question still applies today. We've been through decades of denial after the (1989) Taif Accord and the so-called postwar period. There are many things expected in the postwar situation that take





time but should happen that never happened in Lebanon. Our history stops in 1975 in our history books. We're still incapable of understanding our own history. In the absence of a consensual history, there is no real construction of a nation. In my opinion, the war didn't stop. It has been dangerously simplified. Obviously, the core issues are still there.

B—But there are efforts right now not to wipe away history, such as the renovation of the Barakat Building in Sodeco.

BK—I'm not very familiar with what will happen with this particular project, but I am also a bit skeptical about fetishizing the leftover traces of the war. That will be dangerously sensational. BO18 fell in that register. This is why I stress the fact that BO18 was not meant as a war memorial of any sort. Evolving Scars was not a project through which I tried to fetishize the ruins. This experiment ended up erasing the ruins. It was an important process. We get attached sometimes to physical and very obvious traces. I'm not one to turn a ruin into a postcard.

B—We've been hearing a lot about efforts to erect sustainable buildings. What do you make of that?

BK—I've given up on institutional efforts and projects in this part of the world in particular. I am concentrating my efforts on building and operating in the private sector through programs and commissions that are not necessarily serious to start with but I try to take them very seriously. In my initial years of building, I worked for the entertainment sector and other types of commercial ventures in Lebanon. I want to believe that these projects have a political charge. And in fact this is where things happen, not in the exceptional projects that try to promote or are the result of a political agenda. These projects are usually very consensual. I don't see any consensus left in here. So I work outside these variables.

B—Are you frustrated with the situation here?

BK—I don't think I'm frustrated. I think I've learned to operate on another territory. Here is very different from working in the West or other more stable climates. I think I'm faced with very pertinent and interesting situations through the projects we've been working on, and I'm not complaining. I think I've just developed a plan B.

B—You're quite established abroad and yet you choose to stay here. Why is that?

BK—Because I think that what I'm dealing with here is far more relevant than what I see my colleagues worry about in other more stable environments. Things are really happening here. It's not a sweet story, but...

B—How would you define urban planning in Lebanon?

BK—None. There isn't any.

B—Do you think the right laws for that will be passed one of these days?

BK—I think it is already very late for that. The territory has been ravished. And the question is really not our practice of



urban planning. It is the absence of institutions, not the lack of involvement. I try to do my part in the modest tasks I'm given. I try to act responsibly whenever the situation allows.

B—Minister of Culture (Salim Wardy) promised to take measures to preserve old homes. Do you think anything will come of that?

BK—I wish him good luck with that. I think implementing the mechanisms required to do that is quite a tough challenge. There are modals for that around the globe. In most so-called historical sites or neighborhoods or old constructions in Beirut, if one is allowed to build only 5000 square meters on his/her plot, he/she is bound at some point to sacrifice the structure, sell the land, or develop it to its fullest extent. It's not the owners of the plot that we should look at here. It is the lack of mechanism to compensate them.

What is typically done in other cities is giving the plot owners ways to sell the remaining non-built surfaces on their plot to another location. So if they have another 3000 square meters they are allowed to build on, this surface's value is estimated and they can sell it to another sector. But in order to implement mechanisms like that, you need serious, clean administrations, which is not the case here at all.

B—Sustainable architecture is a very hot issue at the moment. How would you define it?

BK—I think talking about sustainability and a green ecological and sustainable construction is in most cases a big lie behind which everybody is hiding. So when you've got nothing to say you say that you're ecological; when my work is not pertinent, a good way to hide behind the lack of pertinence of my work is to say, I'm going green or I'm LEED-certified. I'm very skeptical about this big alibi behind which everybody is now hiding. It is very funny to see very unsustainable buildings on many fronts that comply with the construction industry's standards and also comply with certain certifications being marketed right now, because it is really turning into a marketing lie. They build buildings that won't last 20 years. They use all sorts of bogus materials that are imported from the other end of the planet to wreck these buildings – buildings that are planned with absolutely no care of their sun exposure, shading, ventilation... They are basically Anglo-Saxon models not adapted with our territory. Yet they comply with certain certifications and pretend to be green/sustainable. So they go out and spend money on labels that comply with literally toxic standards of construction.

It is very funny to see that buildings that used to be built 40 or 50 years before or buildings that our fathers or grandfathers used to build are far more sustainable than the labeled buildings they are trying to sell us today. In fact to understand sustainability, we should just look at some decades-old

traditional models of construction. Obviously, the further you go back in time, the more you realize that whatever was built here was built according to very basic climate issues... look at everything that was built prior to the 1940s and 1950s. They were naturally ventilated, the staircases were outdoors...

But, look at the so-called sustainable buildings of today. You get out of the elevator at noon in the summer and you have to turn on the light. And you have dark corridors and deep slabs that are poorly ventilated. The overwhelming majority of those who tell you they're building green or ecological are architects who have nothing to say. It is the argument to hide behind these days, to mask architecture void of anything whatsoever but fulfills the strange standards of the industry that have polluted our profession. People look for labels simply because they have nothing else to say. I'll say to those look at the basic recipes that our grandfathers used and then we'll talk about sustainability.

B—But your projects are done with an environmental conscience, and it says so on your Website.

BK—I say it very discreetly because it is not the main argument behind my work. But yes my projects try to take full advantage of the extra surfaces that the law gives us such as balconies. Balconies are natural extensions of our interior. Most of my residential projects circulate around outdoor space, which is very complementary to the interior. Most care is given to natural

ventilation, to natural light coming in... we never build deep slabs. We don't resort to the easy add-on extras that this industry imposes on you. We sell our projects as concepts and I strongly believe that the concept is the core issue in the project, not necessarily the material used. I don't build particularly expensive projects so I guess I'm also sustainable in that area. I'm also very active with the local craftsmen. I also avoid making use of universal construction standards but I try to invite certain practices that are very typical to our part of the world – that does not imply the fake arch or the very thin layer of stone that is added to a façade to make it look local or any of the bogus postcard associations to the supposed regional architecture. I don't believe in that.

B—Last question. What's in the pipeline?

BK—We are working on over 20 projects right now on various scales. In Beirut, the majority of what we're doing is residential at this point. We work mainly with developers of my generation; they are people who believe there is a room for other typologies of residences. We are at war with the typologies that have been established for the last 40 years, which is pretty much the same thing here and again – the dark core in the center of the building, the blindness that starts at noontime. We're fighting the deep slabs, we're trying to build a product that is more in tune with its natural environment and culture. ✨

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