



creative lives

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Nabil Gholam

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Beirut surfaced in Nabil Gholam’s consciousness as an enticing challenge, a jolt to the imagination. Instead of returning to New York where he’d attended graduate school and joined the international firm of Spanish architect Ricardo Bofill, Nabil resolved in 1993 to set up his own practice in the city of his birth.

He’d passed through Lebanon infrequently since 1976, but the country and the region had a new energy. “The bigger picture drew me here,” he says. Optimism emerging in the wake of the Oslo Accords acted like a cheering crowd whose own enthusiasm – the prospect of peace! – swelled its ranks.

In Lebanon, reconstruction had begun in earnest, and it seemed that the city that ‘will never surrender’ could finally start to heal. “Beirut was not quite ready for drastic changes,” Nabil says, his lively face a mirror of the doggedness that his profession requires and the animated self-assurance that it confers.

He and his then sole confederate discovered that “if you could do something modern, yet respectful of certain rules that composed most of the last century of architecture in Lebanon, and used the materials that made sense here, then you would be contributing to reweaving a completely destroyed fabric.”

Nabil Gholam Architecture and Planning now employs more than 60 people in three offices: Beirut, Barcelona, and, still a toddler, Istanbul. The success of early creations has paved the way for forward-looking designs in ascendant,

such as a “Platinum” tower on Beirut’s marina, a series of distinct Lebanese mansions, and the ultra-luxurious Four Seasons Hotel in Qatar.

One project that won’t be realized – a redesign of Martyrs’ Square – remains noteworthy for the scope and nature of its vision. The Lebanese Civil War razed the central public space, which fell on the fault line of conflict. In their second-prize winning submission to Solidere’s 2004 “Ideas Competition,” Nabil’s team (with landscape architect Vladimir Djurovic and architect Vincent Van Duysen) envisioned restoring much of the square to pedestrians.

Their multi-layered complex’s central fountain holds the famous martyrs’ statue, while perpendicular paths lined with jacaranda trees “link the East and the West through a series of very powerful staples,” Nabil says. Underneath the city’s quickened heartbeat, a vast museum cantilevers over the harbor and explores Lebanon’s history – all of it.

Such a museum would encourage visitors to look back with clear eyes, Nabil explains, “instead of doing what is our greatest specialty, which is to dust the whole bloody thing under the carpet and move on until the next conflict.”

His words carry a hint of the sentiment common among former expatriates. In the ‘90s, many Lebanese living abroad opted to return, propelled in part by their eagerness to share fresh ideas with their fellow citizens on how the country might better itself. Their story is, broadly speaking, about how creativity adapts>



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>when it rams up against its own limits.

Nabil's work in Lebanon has forced him to deal with powerful, potentially conflicting influences: a worldview shaped by and tied to extensive work abroad, his marriage in 1996 to a Catalan artist, and recognition of the resistance to change embedded in the Lebanese system and its people's psyches.

He has reconciled the two by accepting them both as fixed realities in his life and by constantly traveling back and forth between them, forging links along the way – just as he does with Beirut and Barcelona. “I'm lucky that way, because I adapt to it,” he says. It's a strategy that he's been preparing for his entire life.

The son of a banker and one of the country's first female lawyers, Nabil spent his childhood drawing and struggling to satisfy his already insatiable curiosity in his parents' art books.

His adolescence – the early years of the Lebanese Civil War – passed in a blur as the family moved between Beirut and Paris, setting the pattern for Nabil's future. “I did something like five and six back and forths,” he says.

Accepted into the architecture programs of both the American University of Beirut and the École des Beaux-Arts in 1979, Nabil insisted on going to Paris. He simply couldn't imagine his university years elapsing uninterrupted in Beirut.

Nabil traces the inspiration to do architecture to his first trip abroad at age

seven. His parents decided to take him on a one-month tour of Italy after he broke his leg skiing. “My only regret was that I hated any kind of sauce with my spaghetti, and I would always ask for it with butter,” he says. “So, that was another trauma.”

Nabil particularly remembers gazing down at the Roman city of Pompeii, its urban plan exposed so plainly that a child could grasp its innate elegance. The evolving urban plan of New York City held a different appeal. “All I wanted, truthfully, was not to study urban planning but to live in New York.”

Three years at Columbia University put his chosen field in context. “To an urban planner, an architect is just a link in the chain and not the center of the universe as we tend to perceive ourselves on a regular basis,” he says.

In 1986, Nabil agreed to join Bofil's New York office, not at all expecting that he would continue with the firm for seven years and end up in Paris again, directing projects in about 25 countries.

A year into the job, he met his future wife, sculptor and painter Ana Corberó. A trio of her iconic statues – giant Buddha children gazing upwards – stand vigil at the Beirut office's front doors, and her paintings fill Nabil's workspace.

At the edge of Barcelona, the couple and their three children live in a sort of “Medieval compound” that recently served as the set for the Woody Allen film *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*. The film crew toned down the décor, Nabil volunteers.

1 > Foch 94, Beirut Central District
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“It's a bit *more* crazy than what they put there.”

This continent-spanning marriage is a stimulating partnership that accentuates the links between the couple's fields and motivates Nabil to push at the limits of his. “I decided to try and create a certain amount of discomfort... to worry again about that white sheet and all the possibilities that you might be missing by too easily adopting this or that solution,” he says.

Each project starts with an analysis. “You've got to listen to what's there before you talk,” he says. Sometimes, Nabil and his team will spend days camped out on a given site just to register the changing qualities of light.

Their buildings often consist of “layers of skin” that create natural insulation while preserving transparency. The skins also incorporate innovative louvers and screening systems that allow residents finely calibrated control of their exposure to the sun's rays.

“I have little interest in architecture in itself as much as I have interest in how it impacts people and how they interact with it,” Nabil says. He's learned that people often enjoy the technological advantages of modernity, even if they find its appearance alien. It's intriguing, he adds, to try and find “the intersection between their needs and your will.”

One “strikingly modern” structure, the Waqf Foch Office Building, takes on the guise of its historic downtown district. “This one looks very rooted and very respectful, yet when you go inside, there's not a single pillar,” Nabil says. “We get a lot of support and affection for this building by people who work around there, because they find – intuitively, without understanding it completely – that this is a very pertinent solution to that site.”

None of the practice's projects look alike, Nabil says, and that's intentional. Each structure has adapted to unique surroundings, just like a person. It is one of the great joys of the architect, Nabil says, to see a finished building hum with life. ■

2 > Platinum Tower
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