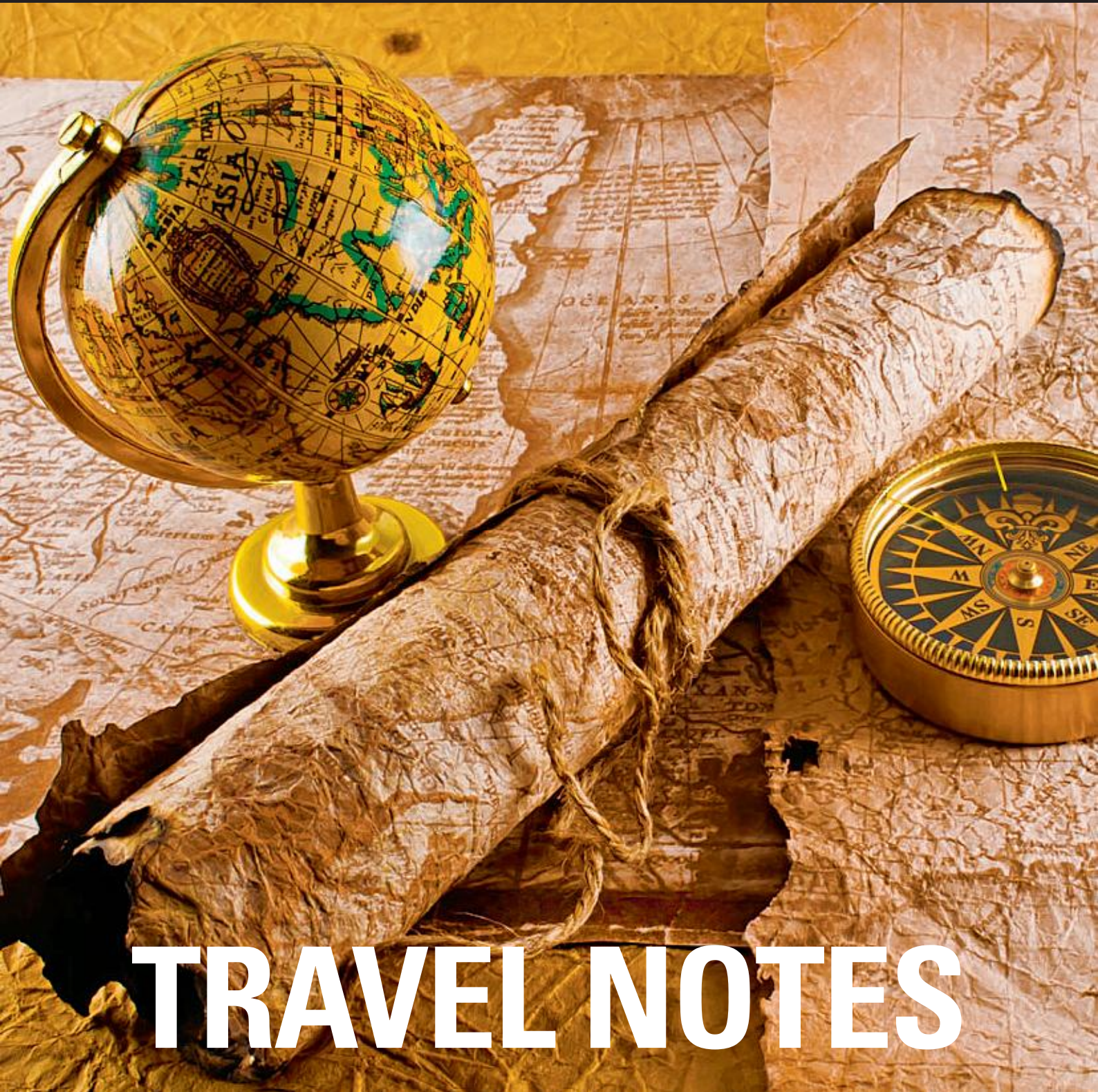


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Papers Dialogues



TRAVEL NOTES

The troubadours of the new century

Lebanese architects represent a forward thinking humanistic current. Often educated in the most famous studios in Europe and the US, they have made the choice to come back to their native land, feeling the urge to contribute to its reconstruction and cultural regeneration.



Nicole Hamouche

He's wearing China blue trousers and a navy blue shirt and is sitting under a blue painting signed by his wife, the Spanish artist Ana Corbero. His office space is a piece of architecture per se, worth the detour. Nabil Gholam is one of those architects who don't dress all in black and who are endlessly gazing at the horizon. His high rise buildings be them on Beirut seafront or in Moscow are attempting a conversation with the clouds, through modern airy platonic volumes. Nabil Gholam Architects are handling big projects in Beirut and across the Mediterranean that nurtures him. This Mare Nostrum is also the source of inspiration, with all the civilizations it has hosted for Galal Mahmoud who specializes in hospitality and leisure and who gets most of his business out of Lebanon. Their understanding of cultural intricacies, of complex and constantly changing environments given where they come from and their takes on identity debates in a world lost in translation and standardization, is what makes them very much solicited across the borders. Youssef Tohme, not even fifty operating out of a very discrete atelier on the hills of Beirut, was awarded the urban planning and designing of the 60 ha Brazza district of the city of Bordeaux in France - he was selected amongst 200 architects in an international tender bid. Beirut is four times smaller than Berlin but it has been experiencing a comparable creative impulse. Post war reconstruction has unleashed the talent of Lebanese architects whose exploration seeks to set a stage for new ways of socialization and communication in a globalized fast moving environment. Fast



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Soffitel Tamuda Bay, Morocco





Frasers Suites,
Riyadh

moving, because of digitalization and new technology but also because of wars and revolutions and the ruptures they bring.

The necessity of survival and of life puts you on a journey. Invariably, all of those Lebanese architects will talk to you about the war even though not always directly; about identities, memory, continuity; about serenity and harmony... Regeneration has made them meditate on an urban civic minded architecture adjusted to a pluralistic society such as the Lebanese one, but also on how to conjugate market dynamics in developing economies with aesthetics and meaning. Hence, Galal Mahmoud Architects is invited to participate in June to Venice Biennale Architecture Fair, the birthplace of some of the most avant-garde trends in architecture. Galal Mahmoud's proposition for this Fair is that of a museum of civilizations, breaking ground in the very symbolic Martyr's Square of Beirut. It addresses the evolving identity and the archeological and cultural layers of a city that speaks so many languages: tradition and modernity, East and West, Roman and Byzantine, war and resilience.

Architecture is "this big book of humanity" wrote Victor Hugo: Galal Mahmoud goes to Venice; iconoclast and reputed Bernard Khoury - known for building a night club on the former site of a refugee camp in Beirut - lectures in New York, in Bangalore, in Lithuania, and so on; and Nabil Gholam confesses he could have been an anthropologist. He has lately published *Eastwest*, a book introduced by the British



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architect Kenneth Frampton and Turkish architectural critic Gokhan Karakus and was asked to sit on the jury of the very prestigious Royal Institute of British Architects for the new Iraqi parliament in Iraq. The "connector's" firm - this is how Gholam is viewed - has grown from an office of two people in 1994 in the aftermath of the war into an international firm of 60 people working on projects in Turkey, in the Gulf, in Spain, and elsewhere; and who is considering at South America in a next stage - the continent draws Gholam's interest - whereby Youssef Tohme, Bordeaux' favorite, curator of its Agora 2014, and designer of the iconic contemporary Campus of Sports of Saint Joseph University in Beirut in partnership with Lebanese firm *109 Architectes*, dreams of New York. Makram El Kadi and Ziad Jamal el Din who have founded L.E.F.T have preceded him there: they have designed the new National Library of Prague, the Jumeirah Cultural Center in Dubai, Home Sweet Homes in New Jersey, and others.

Back and forth, here and there, in a never ending questioning, never ending exploration, each in his way, Lebanese architects could be the troubadours of the new century. Based in Beirut, Gholam, who has studied in Paris and New York and has worked at Boffil in Paris, Spain, on projects all over the globe, with a passage in China, lives in a farm in Carmona, Spain, on the outskirts of Sevilla, where he has also set an office, which he has moved from Barcelona. Against the stream? Not necessarily, but on his own current. That of the ineffable, of the play of light, of a poetic glimpse, that of space. "True luxury is about space not expensive pricing" says the architect, who wants to create space, to make room for people to live their lives rather than put his signature on his buildings. He would rather disappear behind them, for what motivates him are the individuals not the construction.

Sherif Aoun younger, also married to a Spanish lady, Ana Larriu very much attuned to design and the energy of living spaces, has created his own niche: European style small surfaces - by Lebanese standard - two bedrooms, one



Tortuga
Residential
Project, Lebanon

bedroom and even studios as well as duplex lofts characterized by 5.5 meters height in the living room area. Aoun, inspired by his travelling in various cities, has devised a new concept: “small home for big living”, which has more and more aficionados. The “homy” aspect is key to his architecture as he believes that one of the primary needs of a man is to find a refuge. Aoun feels passionate about contributing to creating such refuges and emotion in chaotic yet attaching Beirut and caresses taking his concept abroad.

That is precisely “the difference between architecture and construction; procuring an emotion” says Tohme who has come to be a master in that. His design relies a lot on cantilevers and on tension and suspension: tension towards the horizon, towards nature; suspension between valley and mountain, between interior and exterior, and so on. “The culture of *l’entre deux*” (i.e. in between) provokes interesting, unexpected results” says the architect who reveals he has a particular interest in this “in between” space, in what relates cultures and what dissociates them. He strives to propose another way of looking at things in this “entre deux”: in superlative Dubai for instance, he didn’t go for high rise for the Aajman Tower known also by the name of Zora project; rather, he proposed a seven story complex of suspended villas.

If they don’t mean to make bold, palatable statements about history or politics, Lebanese architects are nevertheless engaged as they do believe that people are also shaped by their environment and that architecture is a space of encounter. Between individuals but also between the

individual and one’s self. Though educated and practicing in Europe and the US in the most famous studios, they had made the choice to come back to their native land after the war as they felt the urge to contribute and to participate to reconstruction. “Public space is a precious place of transformation of the daily life; a place of possibilities” says Youssef Tohme. However, they all deplore the savage urbanization there and could not deploy their urban planning skills there are no public commands were made whatsoever. Instead, they were called elsewhere: Gholam for instance has worked on low income housing in Egypt and in Khobar - but his deep driver is to be able to make a difference in his own country and to improve the lives that need to be, not only the wealthy. Same for Galal Mahmoud who has worked in Morocco on the rehabilitation of the coastal village of Moulay Yaacoub and who envisions the rehabilitation of the Lebanese coast. “200 km, not such a big deal” says Mahmoud. Vast reverie given the country’s status at the moment.

This generation of middle aged Lebanese talents do not represent a school of architecture like Vienna’s - as Beirut’s reconstruction didn’t give room for this - but definitely a forward thinking humanistic current. In the globalized world we live in, their takes on architecture receive a hearing across the borders. They have had to confront themselves to a complex and paradoxical environment such as the Lebanese one, Beirut having been global since ever - given all conquerors and influences - yet having kept its own AND. “I look at buildings as devices,” Khoury says, “as active instruments that allow moments to happen, between people, between an individual and the built context he finds himself in” and that allow a mutually respectful conversation’ between what had gone before, the reality of the present and what lay ahead” dixit Alain de Botton quoted by Khoury. The reconstruction of Beirut has left no choice for them but to reflect on those questions. There is no doubt their imagination still has many gifts to offer. When asked about his flagship projects, Gholam humbly answers: “they are yet to come”. ●

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Nicole Hamouche contributes to several publications of the Lebanese *L’Orient-Le Jour* press group, among them *L’Orient Littéraire*, a monthly literary supplement of *L’Orient-Le Jour*.