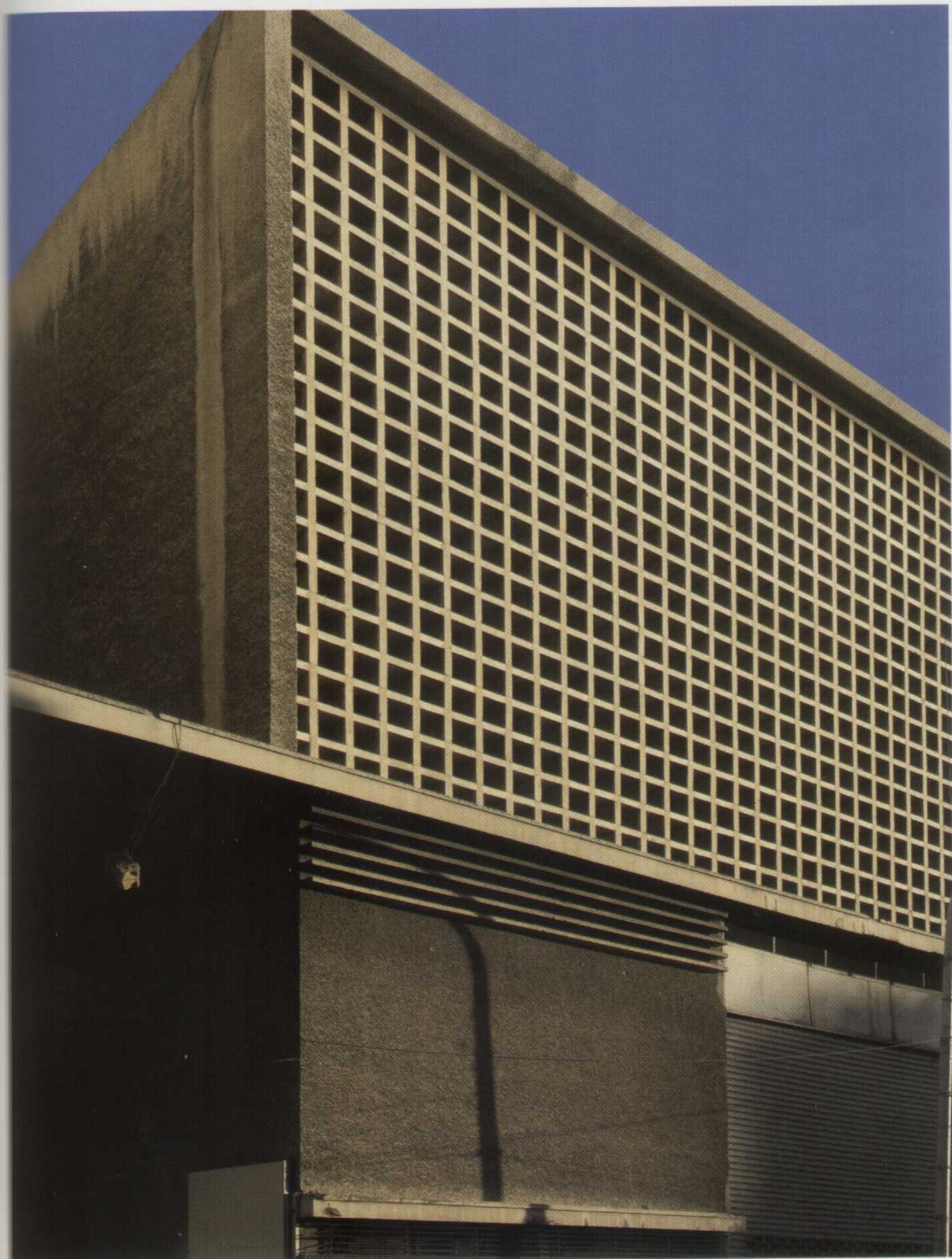


The Central Bank in Hamra

BEIRUT, EXPLORING THE MAN-MADE

Beirut is a hodgepodge of architectural styles, both ancient and modern, from Roman ruins to skyscrapers of glass that glint in the Mediterranean sun. Everyone has their own favorite building in this bustling metropolis, whether an ultra-modern, Manhattan-inspired tower, a French mandate-era building or a recently renovated mid-century structure. But to find out what building the professionals would choose, Aishti Magazine talked to four leading Lebanese architects about their favorite Beirut building. Sounds easy, but for the architects in question, there was a lengthy list, with the number one choice often a compromise.



The electrical substation building in Hamra

Hamra power

Numerous Beirut buildings sprang into Nabil Gholam's mind while pondering the question. "But few really stood out, and certainly none stood alone," he says. Rather than choosing an obvious building, Gholam decided to pick a building that "does its job well" and has stood the test of time. His choice? The unassuming electrical substation building on Lyons street above Hamra, designed by Karl Schayer for Makdessi, Schayer and Adib architects in the '60s.

"It is a small and mostly forgotten utilitarian structure probably saved by its basic service function. It sits well, recessed between two anonymous buildings on a heavy traffic street," Gholam says.

A discreet if not obscure urban slot, Gholam chose the substation due to its economy and modesty, contributing to the streetscape with what he calls a hint of black humor. The mix of '60s urbanity and utilitarian machine-honed looks struck Gholam as the right kind of architectural balance,



The EDL building in Mar Mikhael

symbolizing "at once a smart pertinence and a sense of good fun in a restrained, elegant package."

Brutalist architecture

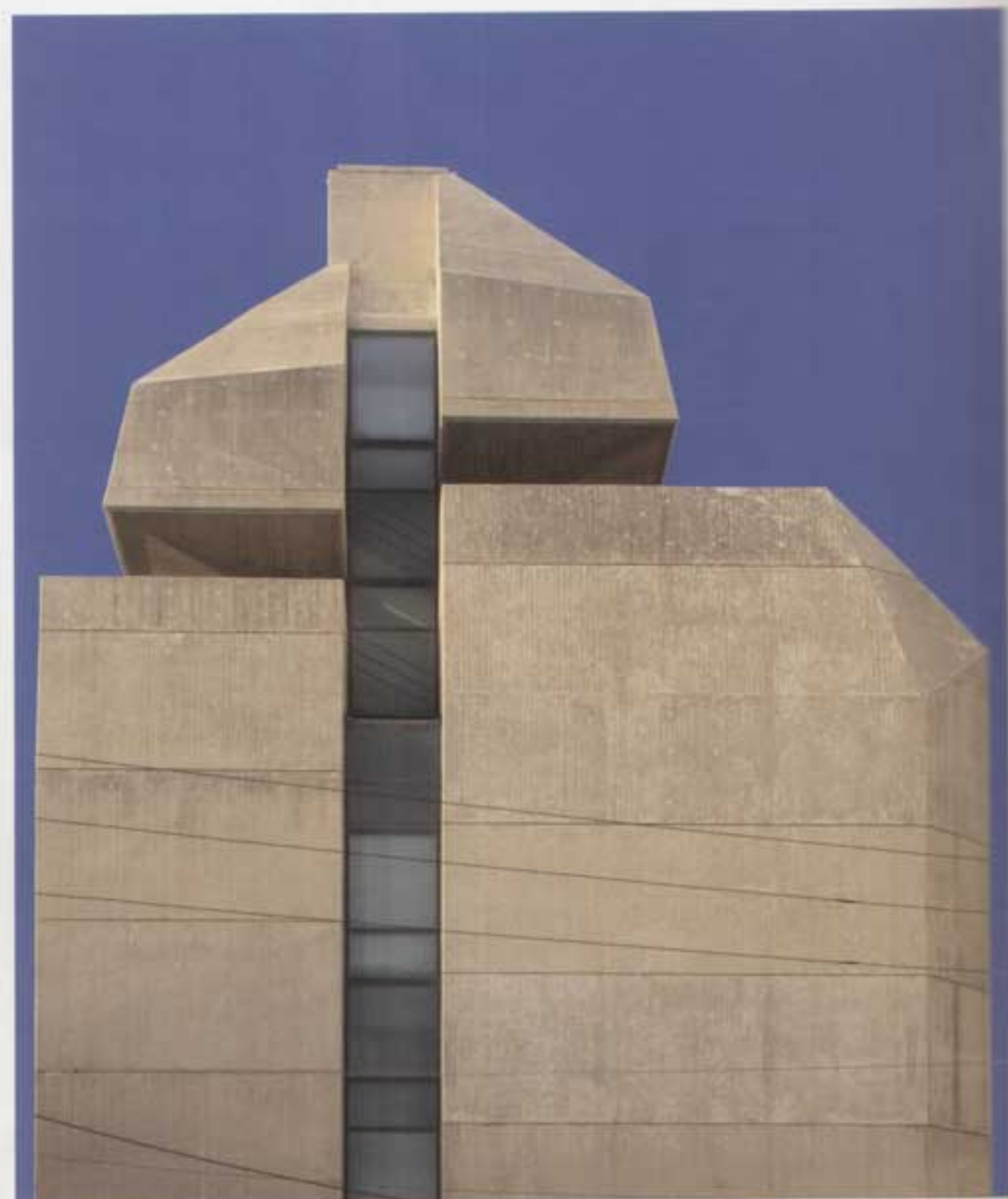
Bernard Khoury was quick off the mark when asked his favorite Beirut building. "The Interdesign Showroom building, Wardieh Square, Hamra, built by my father (Pierre Khoury)," he says. The building has an interesting history, with construction starting in 1974 right before the Lebanese war began, to then grind to a halt a year later. Construction started again in 1983, but was only completed in the late '90s.

"It is a very unique building: it can only be a showroom and nothing else," Khoury says.

As a result, it is the interior of the building where its design really comes to life. With an open floor plan and no partitions, the interior is structured

DESIGN

Wall of fame_beirut buildings



The Interdesign Showroom building in Wards

around a central core with an elevator that has a staircase wrapped around it. "You keep going up, kind of like the Guggenheim, and it is an interesting way up and down. What is interesting is you see platforms above and below, so you see furniture displayed at unusual angles."

The building's exterior is quite different. Made of dark gray concrete, the showroom stands out among Hamra's other buildings, representing what critics would refer to as brutalist architecture. "What I like is that it is not brutal for stylistic reasons. I think it is the most contemporary building from the last three decades."

Show me the money

Most of the buildings Fadlallah Dagher appreciates stem from the '50s and '60s, such as the Shell building in Raouche by Polish architect Carol Schayer (1953). Next up are Ottoman period buildings, "which are very nice, especially when set into large gardens." They are not however a model of what Beirut is today. Dagher chose the Banque du Liban (Central Bank) building in Hamra due to its timeless design. Designed in the '50s and built in the '60s, Dagher says the Central Bank has aged "very well," and can still be considered a contemporary building.

"It is an intelligent design as protected from the sun and is a building that expresses its function very well – it looks like a safe building."

Dagher also likes the building's political symbolism. "It reflects the ambition of a government to build something that is not just for a specific time, while

expressing the optimism of an emerging society. It is a public building that is here to stay."

Beirut is electric

Raed Abillama had several potential favorites, but managed to narrow the selection down to the Electricité du Liban (EDL) building in Mar Mikhael that was designed by Pierre Namee in the mid-'60s.

"The architecture of that era was the highlight of architectural discourse in Lebanon that has gone down since then. There was an understanding that architecture could do anything and go beyond functional aspects," he says.

Abillama explains that back in the '60s the government organized competitions for architects to come up with designs, but such competition is now nonexistent. "It is obvious something is missing with regards to architecture."

The EDL building had to be functional in its nature as a service center, and although the area is now fenced off, it was originally open to the public with a sculpture garden and plaza. "It was originally very welcoming, merging with the sidewalk," says Abillama.

The EDL building, he adds, addresses the pedestrian, creating space around the 12-storey structure. "The south façade is very simply developed with a sun breaker, and the north face is open to the sea. It is a simple building and iconographic of its time."

Paul Cochrane