

Two iconic landmarks in the Gemmayzeh neighbourhood – part of an audacious development project by the architect Bernard Khoury – shown before and after (opposite page) the blast.



Photography Rami Rizk
Interviews Pratyush Sarup
With thanks to Mira Hawa



VOICES OF BEIRUT

In just a few seconds, over 40% of Beirut was destroyed or damaged on August 4th. More than 200 people lost their lives and thousands were injured. Now that the dust has settled, and the slow, arduous work of rebuilding has begun, leading members of the creative community reflect upon the devastating changes that have been wrought upon them and the affirmative action that's needed now



FROM TOP: Saint Antoine de Padoue, Gemmayzeh, 17th August 2020; Gemmayzeh old buildings, 17th August 2020.
OPPOSITE PAGE: The Port of Beirut, 11th August 2020.

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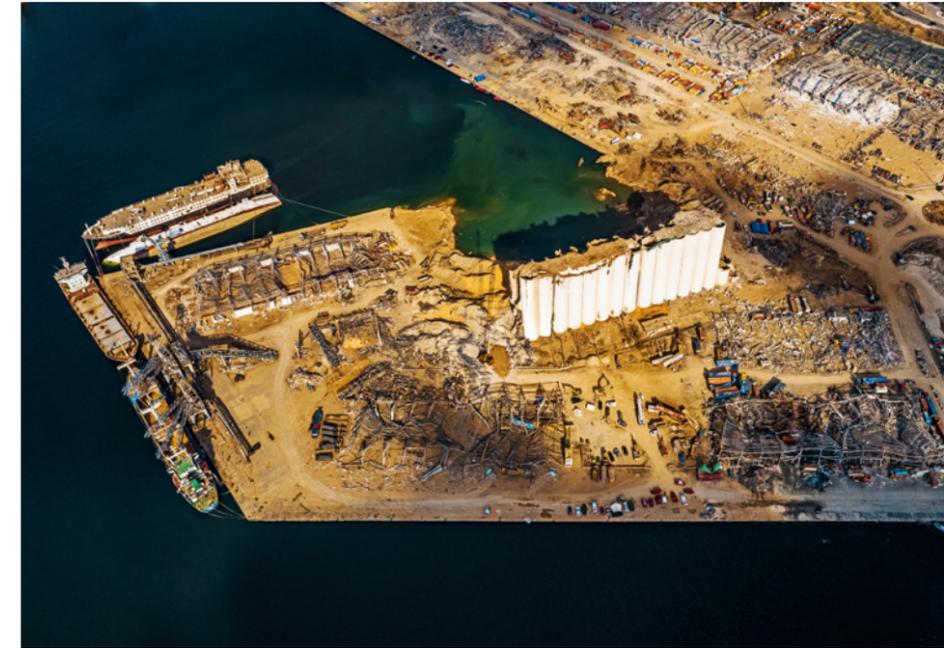
HOTOGRAPHER RAMI RIZK HAS LENSED LEBANON'S URBAN FABRIC – its historic neighbourhoods, soaring new skyline and heritage buildings left to ruin – for years. Like everyone else, nothing could have prepared him for what happened in Beirut on August 4th, when the past and present collapsed with a massive blast that is now listed as the third most powerful in history – right after the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

“The explosion has instilled a different emotion in each and every one of us,” says Rizk. “While some of us felt shocked, others were enraged. However, none of the feelings stood in the way of spreading hope where it is desperately needed.”

Over 200 people lost their lives, 6,000 were injured or mutilated and some 300,000 were displaced. Those who consider themselves lucky not to be physically impacted by the blast were nonetheless emotionally scarred. Beirut's citizens – the broken, the angry, the sad, the mourners – all stood together and demonstrated Lebanese unity once again.

“The main regions affected by the blast were Mar Mkhayel and Gemmayze – the cultural and creative hubs of the capital,” adds Rizk. “Previously, they were prime locations for an active and unstoppable nightlife. Today, they stand broken and empty, and streets which were once filled with people are now covered with the debris of the buildings that were once the cocoon of life and joy.”

Several weeks have passed since the devastating blast that ripped through the city and while every day triggers new emotions, the Beirut people are back on the ground, rebuilding homes, lives and businesses. We spoke to some of the leading names in the Lebanese creative community about how they are coping with the aftermath, but more importantly, to ascertain how we could rebuild Beirut, together.



CARL GERGES, ARCHITECT AND MUSICIAN

We've been living in limbo and maybe that was the charm of Beirut, but what just happened is a huge slap in the face and an alarming wake up call. It has become evident that something drastic has to change. Even if it is going to be very challenging and almost impossible, it's our duty as designers and architects to change the narrative. It's time to break this vicious circle of war and destruction that has become synonymous with Beirut. Resistance is about putting up a fight, even when the odds are stacked against us. I hope people won't sell their properties and leave, and that developers won't destroy our heritage – or what's left of it – with soulless buildings.
Carlgerges.com

KAREN CHEKERDJIAN, FURNITURE DESIGNER

The first two weeks after the blasts I decided to shut down my devastated office. I was so saddened, broken hearted and had no energy to fix anything anymore. Another two weeks passed and I was consumed with the feeling that no-one had the right to force me to do

anything. That we will not leave it to “them”. But who is “them”? The ones who cultivate the culture of death and savagery? I awoke to a loud inner voice: “We will not leave it to them.” This is what is giving me strength to plan the restoration work ahead and carry on, because all we have created and built is ours and ours alone. karenchekerdjian.com

PAUL KALOUSTIAN, ARCHITECT

Undoubtedly, this catastrophe ruptured the appearance of our normality and ripped the fabric of our being. It is traumatic and transformative at the same time. This event will generate creativity and a Herculean force from which something new emerges. Our view was always to have a place in the world but now we have to create a new place in the world. paulkaloustian.com

CAMILLE TARAZI, MAISON TARAZI

Beirut's creative industry is constantly in rebirth and rebuild mode. We only need hope, trust and solidarity from the global community. Our focus is to protect and nurture the historical know-how of Lebanese art and craftsmanship that is more threatened than ever after this tragic disaster. For that, and to preserve our heritage, we need to make sure we can support our artisan communities through these trying times. maisontarazi.com

KARINE FAKHRY, ARCHITECT

A friend of mine asked me a few days ago: "Do you leave someone you love just because they're sick?" I thought of Beirut, my demolished city; I thought of Lebanon, my sick country. I realised the only way it could heal is if we stayed by its side and helped it stand again. So much love, care and support has poured out for the Lebanese people over the past month. Ultimately, we need to rebuild our city by allowing the organic urban fabric that made it so memorable to be stitched back together again.
fararchitects.com

CYNTHIA RAFFOUL, JEWELLERY DESIGNER

My boutique is part of an old traditional Lebanese house in Gemayzeh. Miraculously I wasn't there at 6:08pm or I would not be here today. I heard the blast from 20km away – at first nobody understood what had happened nor could we imagine what was about to unfold. Watching the security camera footage later was like witnessing the destruction all over again. The boutique literally exploded from front to back in a second, with people on the streets injured and lost. It is the hard times that show us who we really are – the beauty of us as people, our ideas, and the unselfish human acts that emerged from this chaos give me faith. cynthiaraffoul.com

STEPHANIE SAYAR & CHARBEL GARIBEH, PRODUCT AND INTERIOR DESIGNERS

In 2018 we moved from our small space in Mar Mikhael to the Gemmayzeh neighbourhood to add a workshop to our studio. We felt very lucky finding a space that has a beautiful Lebanese architectural character. We spend most of our time there working, hosting friends, dancing, laughing, dreaming, creating... Unfortunately, our studio was 600 metres from the epicentre of the blast. It was totally destroyed and we were both severely injured. As we recover from the repercussions of that painful day, what we are asking of both local organisations and the international community is to create new opportunities and collaborations – to promote the work of Lebanese designers. sayargaribeh.com

REEM ABDULGHANI, FASHION DESIGNER

After three years of non-stop hard work, I finally managed to launch my first collection in October 2019. It was just two days before the protests began. Everyone said "What bad timing", but I reminded myself about how far I had come. And here I am, a few months later, finding myself standing in my studio, heartbroken again. As I picked up my hand-embroidered pieces from the rubble of glass and wood, I asked myself: "Should I ask for help, or should I offer help to those who are in much worse situations?" We were able to physically arrange the materialistic stuff, but how can we clean our inner thoughts, how can we forget what happened? In order for us to get back on track, it's important to get mental support more than anything else. We need to have hope again.
reemabdulghani.co

CHERINE MAGRABI TAYEB, FOUNDER, HOUSE OF TODAY

The struggle for the Lebanese creative sector as a whole has been long and arduous already. We need to start by helping them return to basics. Simultaneously, we need to expose their work and message to a wider audience by identifying global opportunities. There is no better – nor more urgent – a time for patrons and the design community to come together to breathe life into the sector in order to keep it alive and to release Lebanese talent and creativity. houseoftoday.com

GHAITH ABI GHANEM AND JAD MELKI, ARCHITECTS

Rebuilding Beirut after the blasts can't just be a physical process. To rebuild the city we need to break free from our safe bubbles to target bigger issues such as the prevalent societal structures and our relationship to the land to establish a new value system that everyone can share and benefit from. This is what will eventually create a more sustainable future with a stronger community that builds each other up.
Ghaithjad.com

RICHARD YASMINE, PRODUCT DESIGNER

I lost a big part of my life and career that day. It is now our duty to keep the situation and the many related issues in the spotlight. Nonetheless, we really need financial support, and, in my opinion, the assistance of the international media will be critical in the next few months. richardyasmine.com

NADA DEBS, PRODUCT DESIGNER

Our spaces are destroyed, we are not. To rebuild our city, its creative culture and the country's design economy, we need platforms that will promote and be able to create a demand for Lebanese products outside our borders. The designers and craftsmen need to be able to sell what we have right now, to have the money to afford us new creative outlets.
nadadebs.com

BERNARD KHOURY, ARCHITECT

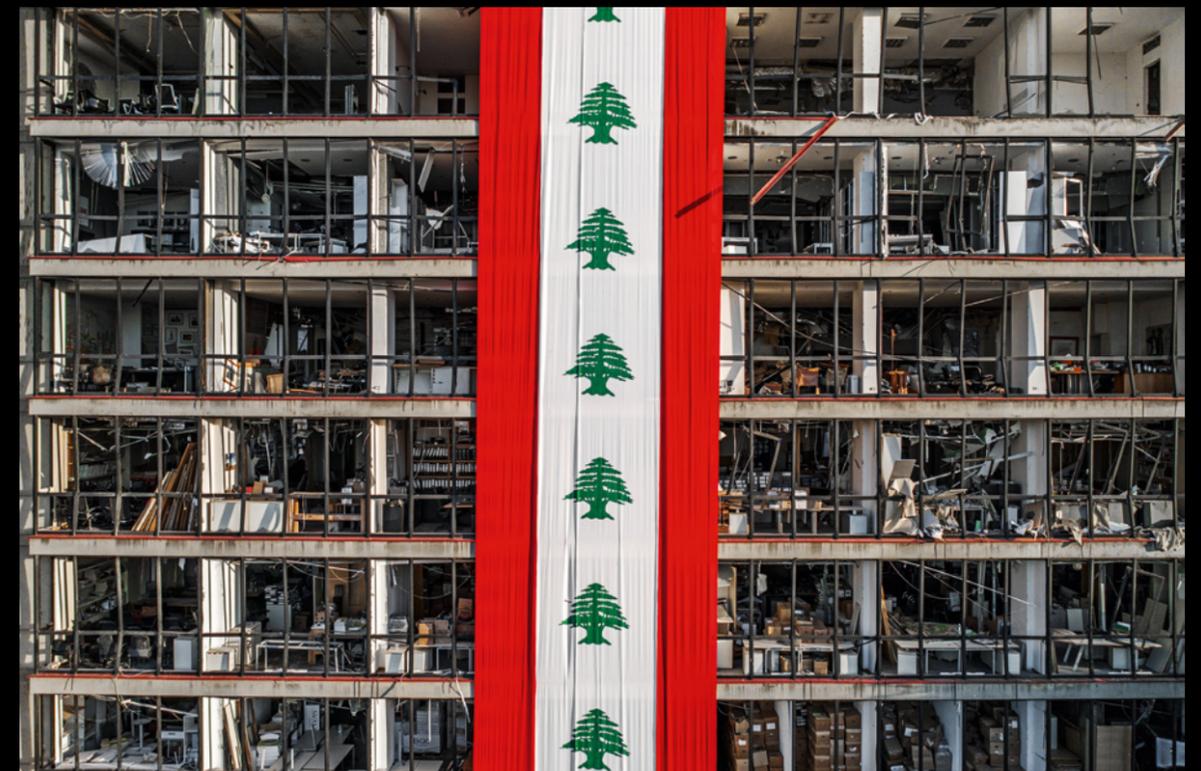
The political system has failed us on all fronts. The current political class needs to be held accountable for the corruption and incompetence that caused the total collapse and financial bankruptcy of our environment. We need to clean out our political system and build a new one. bernardkhoury.com

LINA GHOTMEH, ARCHITECT

We, the creative community, are the beating heart of this city. We need to reclaim our land and make it the real reflection of our energies. We want to reshape our environment with our own hands. Our voices should be the ones to be heard. linaghotmeh.com

ALINE ASMAR D'AMMAN, ARCHITECT

I am choked by how our heritage has suddenly disappeared in dust. Some of these buildings and old houses have gone through decades of war and violence; the Lebanese community has already spent years rebuilding. The global community can also help the local rebuilding efforts by putting forward Lebanese talents and their products to help them regain dignity and gratify their resilience. At this time, we need acts of love more than words of love.
cultureinarchitecture.com



FROM TOP: Mar Mikhael street, 17th August 2020; Pasteur street, Gemmayzeh, 17th August 2020.