



**Left**— Aishti Foundation by David Adjaye houses an art collection by Tony Salamé, and doubles as a luxury retail destination.

**Right**— The Phoenicia emerged on the local landscape as a design that loosened the strict modernism of the time, to more clearly reflect the vernacular.

**Below left**— ‘Plot #4371’ by Bernard Khoury was designed as working-and-living lofts for the city’s creative crowd.

**Below**— Zaha Hadid’s Issam Ferres Institute at the American University of Beirut.



## Beirut, Lebanon

A glorious mix of chaos and creative energy, Beirut exemplifies the improbability of artistic survival against extreme odds. And it won’t be kept down.

A glance across the architectural landscape serves as an insight into the heart of Beirut – full of complexities and contradictions, extravagant, maddeningly sensual, multi-layered and utterly confounding.

Architecturally, politically, artistically and socially, there’s a lot going on in the city. Its constantly evolving skyline has been at the mercy of political power plays and much of its beauty bludgeoned by blunt development. While Beirut’s love affair with architecture and design has stuttered and surged through Lebanon’s strife and calm, it has never abated. On Phoenician and Roman foundations, the Ottoman Empire and French Mandate left distinctive imprints on the city that’s sandwiched between the Mediterranean and the mountains. As did the modernist golden age – a time when Beirut shone as the avant-garde capital of the Arab world.

Examples of architectural ingenuity by Alvar Alto, Victor Gruen, Pierre El Khoury, Jhalil Khoury, Karol Schayer, Jacques Aractingi and Joseph Nassar rose across the city. Some of these marvels still stand – there’s the rigorous geometry of the quake-proof Banque du Liban by Addor & Julliard and the elegant Hôtel Phoenicia by Edward D. Stone, Ferdinand Dagher and Rodolphe Elias. Others wonders have been pummeled by war or replaced by dull predictably. And there’s now a new roll-call of starchitects – Zaha Hadid, David Adjaye, Renzo Piano, Fosters & Partners – making their mark, their signatures on the skyline making for a ritzy read.

The late Hadid’s second contribution to the city is still being built – a compressed Z wrapped in snakeskin-like mesh on the site of the old souks will be a retail and dining destination. Her first is the cantilevered concrete anvil-meets-ziggurat Issam Ferres Institute, which stands surrounded by 20th-century buildings and ancient cypress at the American University, an oasis of green in a city almost stripped of it. For many locals, the building is a jarring contextual anomaly, while her \$60-million-plus Beirut Souks project is a design of intriguing sensual curves.

On the other side of the city at Jal El Dib, David Adjaye combines art and commerce in the Aishti Foundation. A geometric rust-red lattice screen wraps the complex that houses luxury retailer Tony Salamé’s art collection and department store.

Piano’s Beirut History Museum has been in progress since 2015 – it promises an ethereal, permeable and luminous space that will preserve the view to the sea at Martyrs Square.

### Local heroes

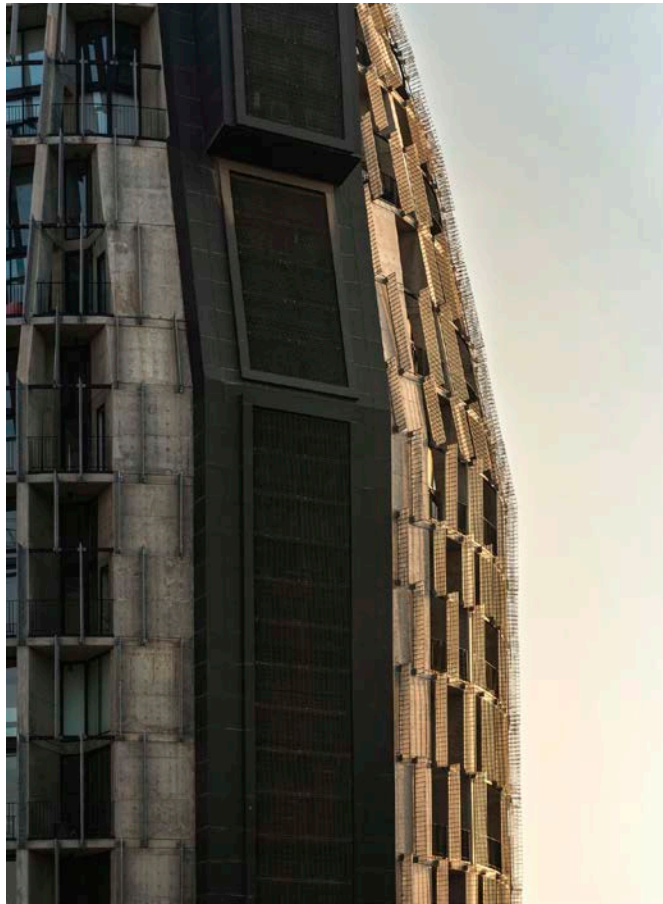
He’s turned a war bunker into a nightclub, designed a residential tower that mimics the shape of a hand grenade, and has a machine gun with a strike through it painted on his studio door. Architect Bernard Khoury sometimes uses the scars of the country’s complicated history in his expression, mocking political stupidity and the futility of war. An outspoken critic, he’s also forthright in his description of Beirut as “extremely ugly”, but “extremely fascinating”.

Khoury’s design pedigree probably helps him weather fallout from his public proclamations. He studied at RISD, has a Masters in Architecture from Harvard, and is the son of ‘Le Corbusier of Lebanon’, Khalil Khoury.

Khoury senior created one of his most daring designs for his own father in upscale Hamra. The Interdesign Showroom is a Brutalist alien presence – part spaceship, part pyramid – it angles concrete blocks with glass slits to access and block light. Construction began in the 1970s but halted during the country’s 15-year civil war – a crane remained onsite throughout the entire period. It was finally finished in 1997.

### 200grs

Rana Haddad and Pascal Hachem are the architects, academics, designers and artists behind 200grs. The architecture comes through in their sculptural and exquisitely crafted furniture and refined design pieces. The art comes through in the micro installations – each beautifully composed and compelling – at their light-filled warehouse studio and workroom in Sin el Fil.



Photography Jo Bates, Alamy, Bahaa Ghoussainy





**Above**— Tables by 200grs, the tops comprising numerous brass rods. London's Victoria & Albert Museum recently acquired the design studio's 'Stuck Stick' series for its permanent collection.

**Left**— Pieces on display at designer Karen Chekerdjian's showroom.

**Below**— Nicolas Moussallem (left) and David Raffoul of David/Nicolas.



As artists – separate to their studio – they came to Wellington in 2017 for a residency at Letting Space, where they created 'Unsettled', an installation prompted by homelessness in the capital – an issue that surprised them given our low population and abundance of space.

Lebanon's own problems have been a driving force behind 200grs (the name references a shop in the old Beirut Souks where goods were paid for by weight). "We started in the spirit of the constraints we have in Lebanon," says Haddad. "I think it's the war that made us like this – it's a way to fight what we've been through, but positively. It's a driver that turns constraints into opportunity – creativity towards something new," she says.

The pair, who lecture in architecture and design, talk of a new wave of emerging talent, partly due to creatives returning to discover what can be achieved in Beirut. "Before it was about art but now is the time for design," says Hachem. [200grs.com](http://200grs.com)

#### David/Nicolas

Since their Milan Design Week breakout in 2014, the international profile of design duo of David Raffoul and Nicolas Moussallem has been on a rapid rise. The multi-disciplinary studio works in retail, hospitality, residential interior and furniture design. They've coined the term 'Retrofuturism' for their aesthetic, a meeting point of historic Oriental geometry and futuristic space travel. You can see their sublimely original interior work at Kaleo, a restaurant in Downtown. They recently toured *Supernova*, an exhibition of their latest designs, in New York and Paris. (You can see it on their website). [davidandnicolas.com](http://davidandnicolas.com)

#### Carwan Gallery

Architects Nicolas Bellavance-Lecompte and Pascale Wakim founded Carwan Gallery in 2010 – the first contemporary gallery of its kind in the Middle East, they say. They've collaborated with Bernard Khoury, India Mahdavi and Michael Anastassiades. And they've shown work by local designers 200grs, Nada Debs ([nadadebs.com](http://nadadebs.com)), Karen Chekerdjian ([karenchekerdjian.com](http://karenchekerdjian.com)) and Marc Baroud ([marcbaroud.com](http://marcbaroud.com)), alongside international designers such as Sabine Marcelis. [carwanguallery.com](http://carwanguallery.com)

#### Joy Mardini Design Gallery

At her gallery in the bar-and-dining district of Gemmayzeh, Joy Mardini exhibits what she calls collectible design. Mardini, who opened her gallery in 2011, has witnessed the recent and rapid growth spurt of contemporary Lebanese design. International recognition has been helped, she says, by the likes of Paris-based furniture and product designer Charles Kalpakian and David/Nicolas. [jmdesigngallery.com](http://jmdesigngallery.com)

**Text** Jo Bates