

Blueprint BEIRUT

LEBANON'S CAPITAL CITY IS FACING ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING DESIGN CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY. MEET THE PEOPLE TRANSFORMING BEIRUT'S URBAN FABRIC

WORDS | MARESA MANARA



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Melki. Over a mug of hot coffee in a cramped café in Beirut's suburb of Hamra, he is excitedly telling me about his plan to put trees on every roof in the city. Melki is looking to change the face of Beirut, and with it, the mentality of people living there.

"It's simple – you put a tree in a pot and place it on the apartment building roof," says Melki, who posts his environmental proposals for the city on his website Studio Invisible. "Ideally it's better to put the tree in the ground, but since we can't do that, we want to put them on the roofs, where they create oxygen. It would have been much better to have decent urban planning in Lebanon. Most empty lots are owned by people who want to build new apartment blocks, not parks."

It is Melki's latest proposal that has everyone talking. "Wonder Forest" is a comprehensive plan to change Beirut's urban fabric via green roof gardens on every apartment block roof in the city. Under Melki's plan, 15,000 of Beirut's apartment blocks will be given four trees and a couple of shrubs to place on their building's concrete roof.

By greening Beirut, Melki wants to improve the city's air quality and raise awareness amongst residents about the environmental

problems facing Lebanon's capital. "We hope in every building there will be two people who will look after the plants," he says. "Roofs in Lebanon are not used so if everybody enjoys the trees, we're also reclaiming a space."

Melki makes a valid point. While the city does not have many public spaces, its residents have long used semi-public spaces, like balconies, to socialise. As part of Beirut's rapid redevelopment, new apartment blocks are being built without balconies – eliminating an important element of traditional Beirut social life. Wonder Forest will turn unused space into a communal place for city dwellers.

Not long after Melki posted his proposal online, he received a call from Lebanese prime minister Najib Mikati. Mikati told Melki he liked the look of Wonder Forest and wanted to make it happen. Then the Ministry of the Environment got in touch – they could help source the trees. The Ministry of Finance and the Interior Ministry are going to offer Beirut residents tax reductions as an incentive to participate.

A quick feasibility study showed the project would not be as expensive as Melki initially thought. "To cover 15,000 buildings with 60,000 trees will cost almost US\$3 million," he says. "That includes maintenance for three

years, and all the marketing and promotion. After that the project should work on its own. It's not that expensive – if the government wanted to open a park they would have to spend at least \$10 million. There are only a few areas in Beirut that feel like a real city – somewhere you can walk around on the sidewalk, where trees are aligned. In other cities, there would be trees."

He gestures outside, where students from the nearby American University of Beirut (AUB) take shelter from the drizzling rain under makeshift tin roofs. The morning's unseasonal downpour has caused the road to flood, and parts of the already cracked footpath have broken away. Professors on their way to lectures dart across between double parked cars and crepe stands. It's a common scene across Beirut's central neighbourhoods.

"Green spaces are becoming less and less in Beirut," says Melki. "Instead of going forward, we're going backward. Putting a tree on the roof is no solution for Beirut. Much more needs to be done, but if people are involved in this, I hope it could lead to a social awakening."

At AUB's Centre for Behavioral Research, professor and sociologist Samir

Khalaf has just finished teaching a third-year lecture and is striding back to his office when I catch up with him in the hallway. He's forgotten our meeting and, it seems, everything I'd explained to him when I arranged our appointment.

"Beirut is a city of anomalies," he eventually says, after conceding to walk across the campus with me. "Lebanese have not put themselves in a self-reflective mode and this is evident in the new architecture which has been hijacked by the corporate world. Their response is to make up for lost time."

As we walk down tree-lined avenues towards sandstone buildings and modern college halls, with views towards the sparkling Mediterranean Sea, I imagine this is similar to what the city looked like in the 1960s. Most importantly, the university grounds are filled with thousands of students – bringing vibrancy and life to beautiful surrounds.

"Change needs to come from within," continues Khalaf. "Beirut is almost a textbook case of the three Fs. You respond to fear by freezing and many Lebanese have frozen. They've also taken flight in their own bubbles. But the third F – how are they fighting? Without people, buildings are simply spaces. I hope

these features become more visible. Lebanon has a beautiful climate and an appealing environment. It's a wonderful place to be."

It's almost the end of the working day at Nabil Gholam Architects, but Gholam won't be leaving for another few hours. As we walk to the door, he tells me about a recent trip to their office in Seville. "I saw an ad in the south of Spain recently," he says. "It was made out of thousands of faces and said: 'Andalusia is its people'. At the end of the day I think what makes Beirut is its people."

On the dusty streets of Jisr el-Wati, I walk from Gholam's contemporary studio, past an empty construction site and back towards my hotel in downtown Beirut.

In just a few days, I've experienced three very different parts of this lively city. From the immaculate district of Solidere, with its glamorous residents and expensive cars, to crowded, vibrant Hamra and the elegant, sprawling AUB campus filled with spirited university students, Beirut is a city still searching for its urban identity. Luckily, it's got some very talented, creative and passionate people who are stepping forward to embrace the challenge. ☺

EXPERIENCE BEIRUT

FOR SLEEPING: LE GRAY

With 87 contemporary, luxury rooms overlooking Martyrs' Square in Beirut, Le Gray is the epitome of Beirut's new design direction. With fabulous interiors and friendly staff, it's no wonder this is the hotel everyone's talking about. Whether you're taking a dip in the rooftop infinity pool, indulging in a massage at PureGray Health Club & Spa, or sipping cocktails at Bar 360, Le Gray is the first choice for the sophisticated traveller.

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FOR EATING: INDIGO ON THE ROOF

With a seasonal menu of freshly-shucked oysters, Atlantic lobster, grilled calamari and a delicious selection of crunchy green salads and warm potatoes, Indigo on the Roof at Le Gray is one of Beirut's culinary hotspots. An impressive wine cellar and a buzzing open kitchen make this the perfect place to catch up with friends over a Lebanese aperitif. Don't miss the valrhona chocolate fondant for dessert.

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FOR A DAY TRIP: BYBLOS

Just an hour-and-a-half from Beirut, a visit to this pretty seaside town is the perfect way to break up your city stay. The ancient port, spectacular ruins and sandy beaches have drawn celebrities to the old Phoenician village for more than fifty years. Stroll through Byblos castle, or spend the afternoon haggling in the old cobblestone souk.

WWW.LEBANON-TOURISM.GOV.LB

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PREVIOUS PAGE: Luxury design hotel Le Gray boasts spectacular views across Beirut. THIS PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Prominent Lebanese architect firm Nabil Gholam Architects designed the five-floor Waqf Foch office building in Solidere; Le Gray's interior is contemporary and full of light; Platinum Tower is sleek 33-floor residential high rise designed by Nabil Gholam Architects. FOLLOWING PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Foch 94 is a seven-floor residential building in Solidere, downtown Beirut; Wonder Forest is Wassim Melki's vision of a greener Beirut.



"The great damage of Beirut's conflict was not in demolition but in construction," says Nabil Gholam, rolling across his studio floor on a swivel chair. "Beirut's environment evolved rapidly. Shifting populations placed tremendous demands upon the city."

I've taken a short taxi ride across town to the Beirut neighbourhood of Jisr el-Wati to the Nabil Gholam Architects office – a cool, contemporary space in a converted warehouse. Lebanese-born Gholam is one of the Middle East's most prominent architects, having designed buildings in Beirut's new central district, Solidere, among many others.

"Architecturally, in the 1960s and 1970s Beirut was lovely," he says. "There were a couple of tall buildings but the city had an almost Venetian profile and was harmonious in terms of height. Post-1990s, Beirut got its fair share of ugliness and that's due to the laws that allow a great concentration of square metres per land plot."

You don't have to be in Beirut for long to realise that Gholam is right. Almost two

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decades of man-made conflict transformed Beirut from one of the world's most architecturally beautiful cities into a haphazard jumble of architectural experiments and unregulated construction. Concrete towers perch precariously beside crumbling Ottoman

palaces, which in turn are dwarfed by modern, glass skyscrapers. Beirut's central district, Solidere, has been rebuilt into a luxury lifestyle area, filled with designer shops – yet many Lebanese can't afford them and shop instead in suburbs like Hamra and Gemmayze.

"In Lebanon it has ironically been places that have been kicked around that have recaptured their vibrancy," says Gholam, who designed the high-rise luxury residential apartment block, Platinum Tower, in downtown Solidere. "Solidere is at the beginning of its life. I had a professor in New York who said 'if it takes a building five years to become alive, add a zero for a neighbourhood'."

"Solidere doesn't have the natural range of incomes like you have in other areas of Beirut, but if you go to New York or London there are also neighbourhoods that are exclusive and expensive," he continues. "This is a place that has been battered by war for several decades. There's a lot of memory erasing. The buildings have changed, the owners have evolved. The trauma will take time to heal but in my opinion it's impossible that it won't come back to life."

While downtown has been rebuilt, the rest of Beirut is facing a unique design challenge. Beirut needs an urban environment that suits the needs of its citizens, while complementing its dazzling landscape. Instead of preserving the remains of traditional Beirut architecture, old houses are being torn down and replaced with skyscrapers.

Gholam believes that the zoning laws that increased the city's floor area ratio are damaging Beirut's cityscape. "Today you can build on any plot of land in the centre of Beirut five times what is on the ground," he says. "In Achrafieh, some plots are large enough and some streets are wide enough to go up forty to fifty floors, which is typical North American scale. The infrastructure of old Beirut means that if these towers were fully inhabited, the city would be even more clogged. All those inhabitants – think of the cars, the water, the sewerage, the electricity. This place was set up for urban planning in the 1960s, when we had six or nine-storey buildings only."

The solution, says Gholam, is good modern architecture that reflects the past without copying it. "Reminders of the past in a direct way don't work. The results are often worse than honest, modern proper solutions," he says. "It's not by making a fake Lebanese house that rises thirty floors with a little roof on top and arches on every floor that you're making anything reminiscent of old Beirut. You've made a much weirder, scarier object."

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"If you have to make a tower and you manage to do something extremely clean

and sculptural that is effervescent and light, you can say you did the best with proper contemporary architecture," he insists. "You can capture some of the environmental values of those old buildings. Sometimes materials help, you can definitely capture the same quality of light, or you can include terraces and planted areas that remind you of the little gardens that used to be on the ground floor. You need to go lateral thinking, second degree."

One person stepping forward with thoughtful, practical, grassroots solutions is architect and urban designer Wassim Melki