

Inside Pier 7

We meet the minds behind one of Beirut's most arresting new landmarks. With Karim Nader, Patrick Mezher and Walid Ghantous of BLANKPAGE Architects.

Words **NATALIE SHOOTER** Photography **HASAN SHABAN**

If you drive down the seaside road of Nahr el Mott, you'll come across a dominating black wall that glimmers like a subtle disco ball with the reflections of the highway. Behind that wall hides a modern day coliseum, an innovative new structure between the sea and the highway. Although Bernard Khoury initially started designing for an early concept of Pier 7 at a different location, BLANKPAGE took on the project in the new location of Nahr el Mott and designed the structure from start to finish. BLANKPAGE is a design studio of three architect partners formed in 2000, who have a growing portfolio of projects from the commercial to the residential. Pier 7 isn't just another nightlife venue – it marks a change in the shape of the city, with a move towards the industrial suburbs.

What first interested you about the project?

Karim: It was a very unique opportunity. The location is unique with the seaside and the industry together in this context. Also this is the beginning of the Beirut nightlife mov-

ing out of Beirut towards the periphery. The transformation of this industrial area into a mixed area with industry and entertainment, something which is comparable to the Meatpacking district in New York.

What were you trying to achieve with the design?

Patrick: First we had this idea of something really centered around the stage and gradually having step seating back in a Roman amphitheatre arena. Second we had another consideration, the context. You're implementing an entertainment program surrounded by a gas station, a mall, a highway and the sea. So how do you transition between these elements? Our proposal was the wall. It plays many roles. It's a buffer between the context and us – privacy and a sound barrier. It somehow talks to the highway – the cars speeding by – it acknowledges it in a very subtle way.

What is the significance of venues such

as Pier 7 moving out of the city to Nahr el Mott? Is this the beginning of a change in the shape of the city?

Karim: Definitely. We see this area transforming into a sort of Meatpacking District. I think it's very positive for Lebanon because it decentralizes the entertainment and spreads out the density beyond the confines of the city.

What challenges did you face building on the site?

Karim: Time [laughs].

What was the time frame of the project?

Karim: It's unbelievable, the project was built in three and a half months. There was just sand and garbage on the site at the beginning of 2011. It was about running against the clock to be able to redesign every one of our details, in order to make them feasible in a very short period of time.

Have you all partied in Pier 7?

All: Yeah.



Left to right Karim Nader, Walid Ghantous and Patrick Mezher in Pier 7



Let the games begin The 21st century amphitheatre



VIP suite It's all about you in these private booths

Patrick: We were there for the opening and one week before for the rehearsals, so we got a preview of dancers' acts.

Karim: There was this bizarre moment when you had the workers and the entertainers together on site. So the situation was really totally strange.

Patrick: For the first time you could interest the common worker in staying after 5pm [laughs].

This issue of TOB is all about treasure hunts. What are your architectural treasures of Beirut?

Karim: In the central district, there is a very interesting building. It's something that up until today I'm surprised people have not

copied. Starco [Centre building] does not have stone, it's clad with white glass and black glass, and I think it's an extremely innovative building.

Walid: I think one very important building is a furniture showroom in Hamra by Khalil Khoury [the Interdesign building]. It's very modern. In fact, it's a concrete sculpture. It's superb.

Patrick: One of my favourite objects – because now it is reduced to the status of an object – is the amphitheatre near Martyrs' Square [The Dome]. It's going to be demolished eventually. It was a shopping or office complex. Many attempts have been made to integrate it with something new, but this is how real estate moves.

Patrick: It's really unnatural. Countries are dying to have some cultural heritage, here we have it and we're giving it away due to corruption. After the 90s, 2000 buildings were declared good for preservation and now they're reduced to 100, maybe less. It's all based on corruption and greed. Beirut is losing its soul and denying its past.

So what is the future for Beirut?

Karim: I think there should be a plan for limiting the city so that there is an equilibrium between open space and construction. The trend is going towards less open space, and at a certain point it's going to reach saturation. My proposition is to reduce the amount of possible build-up area so that more open space, public space and green space can be made and so that the city can be rightly balanced.

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Beirut is losing its soul and denying its past

What are your opinions on the shape that Beirut is taking and the destruction of the city's heritage buildings?

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Early inspiration A 3D fantasy sketch by BLANKPAGE



Sunset lobby The dramatic entrance hallway where the sun forever sets