

## BEIRUT: CITY OF DESIGN

What is Beirut's status as a city of design? Once unchallenged as the region's creative powerhouse we ask whilst the lustre remains, what's today's reality?

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In 2010 the Financial Times announced that Beirut was 'back on the map', and that visitors were flocking again to Lebanon'. Reports of the city's renaissance are frequent and easy - if often misguided - fare within the international press. It's true that Beirut's reputation as the Middle East's creative capital has taken a knock over recent years, but its vibrancy - derived from a largely chaotic approach to life - continues undaunted.

One need never look too far down a list of the world's favourite, leading or most influential designers to read a Levantine name. The Lebanese are out there, and they're exceptionally good. What is it about this tiny society that produces creatives of such quality, and what lays ahead for the sector in an increasingly globalized world? We sought views from a cadre of the country's notable design leaders, each with their own angle on the industry, to help gauge the reasons behind Beirut's enduring success.



### The Architect ANASTASIA ELROUSS

Co-Founder, Partner Architect and General Manager at Beirut-based architects [YTAA](#)

Beirut is a wonderful platform for experimentation. We have a system of order - a code of rules and regulations which must be abided by; and living within this we have chaos - something that is both a positive and a negative aspect of the city. As an architect, the relationship between order and chaos is what makes Beirut a platform for experimentation.

You take the system, the order, you study it, you see how it can give you the contextual part - and then you work with it, in between the chaos. It forces you to take one position, a starting point beyond which we have the liberty to experiment. It delivers a positive impact on architecture.

It wasn't always this way. In the past, people systematically followed regulations - even if they felt the rules had no meaning - and they went no further. But back then, the compensation was Beirut itself. At the time, it wasn't crowded. It was a low-rise city with a lot of public spaces and public gardens. These gave rules and regulations their *raison d'être*. Therefore, architects didn't feel the need to use the chaotic or unfinished part of the rules.

It's a systematic chaos that has evolved as a response to the changing system. Those who are succeeding are those who have adapted and, as we know, the Lebanese are highly practiced at adapting. It's the speed of this adaptation that drives the chaos.

## THE INVENTORY RECOMMENDS



### THE DIARIST EVENTS OF NOTE

The city's cultural agenda, curated





### **The Curator** **CHERINE MAGRABI TAYEB**

Founder and Chairwoman, *House of Today*

Many Lebanese feel frustrated at the current political situation here; there is little dialogue between the government and the public. This situation creates a strong desire by people to express their opinions in a manner that can be heard. Design is a useful tool for expression and storytelling, it's not only creative, it requires pragmatism as well.

There is a contemporary style that already exists in a very informal and abstract way. Lebanese design is all about a coming together of inspirations: past and present, traditions and subcultures, vernacular forms with contemporary elements, the contradiction is almost the essence of Lebanese design. Today, we're seeing the formation of concepts that push the boundaries of what we consider to be design, and designers whose work we believe will endure the test of time.

Beirut's magic and curse is that it will always rise and fall. We are now rising in some areas and falling in others... Design is in its ascendance, but not by accident. We have some of the world's most exciting talent here, we also have an influential, international group of creatives who support the industry: writers, philanthropists, architects, gallerists and curators, businesspeople who see the value in the cultural as well as the commercial. The people of Lebanon have vision, and they want to tell their story.



### **The Product Designers** **DAVID RAFFOUL & NICOLAS MOUSSALLEH**

Founders, *david/nicolas design studio*

Today the city has an energy; we have a lot of people here who want to create, to move forward and to be an entrepreneur. But to compare today in terms of design and architecture we would say that in the past there was more intellectuality in the work. Without this intellectualism, we can't say that Beirut is a city of design, Beirut is a city of crafts.

Everyone is doing what they can with what they have. It's a marketed vision more than it is a reality. For us, it is like Spain's *La Movida Madrileña* of the late 70s and early 80s. More style than substance. I think there's a conflict – it's a worldwide trend to be creative – it's encouraged through social media and gives people the feeling that everything is possible. Globally, the 60s were more mature; less self-centred and more human-centred. Today everything is about the ego of the designer.

Globalisation created over-production and over-design. At some point this needs to be addressed. For us, it's about producing quality, not quantity. Globalisation vulgarised the standards of product design, and created something new – art design.

I think we can only call Beirut a city of design when we're able to walk the streets and feel that everyone has a culture of design. For example, walk through Amsterdam and you feel there is an intention to design. Walk in Copenhagen, Stockholm, Milan, Paris and you have this same characteristic. Not yet Beirut.



### **The Architectural Studio** **KARINE FAKHRY AND** **DIANE SAWAYA**

Founders, *FaR Architects*

Before the war, Beirut was a city of tourism. Everything was pretty and we catered towards visitors – the hospitality, the nightlife, the beaches. The war changed all this. There was creativity before, but I think it was centred around very few people. Beirut, before the war, was not a city of design. Fortunately, things are very different today.

During and right after the war, I had a block against Beirut. I cut myself off from its influence and culture. Somehow, I feel that many others in the country did the same. The spirit of creativity was dormant within our generation for many years but latterly, over the past five years or so, we've started to see a new wave of musicians, painters, artists and architects develop, in many cases they're working together. They have a shared love of Beirut, and they're returning to their Arabic roots.

I think for many years our generation was undergoing an identity crisis – we needed to discover ourselves by examining our roots, our language, our culture and our country. Now, after everything we've been through, we've arrived at a place of new confidence.

Until recently, when looking at locally created work, it seemed artists were simply copying from what they'd seen outside of Lebanon. Today though, they're creating something really different. It'll be interesting to look back in 10 – 20 years time and judge just how important this era was for the city.



### **The Graphic Designer** **SANA ASSEH**

*Brand designer, founder of 1/*

Beirut almost overwhelms with its level of creativity. I look around and there are so many people doing wonderful work. Part of the reason for this is our recent history. The civil war and its legacy still influences our country and our people greatly; and I feel that we live in the moment more than other societies. That period instilled within us a compulsion for curiosity and creativity.

I feel that people of my age and older have an urge to create, and to create rapidly – almost to excess. It's meant that everyone's become a designer. Through Beirut Design Week and now Beirut Design Fair, the city has facilitated people's dreams. But generating volume doesn't always equate to generating quality.

Although I fear we're missing out somewhere in terms of quality, eventually through a process of natural design selection and also commercial reality, the best and the most talented rise to the top – they will survive. They will become part of the new cycle for Beirut as a city of design. It's already happening, and we see good young designers enjoying success at home and internationally.

In Beirut, a small city, to design for a niche is possibly the best way forward. I think the future is bright for those who understand the value of learning to work hands-on and have an understanding of production. It's also good to know that, sometimes, producing less is a good thing.

[WHAT WE THINK: Beirut lost a lot of ground, and its inward-focused years were costly on many levels. It recognises the time for navel-gazing is over, and with initiatives such as House of Today, Beirut Design Week and this year's first edition of Beirut Design Fair, design and designers are once again seeing their work at centre stage. The adoption of a global outlook alone will not be enough to transform Beirut in to a city of design - it will take an unlikely seismic shift in the society's mindset to guarantee this - but the continued and determined approach of Beirut's innovative creatives looks set to push Beirut further up the worldwide pecking order]

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