

# Karol Schayer's Mod, Mod World

## Restoring a Beirut apartment building to its midcentury glory

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The Carlton Hotel. The Horseshoe. The Dar el Sayad. Polish architect Karol Schayer left an indelible mark on Beirut. His Modernist buildings, designed and built with his partners over a 24-year period from 1946 to 1970, once dotted—and defined—the Lebanese landscape. Today, with some of Schayer's most popular designs demolished in the name of progress and many others the victims of inconsistent renovations, a group of dedicated residents are working to restore one: the Boulevard.



Karol Schayer's Modernist Boulevard building *Elie Abi Hanna/Minime Production for The Wall Street Journal*



A plaque outside the building - *Elie Abi Hanna/Minime Production for The Wall Street Journal*



Inside Richard Azoury's duplex - *Elie Abi Hanna/Minime Production for The Wall Street Journal*

"It would have been easier to renovate it in today's style, but it was important for us to bring it back as close as possible to its original state," says Richard Azoury, president of the building's homeowners' association.

Before there were countless beachside apartment complexes along Beirut's coastline, the Boulevard stood virtually alone. Built in 1963, when Ramlet el-Baida was a sparsely populated district on the edge of the Lebanese capital, the building has survived wars and invasions. But it has suffered from rusting, bad alterations, quick fixes and old age.

"There have been at least three renovations through the years," says Mr. Azoury, a 58-year-old director of business development at Solidere, a local company in charge of redevelopment. "They've added things that we're now removing, like the ceramic walkway." One of the building's early residents, Mr. Azoury moved into a duplex apartment on the 10th and 11th floors with his parents and sister in 1966. He left in 1976 to study in the U.S., but returned frequently during his decades abroad, finally settling back in the apartment of his youth in 2007.

Today, Mr. Azoury and the homeowners' association's executive committee are working with architect Richard Mitri and architect/professor George Arbid to restore the building to its midcentury glory. (The \$225,000 price tag is being equally divided among all but one of the building's homeowners.) For the past nine months that has meant peeling back the front walkway to reveal the original terrazzo tiles, bringing back the signature green glass and repurposing an old unused 40,000-liter water tank to catch rainwater for drinking. Practical, climate-specific details like these were hallmarks of Karol Schayer's work, which included about 140 buildings throughout Lebanon, his adopted country. Other telltale designs: hollowed-out cement claustra blocks, the compositional play of vertical and horizontal planes and precisely round-angled banisters.



George Arbid, Richard Mitri and Mr. Azoury - *Elie Abi Hanna/Minime Production for The Wall Street Journal*

"Schayer made his mark with the elegance and simplicity of his architecture, the straightforwardness of his layouts, and the common sense and practicality of his design choices," says Mr. Arbid, 52, whose biography "Karol Schayer: A Pole in Beirut" is slated for release this spring.

Schayer had been one of Poland's most prominent architects, designing grand residences and public institutions. In Lebanon, with partners Fritz Gotthelf, Bahij Khuri-Makdisi and Wassek Adib, he created buildings that captured the zeitgeist of the city's golden age—from the Elias Murr building, whose street-level Horseshoe cafe was packed with artists, to the landmark Carlton Hotel, with its vibrant social scene.

The team behind the Boulevard's renovation hope to recapture that Modernist magic. "We wanted to keep the spirit of the building," says Mr. Mitri, the 50-year-old architect.

"We want to maintain the value and history of the building," adds Mr. Azoury, "and set the stage for future renovations."

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