



LIFESTYLE
Beirut, Lebanon

The Eternal Modernist

Architect, educator and thinker, George Arbid is archiving the architecture of a lost era at the newly-opened Arab Center for Architecture

George Arbid sits on the shaded terrace of Otium Gallery, located in West Beirut's sleepy Clemenceau district. Despite being built in the 1930s, the elegant white villa is a picture of modernity, making it the perfect site for the Arab Center for Architecture's (ACA) current exhibition, 'Modern Design and Architecture in the Arab World, The Beginnings of a Project'. It's a celebration of modern urban design in Lebanon using architectural archives, a topic that architect Arbid is particularly passionate about.

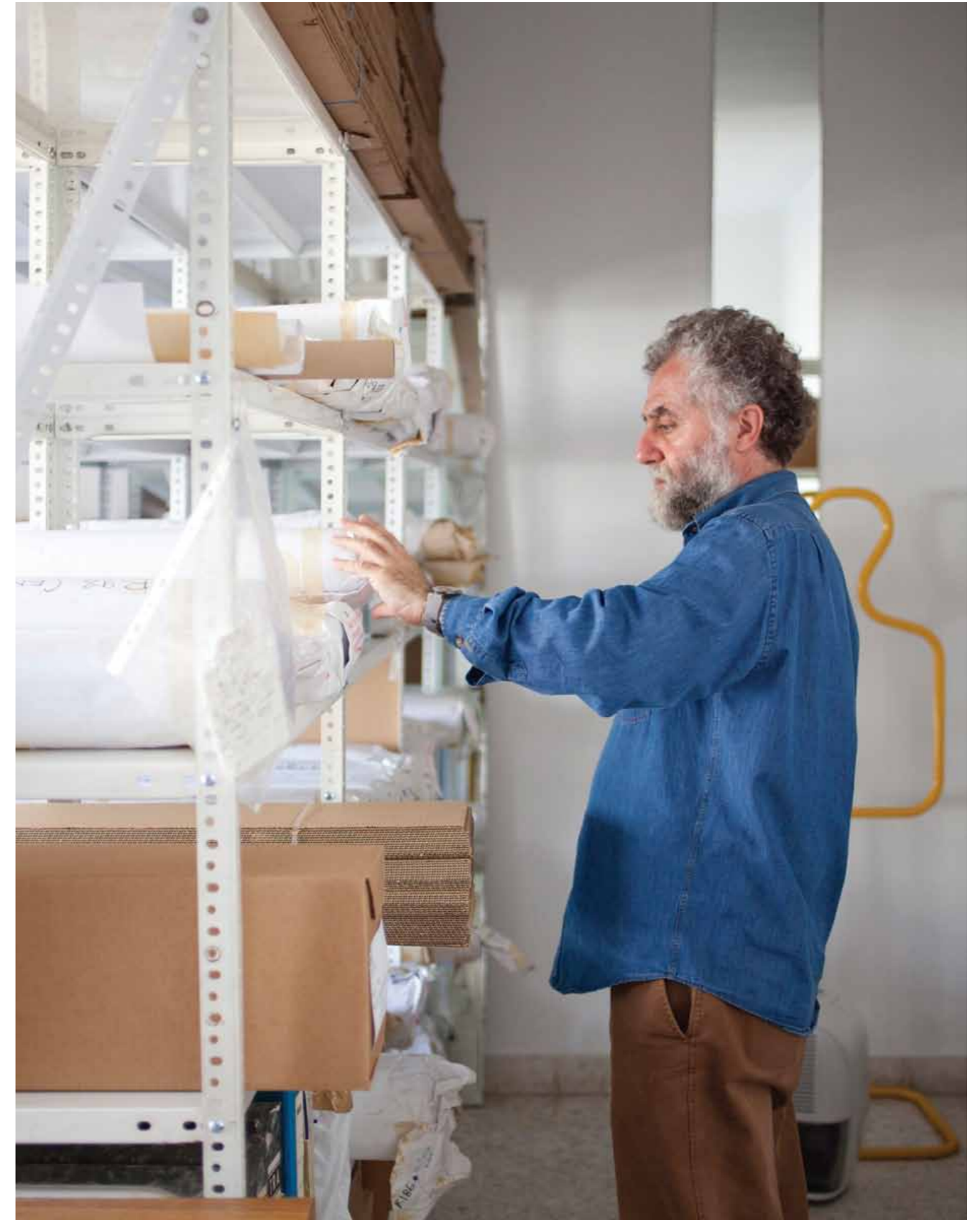
He set up the ACA in 2008, alongside photographer Fouad Elkoury, architects Bernard Khoury, Jad Tabet, Hashim Sarkis and Nada Assi, and urban planner Amira Solh. With a focus on the late 19th and 20th centuries, the ACA collects and preserves photographs, drawings, models and notebooks that deal with modern architecture and urbanism.

The idea of heritage in Lebanon usually only extends to ancient architecture like the Roman ruins of Baalbek's temples or the classic triple-arch red tiled roof of the traditional Lebanese home. Arbid is pushing for an acknowledgment of the importance of the country's modern buildings, such as the towering *Électricité du Liban* headquarters, built in 1965, or the flying saucer-style beach chalet on stilts in Ouzai from 1952. According to Arbid, the region's modern identity is hugely undervalued.

'When you speak of heritage in this part of the world, you straight away start thinking about ancient things. For us it is a politically wrong position because it would mean that modernism is the other and tradition is us,' Arbid says animatedly.

It was when Arbid began working on his doctorate dissertation on modern architecture at Harvard University that he became aware of the lack of importance placed on architectural archives in the Arab world. 'I was constantly frustrated by answers I got from people that I was interviewing, for example the son or daughter of an architect who regretted that I hadn't met them two years earlier because they had just thrown out boxes that were rotting in the attic,' he says. 'The more they would tell me these stories of rats and cockroaches, the more I imagined how great those drawings were and how important they could have been.' The ACA's interests lie not just in the aesthetics of structures, but in how they came to be. 'Once you have the knowledge, if you want to call for the protection of any building you know why you should protect it,' Arbid says, insisting that the project is not about lamenting things of the past.

Despite juggling his time between theory and practice – as a professor in the architecture and design department at the American University of Beirut – Arbid has still found time to give weekly tours around ACA's exhibition. He has a charismatic presence, commanding but down to earth. Arbid pauses in front of original ink drawings of the *Électricité du Liban* headquarters, designed by architects Jacques Aractingi and Pierre Neema among others. At its base was a public walkway, which is now fenced off. 'It survived the war,' Arbid says, 'so it's ridiculous for them to say it's for protection.' He moves on to a black and white picture of 'one of the landmarks of Beirut,' the Carlton Hotel,





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designed by architects Karol Schayer, Bahij Makhisi and Wassek Adib, and demolished a few years back. He has a personal attachment to the building, remembering visits to its swimming pool with his father as a child.

He draws attention to another building designed by Schayer and his partners – the iconic Ilyas Murr Building, more commonly known as the Horseshoe because of the café that used to sit at its base and which served as a meeting spot for Beirut’s left-leaning intellectuals. These buildings don’t only define the aesthetics of Beirut. Architecture is intertwined with the life of the city. ‘Heritage is not only about tabbouleh and Baalbek. Look around you, we are a modern city.’

Arbid’s interest in modernism was triggered at university in the early 1980s. ‘When I studied architecture, books spoke about Western modern architecture as if modernism only concerned one part of the globe,’ he says. Teaching modern architecture and design, he has tried to shift the gaze away from the West, drawing attention to the modernist architecture of the region as something other than an imported concept from the Occidental world.

Arbid speaks of tradition as a series of successive modernisms. ‘What remained as tradition was always the modern solution because it made sense – it was economically viable, it was purposeful,’ he says, ‘it was the modernism of their time.’ In comparison to the rationalist approach of



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modernism, where buildings are more attuned to their environment, playful and creative, Arbid points to a failure in Beirut’s contemporary urban design. ‘I am not a frozen historicist, I am not nostalgic for anything, but definitely the quality of the built environment has changed,’ he says. ‘Now we have streets with fences. Behind those fences you may have the most beautiful gardens but they are fenced and gated and Beirut is not about that.’

As might be expected, as a result of his passion for modernist architecture, known for its common-sense design, Arbid values performance over style. ‘Style is actually the surface of a more complex issue of design. We can say that a building is post-modern, art deco or deconstructionist, but I think that quality architecture is something that brews slowly and comes from the inside rather than from an imposition.’

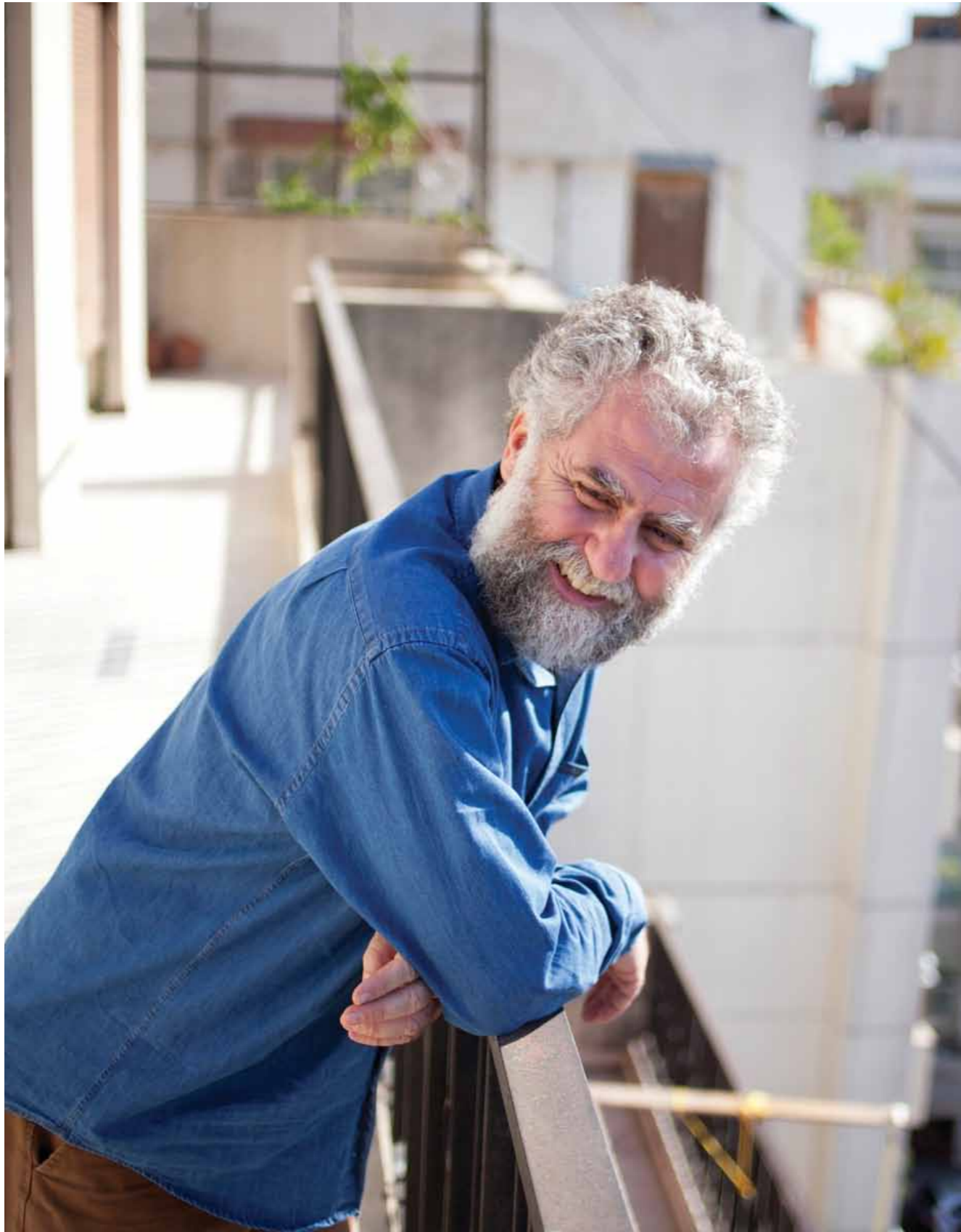
Arbid is a little more allusive when it comes to talking about his own designs. He speaks with modesty and a hint of self-deprecation, describing his own home as a ‘simple old vaulted house in the mountains,’ benefiting from the fact he didn’t add much and ‘ruin it.’ His own architectural designs express a dialogue between tradition and modernity. The Salem Residence in Bttram, Koura, designed with his partner Fadlallah Dagher, features a smooth stone extension that mirrors the shape of the original house, brought together through a glass centre. ‘They are somehow related, you feel the connection between them but they are of a different time,’ Arbid says. The Shabb Residence in Baabda is characterised by its fluid lines of sandstone and large

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Pierre Neema won the competition for the Électricité du Liban in 1966. He drew inspiration from the Brazilian movement in modern architecture

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Ilyas Murr was the first Lebanese engineer to graduate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1905. His designs include the historic Roxy movie theatre in central Beirut



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central glass windows that allow light to pour in. The openness of the clients allowed Arbid and his partner to experiment with the split-level flowing space.

Arbid is perhaps surprisingly a traditionalist when it comes to some of his architectural techniques, preferring to draw by hand. 'I know it could be perceived as backwards somehow, but with all the great things that the advent of computers brought we have to acknowledge the fact that with the transformation of the means of production, the result is altered.' One thing he regrets is the loss of the interaction between engineers and architects, who used to realise projects through real collaboration rather than over email. He also regrets the loss of 'those moments of meditations when the project is slowly brewing in your mind.'

Arbid acknowledges that densification is an unavoidable part of urban development, and he is not interested in lamenting the past when 'all the buildings were low.' His interest lies instead in the adaptive reuse of buildings – a common topic he explores through his teaching and practice. With his students at AUB, he investigated alternative projects to unabashed demolition, proposing for example the adaptive reuse of the Carlton Hotel before it disappeared.

Recently Arbid invited his contemporary, Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury, to collaborate with him on a design studio at AUB, 'The City On Itself.' The studio focused on Lebanon's Zarif area, accepting densification and finding



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ways to develop it with appropriate site specific projects. 'Everybody was worried,' Arbid laughs. 'Bernard is interviewed everywhere, he's doing well with his firm. Will he have time for students? But he was really there all the time. He did a great job.'

Despite the city's mass trend towards design unification, Arbid is hopeful for the future. He has noticed architects beginning to look back on the modernist period of design, 'without fetishistic nostalgia.' He does wish though, for a move away from the 'Frenji Brenji' syndrome in Lebanon, where local design projects in the city's centre are continually commissioned to foreign architects. 'We have a lot of great architects and engineers in the country and more often they're not there actually doing their jobs.'

Back in the Arab Center for Architecture – situated on the seventh floor of a '60s apartment block in Sassine, Achrafieh – Arbid is carefully flicking through a pile of delicate architectural drawings he discovered under rotting carpets in the architectural studio of Karol Schayer and Wassek Adib. He describes the Polish architect, who emigrated to Lebanon during the Second World War, as an avant-gardist – he is the subject of Arbid's forthcoming book 'Karol Schayer, a Pole in Beirut.' Looking through the detailed sketches, watercolours and pastel designs of some of Beirut's most iconic buildings of the 1950s, from the

With funding from the European Union, The Arab Center for Architecture formed the 'Modern Heritage Observatory', which works alongside institutions such as the Arab Image Foundation, and Cinémathèque de Tangier to protect archives across the arts. 'It was extremely important to gather our forces since the idea of these areas as heritage is not widespread,' says Arbid



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Carlton Hotel to the first Spinneys supermarket, the firm's influence on the architectural face of Beirut's past is evident. Most of his buildings were destroyed during the war or demolished, and these drawings show the informational gap that exists in relation to the city's architectural past, and which the ACA is beginning to fill. Arbid must have seen these drawings 1000s of times, but he still looks at them with awe and foresees an exhibition that will follow the publication of the book.

With hopes of becoming a regional institution for architecture in the Arab world, ACA aims to build on its archives and eventually expand. In the meantime Arbid and his colleagues continue to work on advocacy, disseminating the idea of modernist architecture as heritage. Given that many of the 20th century buildings were destroyed during the war, demolished during reconstruction, or altered and disfigured, the documents gathered by the center aim at filling the informational gap that exists in relation to the city's architectural past. Looking out over the urban sprawl below, an almost 360 degree view of Beirut stretching from the sea to the mountains can be enjoyed from the balcony of the Arab Center for Architecture. The architectural diversity of the city is obvious. Hopefully with the work of ACA and architects such as George Arbid this diversity will live on.