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'We could see the bombing from our office window' - Beirut architect Nabil Gholam

DESIGNING THROUGH THE WAR

By Ed Dorrell

Many British practices will be waiting with bated breath to find out about the future of projects planned for Lebanon following the ceasefire in the Israeli-Hezbollah conflict. Ed Dorrell spoke to leading Beirut architect and winner of the 2006 AR/MIPIM Future Projects Award Nabil Gholam to find out about the current state of architecture and construction in Lebanon.

Tell me what it was like to be working in Beirut at the time of the Israeli bombing?

It was possible to see the bombing from the office window, so it was pretty scary for the people who work for me.

Did many people from the practice try to leave the country?

Only four out of 48 staff members left the business over the course of the war,

and that's amazing – especially since a lot of them have dual nationality and could have left if they'd tried. Most people wanted to stay.

How's business in Lebanon now there appears to be a ceasefire?

There has been a question over the willingness of investors to pay invoices. One or two out of 10 clients now say they want to move forward with projects, but very few have put their money where their mouths are.

I take it all projects were on hold when the war was going on?

All construction stopped. Some is restarting now, but because of supply issues there are real problems. Some clients said 'keep designing' because they think they can afford design fees, but affording construction costs is a different question.

What's the state of the architecture and property business, looking to the future?

The market is nothing like what it was three months ago. Some people are relatively bullish now the war appears to be over, but that is very hard to quantify. It seems to be the same in real estate too.

But you must still be OK financially? You have a lot of work outside Lebanon.

About a year ago I took the strategic decision to focus more on the work we were getting in Lebanon. This could now be seen as something of a mistake. However, we do have a lot of foreign friends and clients who are keen to help us out.

So it has been tough?

For two months it was very dry and, as I said, there was an issue

with payments. We were lucky compared to some of our local colleagues because we also have a small office in Barcelona.

Judging by how you sound, there seems to be a flicker of optimism.

There is a very small flicker of optimism – but this is tempered with a large dose of uncertainty – and that is scary for people. There is anxiety for the future – nobody thinks that solving the problems we're facing will be simple.

Thanks for your time, Nabil, and good luck.

Thanks, Ed.