

SPECIAL EDITION 2009



40 Lebanese who make the capital great

Nabil Gholam

Despite his patriotism, Nabil Gholam has learnt from his mistakes and now tries to diversify his portfolio so that he can work abroad as much as he does in Lebanon.

You spent a large part of your life away...

I was born here and left when I was 12. I studied in Paris and New York and came back after 20 years, after getting myself a Masters degree in Architecture and one in Urban Planning. I even spent six years as a partner in an international architecture firm but I had to come back.

To a shock I suppose?

When you leave at 12 your memories are very different, and misleading. Beirut was nothing like I remembered, but I believed there was a difference to be made here, so I set up a small architectural office. I still believe.

That makes sense...

Some of it does. Part of it was emotional and part of it logical. We got our first project soon after and then another and slowly we grew from a small office to our current international size. Our main market has always been Lebanon and we'll always put our hearts into that because we're attached to the country. We specifically refused other projects at one point, feeling it more important to rebuild our own home and while that was a patriotic obsession, the Israeli attack put a high price tag on it.

Are you still based here?

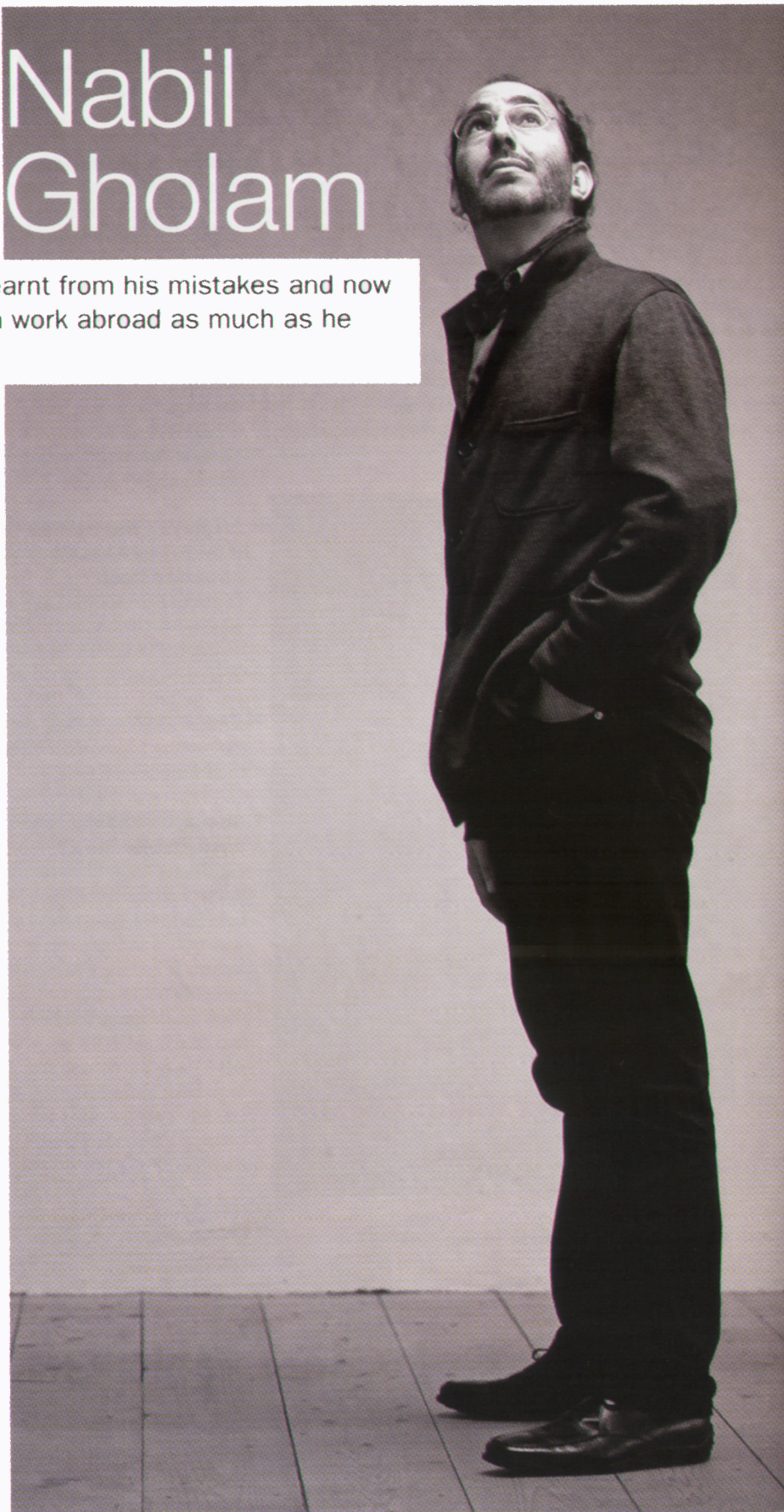
We're half here, half in Spain. We're Lebanese but the Barcelona office has many nationalities and we get a lot of exposure here -- a characteristic of good architecture and the Lebanese. Half in Beirut, half in Spain, that's what we do.

What's the next step for Beirut then?

We need to reform. One thing that can help change our cityscape is an evolution in the regulations -- this would be worth pursuing. There are a few areas worth exploring and there should be a policy of preservation in Lebanon. But there's more awareness in the people as well; the Lebanese learn fast. They're moving quickly from folkloric Disneyland architecture to good architecture. Government or not, continuity would be nice for the country. With enough peace we'd skyrocket. Now we're just ducking blows.

Out with Disneyland, in with...

Beirut will continue to look like an exaggeration of what it is, very lively but not really beautiful. My concern is with the density in some of the neighbourhoods -- Solidere to Achrafieh for instance. These areas were not designed for high-rise



building and you see one after the other pop up in those tiny streets. The traffic and need for additional infrastructure will choke the area, I think, and Gemmayzeh had better watch out. It might be next.

That place just picked up all of a sudden didn't it?

Many neighbourhoods will pick up in the next few years. These possibilities put pressure on the system and there is no mechanism to address this without hurting a person's right to live and profit. This again worries me.

Typical Beirut. Speaking of which, do we have a typical Beirut skyline?

A signature skyline? Beirut doesn't have a fully defined one, no. In the coming years you'll have a good one. You won't have too many high towers to mark it and no characteristic buildings on the hills to make it recognisable. You won't have a St Paul's, a Burj al Arab, or an Empire State Building but Downtown, the Harbour, Solidere and the Marina have a few high-rises and already when you drive around Beirut you see them from some spots. They aren't yet large enough to mark the skyline but maybe that's not a bad thing. In five to eight years, I predict, that will change. You'll have a couple of unique buildings.

Any of them yours?

Well we're working on one but I can't mention it yet. With Solidere there might be a 50-story coming up and it'll be visible from anywhere. If it gets approved it will be a fine addition to the city.

Well, what's your favourite place in Lebanon?

The Cedars is a favourite and the Sporting Club. I have a chalet there next to the water, a beautiful place to stare out. It's difficult to choose but when I'm with my daughter it's an easy choice: Palafel Sahyoun. It's a landmark for us and it changes the map of the Middle East as far as I'm concerned.

Beirut is...

Beirut is a paradox, the paradox. You never know exactly where you stand. The more I travel, the more I feel attached to that funny Beirut. You can be in some other country or continent but then you miss it and you want to be back. You're happy when you're back and that's just what an addiction is. It's the people that make a place, at the end of the day; they're the extraordinary part. I've realised that architecture is a love for people, not buildings.



The simple life
The simple elegance of Gholam's creations has firmly cemented his name amongst the great Lebanese architects.

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