

MOIRA GEMMILL PRIZE SHORTLIST

HUMAN NATURE

A desire to connect with people and the natural world is a driving force behind the work of Lina Ghotmeh, writes *Habib Ballah*



TAKUJI SHIMMURA

(Opening spread) Stone Garden's rippled facade of earth, fused with bonding agents and metal fibres, was created with a large, bespoke steel-shaping tool
(This spread) the art gallery and apartment building rises from the 1950s block like a monolith, but gets lost amid all the new glass high-rises in the neighbourhood



TAKUJI SHIMMURA

An extreme architectural transformation is under way in downtown Beirut. Just two decades ago, the Lebanese capital looked apocalyptic: constellations of bullet holes in nearly every building, shrapnel-splattered facades, squatters and refugees hanging tattered laundry out on the balconies. Now, however, Beirut is home to some of the most expensive real estate in the world.

The city has emerged from the street-shelling violence of its 1975-90 civil war to become a hotbed of Pritzker Prize winners: Foster, Moneo, Piano, Maki, Koolhaas, Nouvel, Herzog, De Meuron and De Portzamparc have all designed one, if not more, unconventionally shaped towers for Beirut. Local starchitects such as Nabil Gholam and Bernard Khoury are similarly inspired, erecting dozens more Modernist shiny structures, hip lofts, shimmering glass office towers – all reaching for the sky in an array of sharp angles.

One problem with this vision for future Beirut (with the exception of a curvaceous luxury department store designed by Zaha Hadid) is that it has been almost entirely male. But could that be changing? From Beirut's crowded milieu of grandiosity and patriarchy emerges a more humble yet unique type of building – and architect. At first glance, Stone Garden – started by Lina Ghotmeh while at her previous practice DGT – is jarring. Unlike many of the high-rises in airbrushed downtown, the structure is located in an older neighbourhood just behind the port, set among low-rise 1950s apartment buildings that survived the war. It is only 13 storeys in height, but towers over the block and leaps off the frame like a pencil sketch or wooden toy figure.

The earthy, sandstone-like material used on the facade has the colour and texture of a pyramid. Ripples run endlessly across its surface giving an unbound sense. But this is not stone or metal cladding, it is not prefabricated in any sense. Up close, the

rough and uneven surface feels as worn as an ancient statue, gritty and satisfying to touch.

'I fought to make a very special finish, which is completely handmade', says Ghotmeh from her Paris office. 'It started with me chiselling with a fork and some clay.' After several trials, the material – a mixture of earth, bonding agents and metal fibres – was projected onto the building's concrete base. Wielding a 3-metre-long custom-built steel shaping tool, construction workers stood on scaffolding and literally combed and sculpted the entire building, leaving no two parts the same.

Having grown up in war-scarred Beirut, history and archaeology have been central themes in both Ghotmeh's work and her childhood memories. 'In Beirut, the skins of buildings stand as they were and we can see all the bullets left there. I thought that was a very interesting texture. Of course, it bears negative memories of the war but, for me, positive futures can always emerge out of negative things.'

Stone Garden allowed rare input from workers – migrant labourers from Syria who have built most of Beirut. 'These people leave their trace on the buildings. They are making them by hand, they are chiselling, they are labouring the soil.'

But Ghotmeh admits that this context – the gritty tapestry of 19th- and 20th-century buildings that was Beirut, old and new, rich and poor – is rapidly disappearing. In recent years, hundreds of heritage buildings and archaeological sites have been destroyed across the country to make way for a postwar vision of the city that prefers speculative real estate over attachment to the past or to the public. Most Beirut residents can no longer afford to live in their city. Evictions have already begun as decades-old rent controls are finally being abolished. The price of new apartments in the city centre begins in the millions of dollars, well out of reach of the vast majority of the population. (According to the World Bank, average salaries are less

than US\$10,000 per year.)

'We are losing the memory of what the war had done, but it's so important to remember and not repeat the past', Ghotmeh explains. 'The amnesia in the urban fabric causes amnesia in the social fabric. It detaches us from the ground we are standing on.'

Detachment has been a major critique of the reconstruction of downtown Beirut. The shiny new city has become an island for

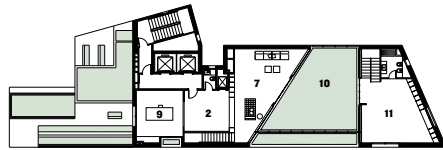
the rich; high security, walls and checkpoints around new buildings tend to keep pedestrians and traditional Beirut street life far away – only high-profile residents are welcome. Here again, Stone Garden breaks with prevailing trends, inviting rare public participation. A spacious, multi-level art gallery has already opened in the main lobby and is to become a permanent exhibition space, accessible through a public entrance.

Of course, this is still downtown Beirut and Ghotmeh knows most won't be able to live here given the now-astronomical housing prices. 'I don't pretend, as an architect, to be able to save the world. When I'm solving a situation, I am creating a new situation. But, on our scale, we are able to provide socially positive spaces accessible to all.'

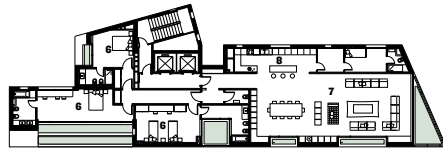
Beyond Beirut, the desire to reconnect with both human and natural surroundings is a theme that runs through her other work. In Paris, Ghotmeh recently received accolades (including praise from Philippe Starck) for her design of new restaurant



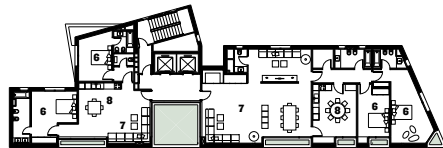
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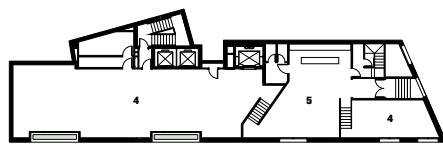
twelfth floor



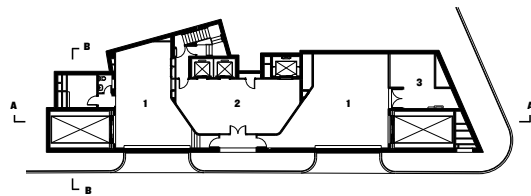
ninth floor



fifth floor

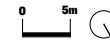


first floor

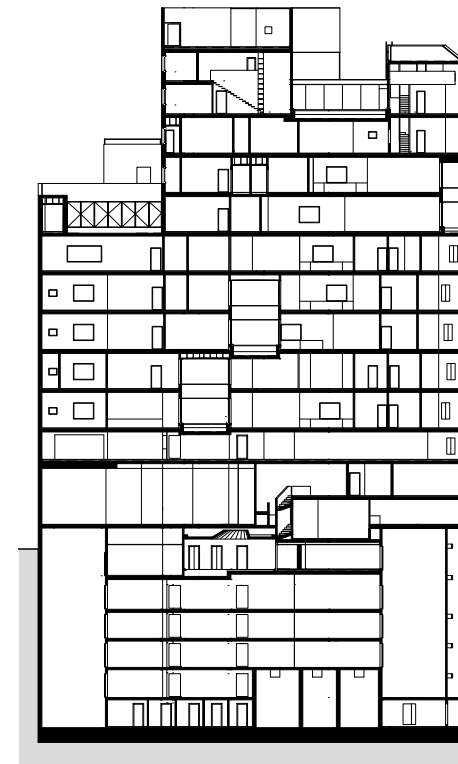


Stone Garden ground floor plan

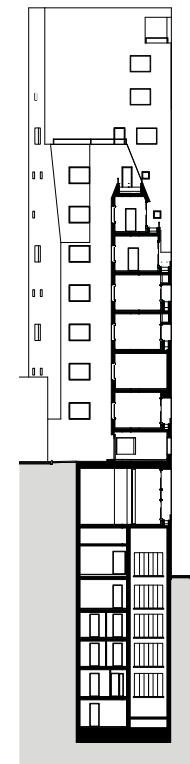
- 1 parking
- 2 entrance
- 3 plant
- 4 art gallery
- 5 cafe
- 6 bedroom
- 7 living room
- 8 kitchen
- 9 office
- 10 terrace
- 11 studio



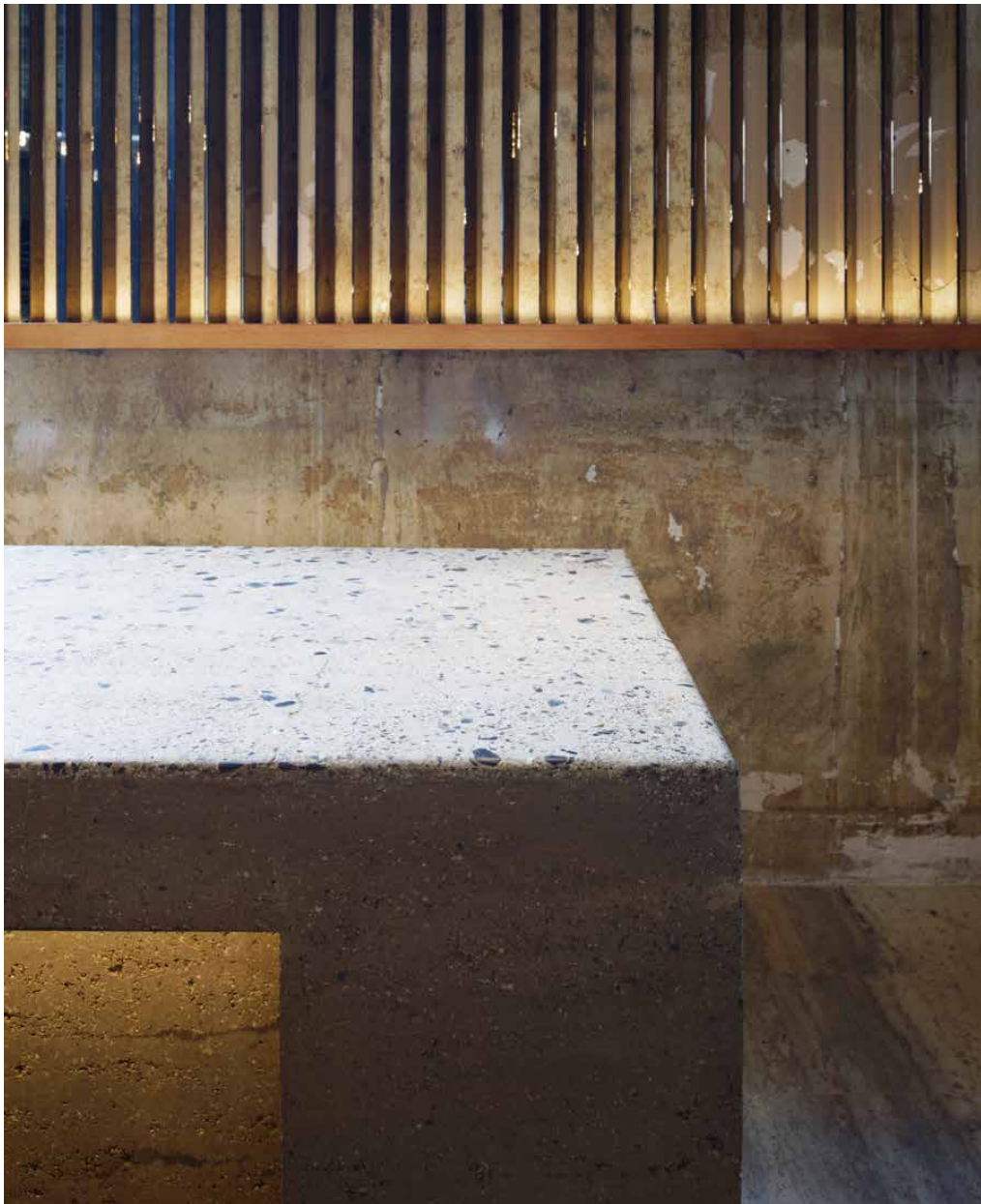
‘With its spacious multi-level art gallery, Stone Garden breaks with prevailing trends, inviting rare public participation’



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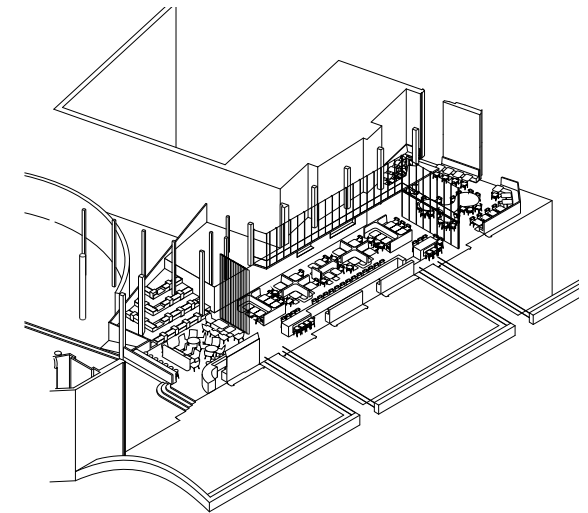


For Ghotmeh, extensive use of natural materials in Les Grands Verres at Paris's Palais de Tokyo art gallery symbolise her desire to reconnect people with nature



BOTH IMAGES: TAKUJI SHIMMURA

‘Low-cost recycled materials were used in all of the dining-room furnishings, including an 18-metre-long bar made entirely of rammed earth’



Les Grands Verres axonometric



BOTH IMAGES TAKUJI SHIMIZU



Les Grands Verres at the Palais de Tokyo art exhibition space. Low-cost recycled materials were used in all of the dining-room furnishings, including an 18-metre-long bar made entirely of rammed earth. The original ochre-coloured walls uncovered during construction were also retained, with bronze-like mirrors added to create 'a new materiality through simple compositions'. Use of such materials is not intended to serve the environment alone, but also those using the space. 'The bar allows us to get closer to our instincts, to our innate feelings, to humanise architecture and make it lovable.' It is this same ethos that informs much of her work. Each project begins with a deep, multidisciplinary dive into a site's social and political history: 'We dig for our spaces, revealing an archaeology of the past in order to establish an archaeology of the future.'

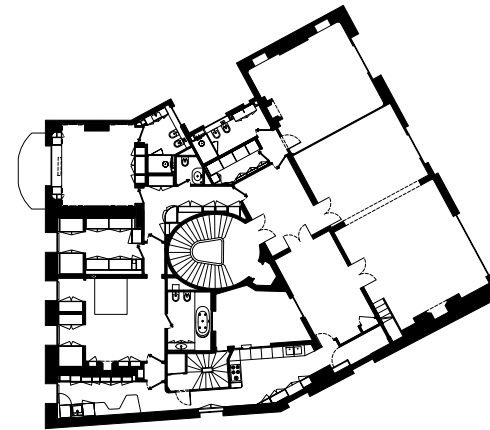
At the age of 25 in 2006, Ghotmeh co-founded DGT Architects alongside Dan Dorell and Tsuyoshi Tane. It was with Dorell and Tane that she completed the National

Estonian Museum, which was awarded the Grand Prix AFEX in 2016, as well as being a finalist in the AR Emerging Architecture awards that same year (AR October 2016). The rooftop of this 34,000m² building slopes gradually upwards from the ground, extending the runway of an old Soviet military base, doubling as a public space. Ghotmeh then established her own practice in 2016, delivering some of the designs initially started under DGT, and building a growing portfolio of work. There are parallels to the wide-open spaces offered by the museum's suspended cantilever roof, the limitless feeling of the lines on Stone Garden's facade and the sprawling bar at Les Grands Verres. These 'infinity'-like structures are 'very much present but also capable of disappearing. There is a capacity of being modest, even if it is monumental.'

With four projects under way in Lebanon and four in France, Ghotmeh's portfolio reflects her relationship between the two countries. Projects on either side of the

Mediterranean use the same architectural devices and language - for example, designs for offices in Massy in France and Lining Kefraya, a rural hotel in Lebanon, are integrated into the natural environment through reflective surfaces that project the surroundings onto the structure's facades. In Kefraya, the horizontal one-storey hotel composed of modular rooms partly disappears into a vineyard.

Ghotmeh explains that growing up between these cultures - she went to French schools in Lebanon before architecture school at the American University of Beirut - has encouraged her to adapt to different contexts, 'always looking to understand the nuances and specificities of each place'. Beyond the obsession with lines, forms and textures, she says architects need to realise that they can be used as tools of power and political ideologies. 'We have to be aware, when you are asked to build something you are committing a political and economic act: it will affect social relations between people.'



Apartment in Paris floor plan

In her refurbishment of a Haussmannian apartment in Paris, Chornohor added drama by punctuating the space with custom-made rounded wardrobes, underlined in brass (opposite), while retaining the property's Classical look and feel (above)