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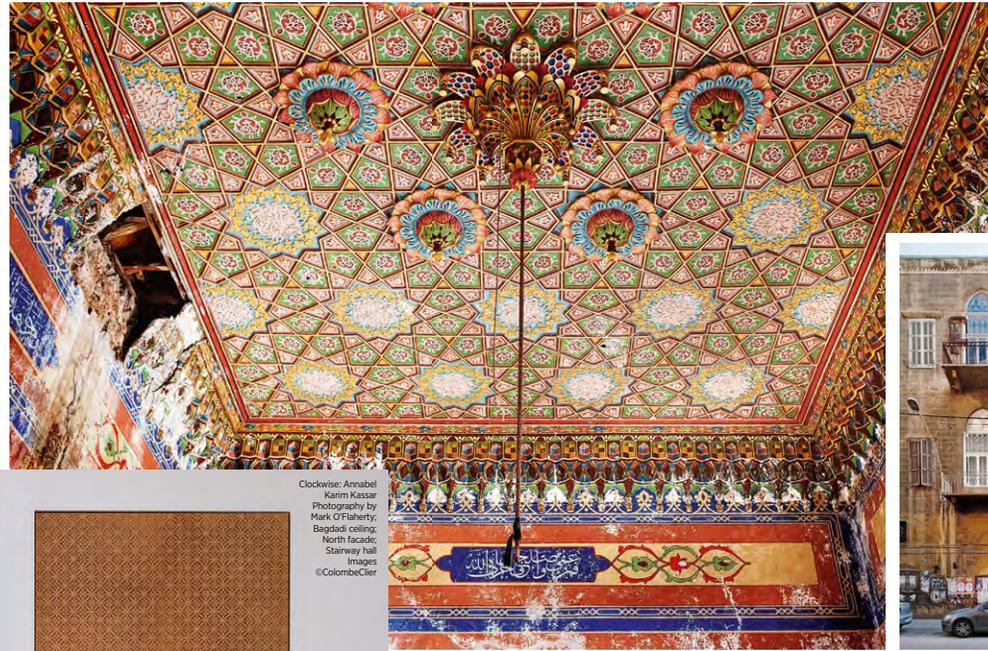
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HANDLE WITH CARE

Annabel Karim Kassar is rescuing traditional Lebanese architecture to show how the past and present can seamlessly co-exist in the face of the modernisation that is sweeping through Beirut, writes *Katrina Kufer*

AKK Architects – French-born Annabel Karim Kassar's architectural practice – works both private and public sectors, providing services from the ground up and inside out from their offices in Beirut, Dubai and London. However, recent years have had AKK looking towards design that sees modern structures coexist organically alongside and within traditional buildings – currently, through its Handle With Care project, the restoration of a 19th-century building. AKK's philosophy serves two purposes: the collaboration of historic craftsmanship and cutting edge technology creates a new architectural language and vision. "In order to grow, we need to be connected to our roots," Kassar says. "As well as maintain a grip on the past. To allow this memory to decay is to lose part of who we are. I very much hope this project will inspire others to preserve the historic buildings we have in this beautiful city."

Beirut is a major design centre in the Middle East and is steadily undergoing a public refocus towards it, having launched Beirut Design Week last year and come September, the inauguration of Beirut Design Fair.



Clockwise: Annabel Karim Kassar
Photography by Mark O'Flaherty,
Bahajadi ceiling,
North facade,
Stairway hall
Images
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"Beirut is an ever-evolving city with an impalpable spirit, a city of contrasts always presenting new challenges," says Kassar. Lebanon, rife with a rich mix of cultures given its diverse history of civilisations, is in many ways culturally fluid – "a mix of different decades and centuries of architecture," describes Kassar, "and this is what makes Beirut's architectural identity. One can trace Beirut's history and see a sort of a historical timeline while walking the streets." But the constant evolution also has its downsides. "I have learned through experience that many architectural projects are sadly temporary, especially in countries like Lebanon, where everything can change very fast, in just a few hours."

At Beirut Design Week in late May, AKK announced the undertaking of an ambitious two-year restoration project on a 19th-century mansion in Gemmayze. The residence – selected simply because Kassar's rental faced the back of the house and captured her increasing interest as the days passed – was originally constructed in 1870. The three-storey, 750-square-metre building with a 700-square-metre enclosed garden and open-front shop

spaces on the ground floor was built for a prominent Lebanese family at the end of the Ottoman Empire. "The aesthetics of the Ottoman era – their scale, elegance and craftsmanship – permeate the consciousness of the Lebanese people," reveals Kassar, indicating that these traces need to be held onto. "We aim to rescue and protect a rare example of 19th-century Beirut architecture. To my mind, this is an important countercultural move in an era which has seen a self-effacing wave of modernisation sweep the capital." AKK set up a series of installations at the property during the design week to introduce the public to the house's story and upcoming renovations, as well as organising a special exhibition of photographer Colombe Clier and director Florence Strauss, who archived the house in its current state with oscillating tones of haunting romanticism.

While Kassar usually employs a typical process – conceptualising, designing and then adding layers of ornamentation – this project proved fundamentally different. "Firstly, I am the owner, and secondly, I will not be the person starting the project," she clarifies. "I will work with the architects, conservationists, structural engineers, historians and experts on Bahajadi wood ceilings," she says of the team of international experts she

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The FEATURES

appointed. "I will listen to them and plan with their savoir-faire." However, through embracing the ideology that design can enhance heritage instead of erasing identity, Kassas mentions that they cannot rely purely on traditional techniques for the renovation; modern methods related to engineering and structural elements of new additions will go hand-in-hand with traditional techniques reinvigorated for restoring the ceilings, as an example. But the final result will not be a museum or preserved homage – it will be AKK Architects' unique take on modern living where past and present are not mutually exclusive. The residence will be contemporary and surprising, featuring unobtrusive updated amenities such as water and electricity seamlessly alongside the historical elements.

Kassar remarks that public and professional feedback has been positive and supportive of her concrete initiative to maintain Beirut architecture. This project alone has brought several conservationists and historians to the fore, with members of the team including conservation architect Nathalie Chahine; Baghdadadi ceiling expert Aurelia Badde; structural engineer Dr



Kassar. "Empty land plots are scarce, and older buildings that can't be taken care of by their original owners are an easy prey for developers. Beirut has been losing a lot of these old buildings in the past couple of years, therefore projects like these are crucial in order to raise awareness for saving these types of buildings and houses."

AKK is forging ahead, but is this an approach that will continue to resonate through Beirut's future? "Unfortunately," Kassar remarks, "conservation architects are rare in Lebanon, and conservation contractors are even more difficult to find, but there is a definite raised

tendency towards environmental issues and conservation issues."

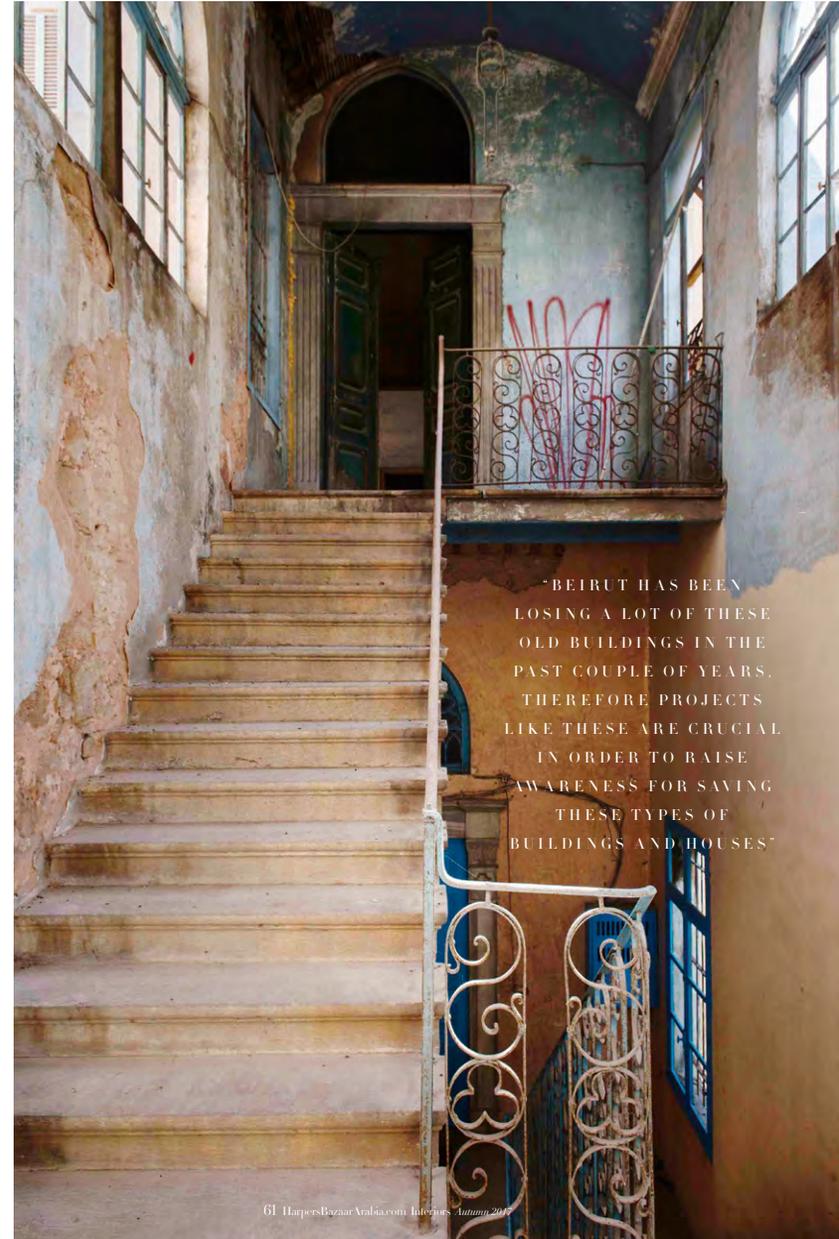
Annabel Karim Kassas serves as principal architect, AKK Architects (Rabih Zeidan, lead architect; Violaine Jeantet, interior designer; Nehmat Alameh, senior architect; and Mustapha Hijazi architect in charge of lighting) has also commissioned Nathalie Chahine, architectural restorer; Doris Schäffler, engineer and photogrammetric specialist who will produce detailed plans of the building; Aurelia Badde, conservator restorer; German engineering firm, Ziegert Roswag Seiler Architekten Ingenieure, to restore the structural integrity of the mansion for daily use; and Dr Ralph Bodenstein, architecture, architectural history and art expert. Specialist local artisans will also be commissioned to restore the building's ceilings, screen windows, frescoes and staircases.

annabelkassar.com



Christophe Ziegert; and Dr Youssef El Khoury, who retraced a history of Lebanese house typology at a talk Kassas organised. She mentions additional structures, some known, others less so, that fall under the remit of projects enriching the physical and historical fabric of Lebanon, such as Zoukak El Blatt, Ras Beirut, La Maison Rose, Dahesh Castle, Red House and Yellow House. But this does not mean the city's heritage is safe. "With the sprawl of destruction of old buildings for the construction of lucrative projects by developers, Beirut is in great danger of losing its identity," laments

Clockwise from left: main room; Room view; Painted ceiling; Face page; entrance steps. All photography © Colombe Cler



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