



hamra|modern

an exhibition by **richard pelgrim**
highlighting the quality and
abundance of modernist
architecture in hamra

Modern Architecture

The term “Modern Architecture” refers to a specific movement in the architectural profession, which began in the early 20th century and lasted till the late 1970s – and some would argue it remains extremely influential to this day. Modern architecture is thus not synonymous with *contemporary* architecture, which comprises recently built buildings, but rather refers to the architecture of a specific time period supported by a coherent ‘philosophy’ of work.

Modernism in architecture has its roots in the technological advancements and democratic and socialist ideologies of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is characterized by a simplicity that intentionally avoids ornamentation and decoration, a very rational approach to the design of space, and a truthfulness to materials and their properties.



Today, Modernism often falls prey to heavy criticism – both from the public and from a wide range of architects. Common critiques include the extreme rigor and strict grids that characterize many

Modern buildings; the accusation that Modernists ignored the needs of the users in their buildings and instead saw their buildings as machines and

their users as robots; and a generally dull, grid-like, and boring aesthetic appearance.

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While these criticisms and accusations were of course not fabricated out of thin air, this exhibition hopes to show Modernism in a different light. In

our Post-Modern, vision-obsessed day and age, it is indeed difficult to appreciate Modern buildings. We have grown accustomed to viewing and understanding our buildings as objects – sculptures or images that look ‘cool’ or ‘nice’ or ‘poetic’ or ‘extreme’. We judge our buildings by their cover.

Think for a moment about some of your favorite buildings in Beirut (or anywhere else). How much of your evaluation is based on how this



building looks from the outside? How many of these buildings have you experienced from the inside? How many of these buildings have you lived or worked in? In how many of these buildings have you thought about the quality of natural light in the corridors or offices, etc.?

These questions were central to the Modernists’ approach to architecture. Their primary concern was the quality of *interior* space they created. Natural lighting and ventilation, a clear distinction of public and private space, honesty in the expression of materials and structure – these concepts were all at the forefront of their design. For the Modernists, architecture was meant to be shaped from the inside out, and this took precedence over the exterior appearance of a building.

Lebanese Modernism

Critics of Modernism often claim that it was irreverent of local traditions. They accuse it of replacing regional variety with a single style that was to be copied and pasted all over the world, regardless of culture and tradition. While this is true to some extent considering that a major offspring of early Modernism was The *International Style* and Modernism was often accompanied with capitalism and an increasingly globalized economy, it must be said that there was always room for tradition and context-specific design within Modernism.

More than a single style, Modernism was an *approach* – resulting in different designs in different contexts. And thus it is very much possible to talk about *Lebanese Modernism* – an architecture grounded in the Modernist approach and catering to a clientele living a modern life-style yet realized in a Lebanese context. Buildings built in Lebanon with the Modern approach in mind still responded to Lebanese climate, topography, life-style, and culture.

Lebanese Modernism: Adoptedⁱ

Lebanese Modernism was at its height from the 1950s until the early 70s. While it had been developing and growing before this time – with many Lebanese architects and engineers getting their degrees in the U.S. and France – these years illustrate best the quality and type of Modernism that was produced here.



The scope of work that could be considered when talking about Lebanese Modernism is immense and spans a wide spectrum. Some architects (like George Rais) embraced the extreme rationalism of Modernism with open arms and omitted any literal reference to the more traditional Lebanese architecture.



Other architects (like Jacques Liger-Belair) strove to learn from vernacular architecture, and reinterpret it in a manner relevant to modern lifestyles and building techniques. Still other architects (like Assem Salam



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in part of his career) perceived a need to claim the traditional identity in the face of globalization, and quoted literally the traditional Lebanese architectural elements (such as arcaded galleries) in their otherwise Modern designs.

The late 1940s and early 50s were formative years for the Lebanese state, and it is interesting to note that many political figures and entities embraced Modernism and employed it to build an image of Lebanon as a modern state open to innovation and capitalism. For example, both the Central Bank in Hamra and the Presidential Palace in Baabda were designed by the Swiss firm Addor & Julliard and are very quintessentially Modern.



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CENTRE SABBAGH

by Alvar Aalto and Alfred Roth (1964-70)



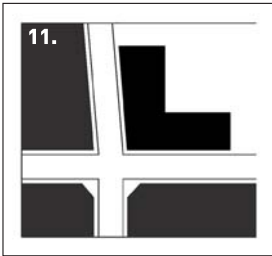
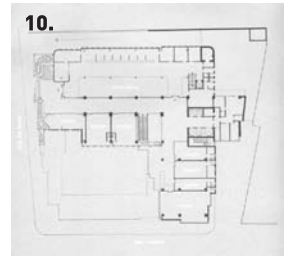
This multipurpose complex, which serves as the head office for the Fransabank, was commissioned by Mme Sabbagh. While she knew personally a number of well-established Lebanese architects, she decided she wanted a famous international architect to design this project and contacted Alvar Aalto in Finlandⁱⁱ.

By this time Aalto was already quite old, and he decided to partner with Swiss architect Alfred Roth. Roth designed most of the project, but when Aalto

saw the design he objected to the extremely strict, grid-like façades and 'broke' the grid to create a more playful façade on the opposite side.

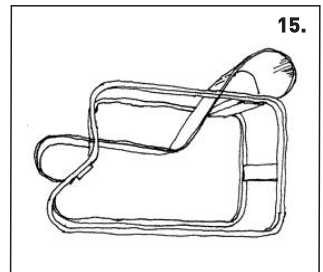
The most remarkable feature of this project is the way in which it relates to the urban space around it. While today any developer would opt for maximum exploitation of the available land, Roth and Aalto designed the building in such a way that the corner of the plot is offered entirely to the street. In a very generous gesture, Roth and Aalto used their building to create a social space for the people of the city.

In plan, we can see that the entire corner is accessible to anyone walking past the complex. The plaza contains a fountain, benches, and greenery, as well as restaurants along the sides of the courtyard on the ground floor.



This is remarkable because the architects could just as easily have designed a plan like the one on the left which would most probably have been much more efficient for the client, but would not have given anything to the public.

Other Projects by Alvar Aalto



INTERDESIGN BUILDING by Khalil Khoury (1972-4)

Designed by Khalil Khoury in the early 1970s, this building is a classic example of the Brutalist movement in architecture. The term comes from the French “béton brut” meaning “rough concrete” and the movement is characterized by buildings that exhibit a stern, almost fortress-like character and that consist largely of exposed concrete facades.

The last thing Brutalist architects were concerned with was designing ‘pretty’ buildings. Symmetry and traditional aesthetics were set aside, and beauty was sought instead through “a ruthless honesty expressing the functional spaces and their inter-relationships.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ The exterior form was a complete product of the interior space and there was no effort made to try and make buildings look prettier than they were. Because of this, Brutalist buildings are often not very popular with the public.



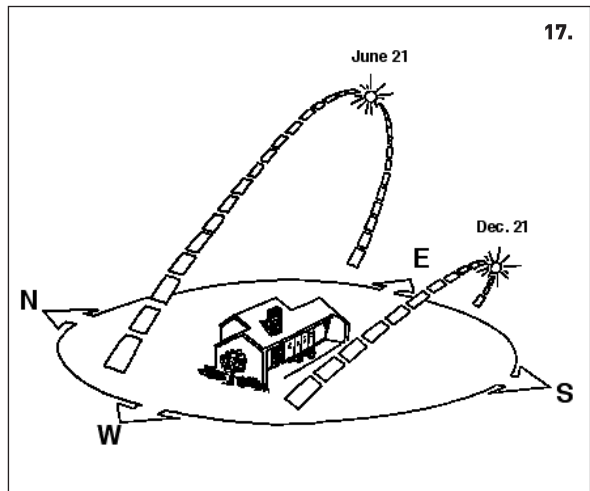
In this gallery for the Khoury family’s furniture company Interdesign, we

recognize the typical characteristics of Brutalism: the exposed concrete, the sharp angles, and the heavy volumes. From the outside, it is not a very welcoming building. However, the experience is entirely different once you enter the building. Two features are impressive and noteworthy:

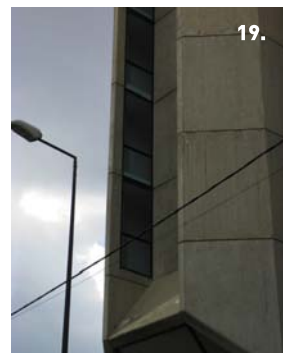
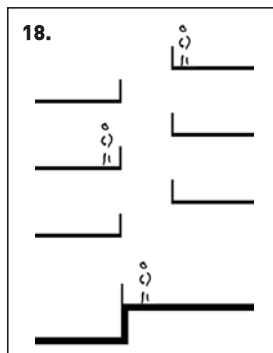
In exhibition spaces (museums, art galleries, etc.) it is preferred to have good natural light that enters the space indirectly because direct sunlight can cause glare and heat up the space excessively. Khalil Khoury accomplishes this with a smart and creative gesture.

The sun rises in the East and sets in the West, and as it travels from East to West, it bears to the South (see diagram) – thus, it never shines directly from the North.

Khalil Khoury uses this to his advantage and designs these 'devices' on the North façade of the building (see picture) which allow indirect sunlight to filter into the space inside, flooding the gallery with natural light.



The section of the building is also very interesting – it consists entirely of split-levels. This way, when you are on any one floor, you can see the furniture on 3 floors at the same time: the one you are on, the one above you, and the one below you. This allows you to very easily view the furniture you're about to buy from every possible angle.



MAKDISI BUILDING

by Karol Schayer, Bahij Makdisi & Wassek Adib (1954)

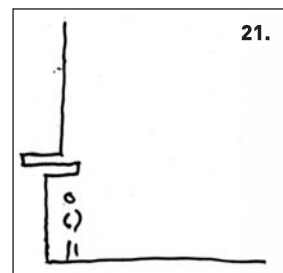


This building was designed by Polish architect Karol Schayer together with his Lebanese partners Bahij Makdisi and Wassek Adib. The building in its original design demonstrates a number of elements characteristic of the practice of Schayer Makdisi & Adib – sadly enough it has been significantly altered in recent years.

Firstly, we note the way in which the architects “cushion” the building to create a more favorable situation for the public passing by and to avoid the building appearing too heavy or bulky. As you can see in the diagram, the architects designed

a horizontal plane that cuts the columns coming from the street, thus creating a small transitional zone between the top of the ground floor and the beginning of the first floor. This zone is slightly recessed, thus adding some depth to an otherwise entirely flat façade. Only after this transitional zone does the more massive part of the building begin.

This gesture is made with the pedestrian in mind. By treating the ground floor in this manner, the pedestrian is not intimidated by the entire height of the building. Rather, the pedestrian only really



experiences the ground floor and feels 'sheltered' by the canopy as she passes the building. Only from a distance can one observe the full height and volume of the building above.



Secondly, we note the open-air galleries on the rear façade of the building. While most buildings in Beirut have interior corridors leading from the stairwell/elevator to the apartments, Schayer, Makdisi and Adib often designed

the corridors to be open to the outside, and sheltered them with panels to create privacy. This allowed for better ventilation throughout the building and created a more interesting spatial experience.

Other Projects by Schayer, Makdisi & Adib



ASTRA HOTEL

attributed to Joseph-Philippe Karam (date not confirmed)



Although the authorship of the Astra Hotel is not confirmed, a number of features lead us to quite safely assume it was designed (or at least heavily influenced) by Joseph-Philippe Karam.

We note a playfulness on the main façade characteristic of the work of Karam – who is known not to abide by the rigor and strictness characteristic of Modernism. Concrete slabs and C-shaped



frames are arranged in a rhythmic pattern, sometimes connecting only at a point. Where 'orthodox' Modernism would be sure to distinguish different internal functions by different exterior treatments, Karam treats the entire main façade with this pattern, although different things are happening behind it.

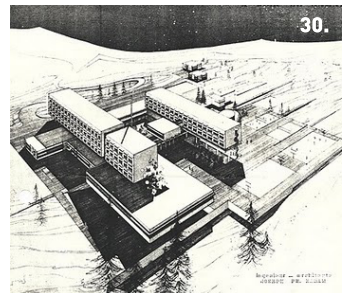
As often in Karam's work, we see that each floor is divided into two 'zones' by a horizontal strip of concrete wrapping around the facades – the higher band either bringing in natural light or containing the air-conditioning



units. Karam's lenient, "unbridled Modernism"^{vi} again shows through in the fact that these zones which he designed so often are difficult to clean and can thus be rather unpractical; whereas practicality was one of Modernism's definitive features.

We also note Karam's use of *claustra* on two of the facades. The term claustra refers to the repetitive usage of certain elements (often concrete blocks) to create a semi-transparent 'veil' on certain parts of building façades. This is most often done to create privacy by eliminating direct visual contact, or to hide certain elements from appearing on the building façade (such as ducts, pipes, or service areas). The same effect could be achieved with, say, translucent glass, but claustra were often used by Modernist architects because they were economical and did not prevent the passage of air – thus allowing natural ventilation of the spaces behind the claustra.

Other Projects by Joseph-Philippe Karam



STRAND CENTER

by Robert Wakim with Dar Al Handasah (1962-64)



Designed in 1962 by Robert Wakim working for Dar al-Handasah this building is a great example of the typical 'courtyard' projects that can be found around Hamra. During the boom of the late 50s through to the beginning of the Civil War, Hamra was a flourishing neighborhood whose streets were always flooded with people. While nowadays most pedestrian traffic is limited to the main streets, in those days many developers designed and built buildings with courtyards that would draw people out from the main street and into these smaller side 'alleys' leading to courtyards lined with shops etc.

We can see that the Strand

Building has two side 'alleys' that lead to a central courtyard open to the sky. This courtyard gives access to a number of shops as well as leading to the first floor that contains office spaces. A sculpture (possibly by Zaven Hadichian) out of a single sheet of metal is placed in a small water basin to decorate this public space.

Another interesting feature is the 'claustra' – this time made from metal – on the main façade. Since this façade is oriented south, the glass could not



be exposed directly to the sunlight. The extensively repeated pattern thus acts as a sun-breaker and also creates an interesting motif that ties the whole façade together. Also, there is an interesting relationship between the horizontal and

vertical strips of metal, which seems to create the illusion that some of the diamonds are floating in mid-air.



CINEMA AL-HAMRA by George Rais (1958)

In its golden days, Hamra was 'the place to be'. Besides shopping centers, restaurants, and cafés, Hamra also offered a variety of cinemas. This building designed by George Rais housed the famous Cinema Al-Hamra.



In contrast to the Strand Center, the main façade of this building faces north and thus receives no direct sunlight. The architect took advantage of this, and designed a façade that was almost entirely made of glass. This building can be considered one of the predecessors of the first curtain-wall building in Beirut – the building right next to it that housed the famous “Horseshoe”.

A **curtain wall** is an exterior building wall that carries no structural loads. It generally consists of an aluminium frame, most often filled in with glass panels. Since the invention of concrete, exterior walls of building no longer needed to be load-bearing – the columns and slabs acted as the complete structure. This freed the architects to begin experimenting with different treatments of the exterior walls one of which is the curtain-wall.

Other Projects by George Rais

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Lebanese Modernism: Disowned

While Modernism was welcomed with open arms in the 50s and 60s, in later years (80s and onwards) both the public and private sectors began to feel a need to reach back to the more distant past in search of identity and belonging. The Presidential Palace was 'clothed' in a 'more Lebanese' skin of arches and arcaded galleries, and many architects began to quote literally the Lebanese traditional past.

Till today, new buildings with traditional elements abound. Take a look at Downtown Beirut or any of the villas being built in the suburbs, and you will see red-tiled roofs, triple arches, and various other elements

quoting Lebanese identity and tradition. Although there is nothing wrong with quoting tradition per se, these excessive references can often become problematic. In many cases, traditional facades are 'glued onto' modern plans, often resulting in awkward discrepancies and a dishonest architecture.

Take for example the building at the entrance to Gemmayzeh street. It has a triple arch on the façade facing the street *and* a triple arch on the perpendicular façade. Traditionally, buildings with central-hall plans only had one set of triple arches – the second set was 'glued' onto the building in an attempt to increase its "Lebanese-ness".

Today's popular definition of Lebanese architecture seems to be limited to a very specific period and fails to include all architecture that is Lebanese. Lebanese architecture is understood to have to include red-tiled roofs, central-hall plans, and triple arches. And since Lebanese Modernist architecture does not fit these parameters it is often not considered to be a



part of Lebanese architectural heritage – in fact, it is often wrongly shed in a negative light as something alien and invasive.

This exhibition has been organized with the intention to raise awareness and appreciation for the Modernist architecture that constitutes a large part of the neighborhoods we live and work in. With a specific focus on Hamra, this exhibition hopes to bring an understanding of Modern buildings and reveal the value of these buildings and the lessons we can learn from them. Hopefully, it will encourage us to be more aware of the built environment we live in and claim it as our own; ultimately contributing to a more informed and relevant Lebanese architectural education and production.

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ii. *ibid.*

iii. "Brutalism". Encyclopedia of Modern Architecture.

iv. Arbid, George. 2002. Practicing Modernism in Beirut: Architecture in Lebanon, 1946-1970. Harvard University

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank a number of people for providing the inspiration and support without which this exhibition could not have taken place.

First of all, I would like to thank Dr. George Arbid for his unwavering dedication to the full range of Lebanese architectural heritage, and the enthusiasm and inspiration with which he freely shares his knowledge on the subject. It would not be an exaggeration to say that you have changed the way I look at this city and its architecture. Thank you.

Secondly, I would like to thank The Neighborhood Initiative at A.U.B. for providing the financial support needed to produce this exhibition. In particular Dr. Cynthia Myntti and Ms. Tonnie Choueiri – thank you for enthusiasm and encouragement. Hopefully there will be many more such collaborations between the Department of Architecture and The Neighborhood Initiative.

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I would also like to thank Café De Prague for hosting the exhibition and generously providing the time and space for the opening reception.

For More Information

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03. Blood Bank, Benjamin McAdoo.

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04. Schroder House, Gerrit Rietveld.

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05. Pan-American Building, George Rais.

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06. Villa, Jacques Liger-Belair.

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07. Khachoggi Mosque, Assem Salam.

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08. Banque du Liban, Addor & Juilliard.

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09. Fransabank, Aalto & Roth.

Photograph taken by author.

10. Fransabank, Aalto & Roth.

Ground floor plan.

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11. Diagram of alternative plan.

By author.

12. Church, Alvar Aalto

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13. Auditorium, Alvar Aalto.

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14. Pavillion, Alvar Aalto.

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15. Sketch for chair, Alvar Aalto.

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16. Interdesign Building, Khalil Khoury.

Aerial photograph

Archives of Dr. George Arbid - used with permission.

17. Diagram of sun-path

http://thedeserttabernacle.blogspot.com/2011_01_01_archive.html

18. Interdesign Building, Khalil Khoury.

Photograph taken by author

19. Diagrammatic section

Drawn by author

20. Makdisi Building, Makdisi, Schayer & Adib,

Photograph by Manoug Alemian.

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21. Diagram of 'cushioning' effect

Drawn by author

22. Makdisi Building, Makdisi, Schayer & Adib.

View of exterior galleries

Photograph taken by author

23. Dar el Sayad Building, Karol Schayer

Photograph by Manoug Alemian

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24. Dib Building, Karol Schayer

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25. Astra Hotel, attributed to Joseph-Philippe Karam.

Photograph taken by author

26. Astra Hotel, attributed to Joseph-Philippe Karam.

Photograph taken by author

27. Astra Hotel, attributed to Joseph-Philippe Karam.

Close-up of claustra.

Photograph taken by author

28, 29, 30. Design perspectives, Joseph-Philippe Karam.

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31. Strand Center, Wakim & Klink.

Photograph taken by author

32. Strand Center, Wakim & Klink.

Close-up of sculpture.

Photograph taken by author

33. Strand Center, Wakim & Klink.

Close-up of metallic claustra.

Photograph taken by author

34. Cinemal Al-Hamra, George Rais.

Photograph taken by author

35. Pan-American Building, George Rais.

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36. Zahar Building, George Rais.

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37. Presidential Palace, originally by Addor & Juilliard

After renovation.

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