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The exhibition includes drawings of elements found in the rubble of a house in Minet Hosn, Beirut, including this cadastral plan. Weekend

Exploring Beirut's hidden histories

Gregory Buchakjian's 'Abandoned Dwellings of Beirut' uncovers 'something lost'



lain Akerman Beirut

Ten years ago the Lebanese art historian and academic Gregory Buchakjian walked into his first abandoned building in Beirut. It was the beginning of an artistic and cultural obsession. at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts. "Some buildings have been sold, some buildings are owned by such a multiplicity of heirs that if you want to bring everybody together it's quite impossible. You have the case of real estate developers who acquire a building and

rector of the School of Visual Arts



(Clockwise from main image) The ground floor of the iconic Pink House, formerly the atelier of artist and designer Sami El Khazen. The vertical lines on the foreground are part of a lighting system he created. The house has been abandoned since his death in 1988; Some of the hundreds of found documents in the exhibition; An abandoned mid-19thcentury house in Achrafieh, badly damaged by shelling during the war, when it was occupied by militias; Valérie Cachard and Gregory Buchakjian prepare material for the exhibition. All images supplied

"It initially started as something very spontaneous," Buchakjian tells Arab News. "It was a reaction to the fact that a lot of buildings were disappearing or being torn down and the city was changing. This happens in many cities, but Beirut is a city that has witnessed a lot of transformation. You don't have something that is stable; and it's very strange to live in a city where nothing is stable.

"So I started photographing these buildings and it (became) very obsessive, very compulsive. I wanted to see more and more and I explored the whole city searching for derelict buildings and the stories they carried. I met people in the streets, asked them questions about the neighborhood, about the war, about families, about whatever they could tell me, and, little by little, many practices came together."

The end result is 'Abandoned Dwellings of Beirut,' an exhibition that draws on Buchakjian's research into nearly 750 residential buildings, hotels and houses scattered throughout the city. It includes Buchakjian's own photographs, as well as collected testimonies and hundreds of found objects — official documents, postcards, greeting cards, letters and other personal effects — that were gathered by Buchakjian and the writer and performance artist Valérie Cachard.

First exhibited at the Sursock Museum in Beirut late last year, the project moved on to the Boghossian Foundation in Brussels from November 14 until January 5, with an additional body of work telling the story of one particular building — the residency of former Prime Minister Takieddin El-Solh.

"Each building has its own story," says Buchakjian, who is the diwait for a good moment to tear it down. You have the case of a family that doesn't have any more money to repair the building. You also have buildings whose owners have disappeared."

The buildings that Buchakjian has documented and photographed range from ornate 19th-century Ottoman houses and French Mandate-era properties to modernist buildings of the 1950s and 1960s. They include Qasr Heneine, a former palace in Zokak el-Blat; the 'Pink House' a mid-19th-century residence near Beirut's lighthouse; and the Hotel Excelsior – in particular Les Caves Du Roy, a once-famous underground nightclub from Lebanon's pre-war Golden Age.

Gaining access to the 200 or so properties that Buchakjian actually entered wasn't always easy. "Sometimes I would ask in the neighbor-

What I search for in my pictures is not the spectacular aspect of the ruins, it's more something of a soul.



hood if someone had a key or knew the owner," he says. "Sometimes I would trespass by climbing on a tree or finding some kind of secret passage into the building. But when I managed to enter — and when the space was interesting in terms of architecture, in terms of memories, in terms of light, in terms of feeling — I would ask someone to accompany me and to inhabit the space for the pictures. There is always a human presence."

This human presence was a way of recovering the space, says Buchakjian — a way of reclaiming the buildings. "Whatever the size or period of these buildings, they were once inhabited by people. And these people were asked to leave or were forced to leave."

Light plays a big role in Buchakjian's photographs. You can see it cascading through windows and doors, acting in many ways





like a stage light, either casting shadows or drawing attention to particular features. His training as an art historian also means his images are influenced by masters of lighting including Caravaggio and Velázquez, giving them a sometimes-ethereal feel.

"What I search for in my pictures is not the spectacular aspect of the ruins, it's more something of a soul," he says. "In many of my pictures I will not focus on the degradation, I will not focus on the stones themselves, but I will focus on the thing that brings life into the building."

Such a focus has had an emotional impact on viewers. During his first exhibition at the Sursock Museum, one man began to cry in front of his photographs. "He came up to me and said, 'This house was related to one of my best friends, and when I saw your pictures all



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these memories of my youth came back.' This was a very beautiful encounter. I've had a lot of beautiful encounters of this kind."

The very fact that the buildings are abandoned means something is either absent, missed or lost a home, belongings, neighbors. Does that mean nostalgia plays a part in people's reactions to Buchakjian's photographs?

"It's stronger than nostalgia," he replies. "I think there is a feeling — and it's not only in Lebanon that we lost something. We lost something in our cities, in our societies, in our human relations; in the fact that everything is becoming very clean. Social media, shopping malls, gated communities; it's a global trend. Wherever you go you see the same trends. There were people crying in Brussels the same way people were crying in Beirut, and these people cannot have nostalgia for a Beirut they do not know. I think people are trying to rescue their memories, their history, their roots."

Buchakjian has noticed a similar desire during Lebanon's ongoing protests. Two abandoned buildings in Beirut's city center — The Egg and Le Grand Théâtre de Beirut have played an important role in the demonstrations. The Egg has been occupied in all ways possible, while the doors of Le Grand Théâtre were pulled open and the hoardings that surround it used for the ritual 8 p.m. banging that has been a regular feature of the revolution.

"Everybody has the same frustrations. Because everybody in this country and in many other countries feels that our cities have been taken over. They took over our places, they took over our histories. And the interesting thing is that the people who are occupying The Egg and the Grand Theater don't know anything about the buildings, because most of them are young," says Buchakjian. "But it's not the Grand Theater for what it is. It's because it symbolizes a city they want to reclaim. This idea of reclaiming the city has something universal."