



The Bokja Mends initiative reupholsters home items damaged by the explosions, for free

Beirut rising

Turning catastrophe into creativity, these Lebanese artists are piecing together the capital city's vibrant history through thoughtful initiatives. By **Aarti Virani**

When two infernal explosions rocked the Lebanese capital last August, they killed nearly 200, wounded over 5,000 and left a quarter million homeless. The blasts, caused by ammonium nitrate in a portside warehouse, tore through Beirut's cultural nerve centre, damaging about 700 historic buildings in neighbourhoods like Gemmayzeh and Mar Mikhaël. "These are areas where Beirut's authentic character was," says designer Nada Debs, whose boutique windows and doors were wiped out by the detonations. "To rebuild at a time when we were already very weak was really difficult," she adds, referring to the country's dwindling economy (the Lebanese pound lost about 80 per cent of its value in 2020), corrupt ruling class, and a spike in coronavirus cases. In the aftermath, members of the artistic community, like Debs, sprang into action, proving essential to Beirut's healing process. Here, meet a clutch of Lebanese visionaries who are using their creative magic to resuscitate a formerly dynamic metropolis.

< CRAFTS >

Bokja

As the brains behind Bokja, a craft studio with a penchant for Middle Eastern fabrics, Huda Baroudi and Maria Hibri turned their Saifi Village shop into a community repair centre shortly after the blasts. "Our boutique was stripped to the bone, windowless and frameless, but still hanging on," they share. In their showroom, the duo launched Bokja Mends, a thoughtful initiative that reupholsters home goods damaged by the explosions, using their signature red stitch work, for free. "The stitch is inspired by a surgical suture, normally used to close and heal wounds on the human body," says Baroudi. "Bokja Mends is a means to protect and preserve the memories of those who have lost more than just their homes," adds Hibri. Bokja.com



Award-winning designer Mamoun Sakkal was among the 161 artists who contributed to the Li Beirut typeface

< T Y P O G R A P H Y >

Li Beirut

In an effort to uplift her hometown, Dr Nadine Chahine, a Beirut-born, London-based artist, crowdsourced a Lebanon-inspired typeface from members of the global design community after the catastrophic blasts. Less than two weeks later, she received over 300 glyphs—intricately adorned Arabic letters and Latin capitals that formed a full-fledged font. She titled it Li Beirut (For Beirut), then sold access to it, along with branded products, as part of a campaign that raised nearly \$30,000 to aid the city. "There was such a strong sentiment of solidarity," she says. "In any shape it came in, I was grateful for the support." *Arabictype.com*

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Arthaus Beirut

Nabil Debs, the owner of Arthaus Beirut, a boutique hotel that was poised for an opening on the day of the blasts, found himself clearing rubble instead of welcoming guests. "The explosion was a declaration of war against our culture," he says. Channelling anger into art, Debs swiftly assembled a group of predominantly Lebanese and Arab artists, resulting in *Beirut Year Zero*, an exhibition of paintings, installations, street art, and sculptures (some of which were auctioned at Christie's London). Proceeds from the exhibit, curated in just three weeks, went to the local Red Cross chapter in addition to supporting Beirut's hard-hit artistic ecosystem. The pandemic may have made it harder, but Debs is planning a follow-up exhibition and concerts soon. *Arthaus.international*



Painter Serwan Baran's work was among the art auctioned at Christie's London



Keeping It Together features furniture crafted from broken pieces

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Studio Nada Debs

Even as her Gemmayzeh neighbours began to rebuild their stores and cafes after the explosions, designer Nada Debs chose not to renovate her interiors boutique, known for its sleek Far East-meets-Middle East home furnishings. Instead, she created a striking memorial, titled *Keeping It Together*, displaying furniture crafted from pieces that were shattered by the blasts. Debs, who was raised in Japan, educated in America and has worked in the UK is now planning another furniture line, inspired by Beirut's heritage mansions and made in Tripoli. "We're still in the midst [of recovery], so the idea is to empower the makers." *Nadadebs.com*

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Matbakh El Kell

As the founder of Beirut's first farmers' market and the owner of Tawlet, a popular restaurant known for its revolving regional menu, Kamal Mouzawak is a humanitarian at heart. So he was a natural ally for World Central Kitchen, a global non-profit devoted to providing meals in the wake of disasters. Mouzawak joined forces with the NGO (founded by the renowned chef José Andrés), a day after the explosions. "It had to be done," he says of their initial efforts, which fed volunteers and hospital workers. "Cooking was therapy for all of us." Since October, Mouzawak has expanded the operation into a community-focused endeavour called Matbakh El Kell (The Kitchen for All). *Soukeltayeb.com* ■



Matbakh El Kell churns out 1,500 meals every day