

A global perspective

By Warren Singh-Bartlett



Three Lebanon projects:
K.H. Headquarters in Dora
(top left), Koukjian Jewelry
in Beirut (immediate left)
and W residences, also in
Beirut (above)



Michel Abboud's SOMA is an architectural practice with an international reach

In some ways, returning to Beirut was the best thing that ever happened to Michel Abboud even though, like many of the best surprises in life, coming back was not something he'd expected to do. After over a decade in New York, where Abboud started his architectural practice, SOMA, in 2003, he felt like he'd never leave. The pace of life, the social buzz, the urbane urbanity of Manhattan was everything he wanted from life.

"New York was a great place for a young, ambitious architect to work," Abboud tells me, as we flick through a slideshow of some of SOMA's current projects "but it's really not a city of medium-scale projects."

This meant that SOMA, a small practice, was working mostly on small-scale projects; interiors and renovations of existing structures. One project in particular, what was to have been an Islamic cultural center near Ground Zero, not only caught the media's eye, it also brought SOMA to the attention of people in the region and soon, Abboud was being approached to work on projects in Lebanon.

One commission led to another and the work began to flow. The boom in Beirut's real estate

coincided neatly with the downturn in New York's, and it wasn't long before opening an office here moved from future possibility to immediate necessity.

It is in the well-chilled confines of that office in Jal el Dib that we meet. Like many of SOMA's projects, it is an exercise in contemporary chic, a concoction of concrete, glass and steel, at once an exercise in transparency and advert for *vorsprung durch technik*-style modernity.

As I sit sipping water – delivered in SOMA's own cylindrical steel vacuum flask – I admire the view of Beirut, which from here looks like some improbable steamship, a myriad of towers afloat on a silvery sea.

As Abboud takes me through the practice's projects – a number of residential projects are under way: the Wave, BoBo, the Castor and the 360, while work begins soon on the new Khoury Homes headquarters and the Nikki Beach resort in Damour – it is a project in northern Iraq that really gets him enthused.

Called Aura, it's a massive mixed-use development beside the Salaheddine Highway that links Irbil's historic city center to the tony new district of Shores. Envisaged as "the



Three New York projects:
Tartinery restaurant in
 Nolita (above), 93 Crosby
 condominium lofts in Soho
 (right) and
50 Lispenard residential lofts
 in Tribeca (bottom)



kind of place you never need to leave,” the \$100 million development is not only SOMA’s biggest project to date, embodying a quantum leap forward in capability, it’s also the most complete representation of what the practice can do, given rein.

“They told us to do whatever we wanted,” Abboud says, admitting that at first, the prospect was daunting. “Architects like to say that constraints make good projects, so not having any at all was scary, but once we started we realized how much fun we were going to have.”

The result is two ranks of towers, conceived as serried sandwiches of glass and concrete slabs of differing heights – an architectural *millefeuille* if you like – which run along either side of a central park-like space. More than just a place to gather, the park is actually the green roof for the subterranean shopping and leisure center beneath the complex. In the middle, the gardens and water features give way to vast expanses of glazing that flood the shops below with natural light. The towers contain residential and office space, as well as a boutique hotel and sporting facilities, and will create a kind of skyline for the rapidly expanding but still mostly low-rise city.

“Irbil badly needs the greenery, but no developer would have proposed this kind of solution,” Abboud says, adding that integrating greenery is something they try to do wherever possible. “We found a way that makes everyone, the city, the developers and the residents, happy.”

