

CONSTANTLY CURIOUS, GREGORY GATSERELIA IS REINVENTING DESIGN AND NURTURING UPCOMING TALENT

SINCE TAKING ON HIS FIRST DESIGN PROJECT IN LEBANON IN THE 90S, INTERIOR ARCHITECT GREGORY GATSERELIA HAS GAINED RECOGNITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA, AND AROUND THE WORLD, FOR HIS DIVERSE INTERIORS. SUPPORTED BY HIS DEDICATED TEAM AT GATSERELIA DESIGN, HIS INSTINCTIVE UNDERSTANDING OF COLLABORATIONS HAS GIVEN HIM THE ABILITY TO SUCCEED IN – AND TO STAY ON TOP OF – THE DESIGN WORLD FOR A LONG TIME. AS CO-FOUNDER OF THE EXCITING EXPERIMENTAL PLATFORM 'THE GREAT DESIGN DISASTER', HE IS TAKING A FRESH LOOK AND NURTURING UPCOMING TALENT, ALWAYS AIMING TO EVOLVE AND REINVENT DESIGN. HARMONIES SAT DOWN WITH GREGORY AT HIS BEIRUT ATELIER TO UNRAVEL HOW HE HAS BECOME ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT FIGURES IN HIS FIELD IN THE REGION.

Tell us a little bit about your beginnings.

My design journey began in Canada in the 80s and 90s. I was living the American dream, in a society where anyone had the chance to succeed. In 1987, I founded Gatsereia Design in Toronto with my brother. At that time, most designers were into minimalist style but I went the opposite direction and created a baroque style interior for a café. I did not want to commit to a certain style or movement. And all was going well, my work was well received. We were in an incredible era where the sky had no limits. I felt I was capable of even more, so in 1995 I wanted to move to New York.

In the 90s you moved your design practice to Lebanon. What inspired the move?

My connection to Lebanon was through my circle of friends. After a long civil war, there was peace in the region and my friends were urging me to move there, which I did. I must admit that the move was mainly motivated by personal reasons.

What was it like in Beirut when you moved in the 90s?

It was so chaotic! But I loved it! I had to work hard to break into the market and to compete with others. Plus, I was used to working in a more tech-savvy environment and Lebanon was lagging at the time. I started to get involved in huge projects all over the region, such as the Dubai Gulf City, so life was good. But then in 2008, the global financial crisis hit the Middle East. It was a challenging time and I had to adapt to the slowdown in the market. But we found a balance and continued to work hard. The environment picked up and I went on to design many more interiors and even to win several prizes, which put us on the map. For example, Spine, Beirut, won the award of Best Overall Bar and Best Middle East & Africa Bar at the 2019 Restaurant & Bar Design Awards. We are very proud of this award as we were competing with designs in over 70 countries.

How does working in Lebanon compare to other countries?

This country is always full of surprises. But I must admit I do work well under stress. It's a unique country, we adapt and we love it here. My atelier is like my home; some staff have been here with me for 20 years and we are like one big family. I don't think that I would be able to recreate this environment anywhere else in the world. Having said that, I am planning to open a small office in Dubai.

Has the interior design scene in Lebanon changed since your arrival?

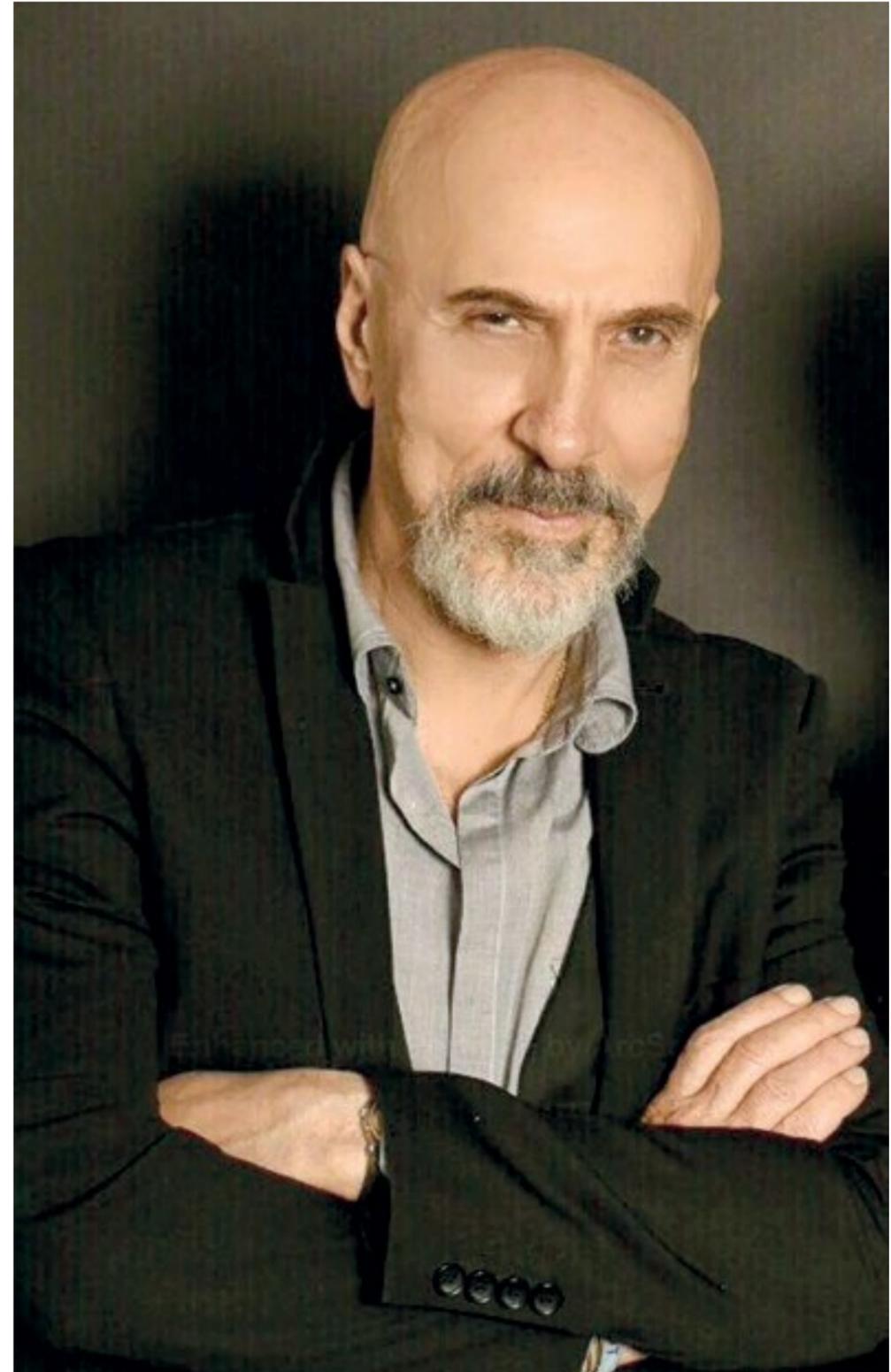
When I arrived here I brought in new ideas. I also worked closely with my clients. This was a long process and unfamiliar as they were not used to such collaborations. I would even travel abroad with my clients to select pieces, art, furniture, and incorporate them. Together, we would choose them not as an investment but for the love of it. The scene in the Middle East has changed a lot since I first arrived. Clients become more daring under my guidance and it's wonderful to see them grow. I am particularly excited about one of my current projects at the moment – a residential property in Beirut.

Has your style evolved since then?

Of course. When I was in Canada I was more of a minimalist. Then I evolved to embrace a boudoir and baroque style, which was so different. To be honest, I am not bound by any special style. I start each project with a blank page. To have no limitations, no restrictions, is what excites me.

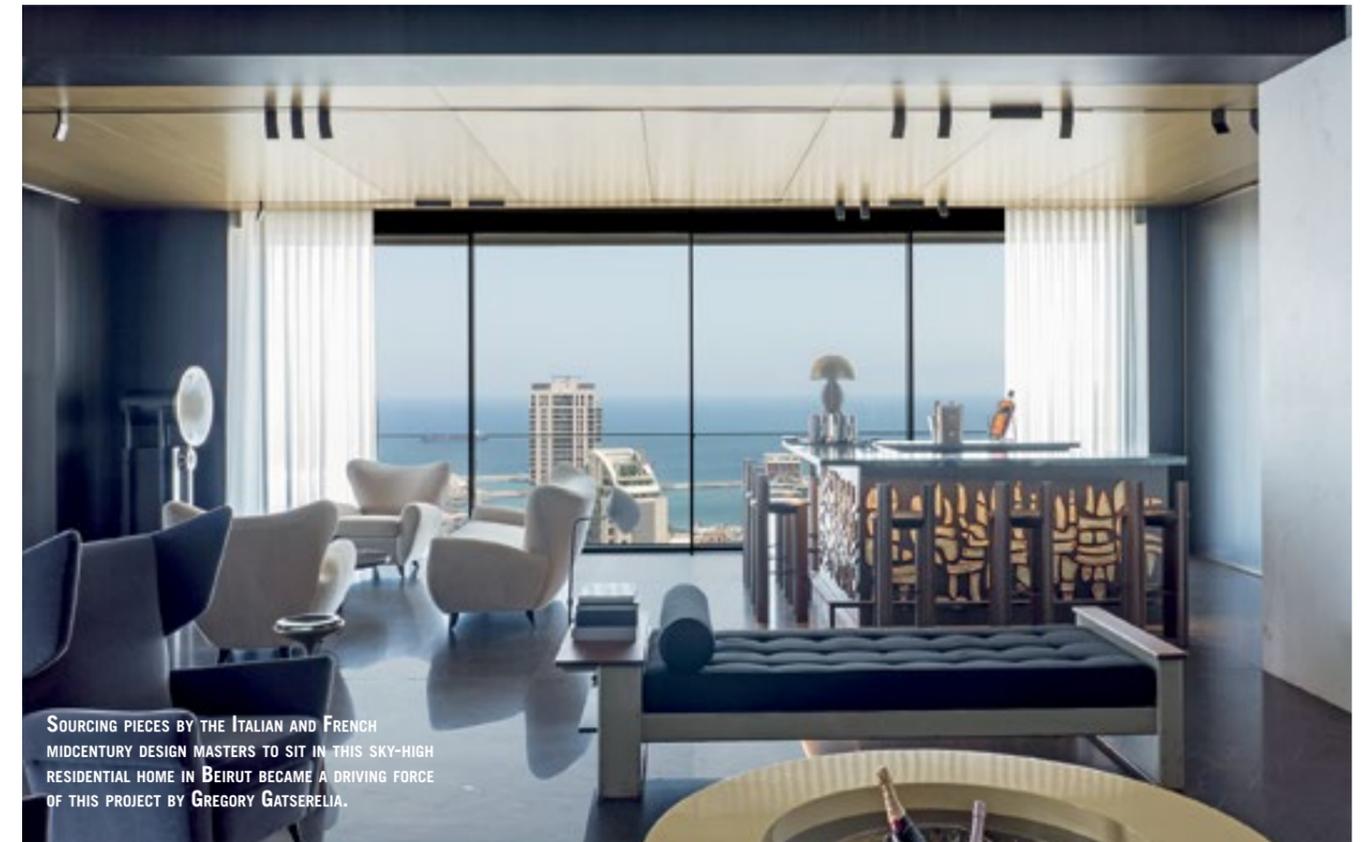
What inspires you to design?

Well, while I was at boarding school in France, I used to draw a lot in my free time. My friends liked my drawings and asked me to create some for them. As I was kept on a tight budget with barely any pocket money, I agreed and bartered the drawings for candy. Apart from the candy, I always felt inspired to draw. And I am still inspired and I still keep on discovering.

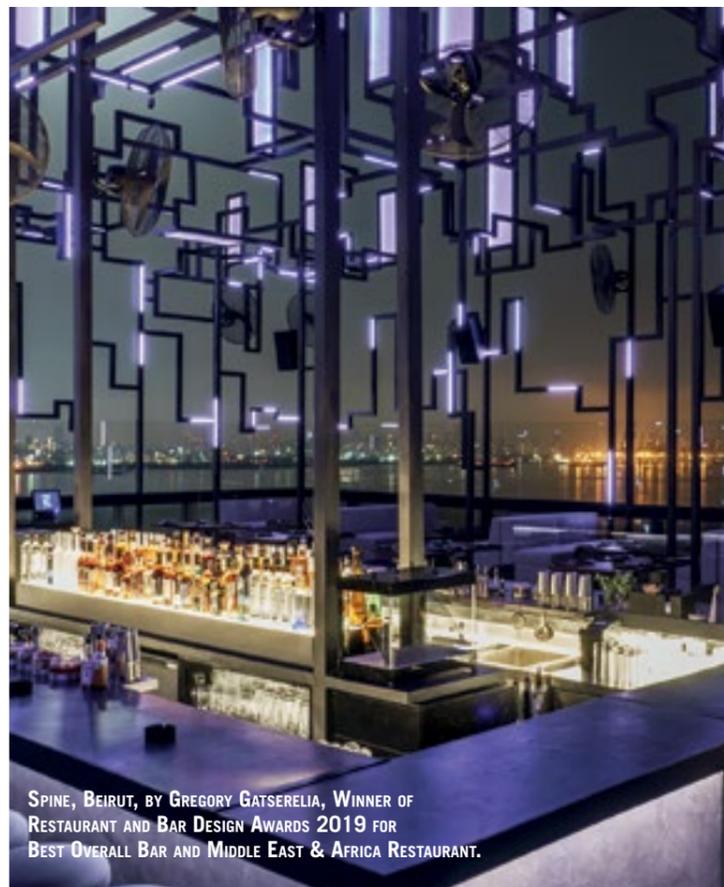




THE SUSHI BAR, BEIRUT, BY GREGORY GATSERELIA, WINNER OF RESTAURANT AND BAR DESIGN AWARDS 2020 FOR MIDDLE EAST AND AFRICA RESTAURANT.



SOURCING PIECES BY THE ITALIAN AND FRENCH MIDCENTURY DESIGN MASTERS TO SIT IN THIS SKY-HIGH RESIDENTIAL HOME IN BEIRUT BECAME A DRIVING FORCE OF THIS PROJECT BY GREGORY GATSERELIA.



SPINE, BEIRUT, BY GREGORY GATSERELIA, WINNER OF RESTAURANT AND BAR DESIGN AWARDS 2019 FOR BEST OVERALL BAR AND MIDDLE EAST & AFRICA RESTAURANT.



MATERIALS AND THEIR VARIED FORMS, ARE THE KEY CONCEPT OF THIS RESIDENTIAL PENTHOUSE BY GREGORY GATSERELIA.

Have you been influenced by a specific artist or an era?

Of course, I have my gods... But I don't feel restricted by a certain period.

On August 4, 2020, at 6:08 pm, a blast caused by 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate took place just meters away from your studio. Tell us about that tragic day.

I was abroad in Milan visiting a showroom. Just after 6 o'clock, I received a call from a friend telling me about an explosion. Then the videos started to come in. To be honest, I was in shock for several days. I lost a dear friend in the blast. Of course, the atelier was severely damaged. But thankfully, no loss of life within our family.

Has your design vision changed since that day?

I do not want to look back. I survived and life goes on. I have seen and experienced so much in Lebanon and I want to keep my dreams alive for my clients. We are all still in the same boat and we have moved on.

Moving on indeed, as you have several projects in the pipeline, don't you?

Yes, all around the world, in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, UK, France, Morocco...

Do you ever feel stressed with so many projects on the go?

To be honest, working on so many concepts at the same time makes me thrive.

Given the choice, do you prefer designing commercial or residential projects?

Each has a different energy. I am lucky to be able to choose my projects, I can be selective. I take my time to get to know each client to see if they are ready to go on the journey with me.

You are renowned for working with local and international artists on custom collaborations. What does this bring to each design?

It adds value, and uniqueness. For one project in Beirut, I dedicated a

space purely to a huge ceramic wall created by Mary-Lynn Massoud. I collaborate regularly with architect and furniture designer Ewa Szumilas who makes incredible pieces. It's exciting to discover new artists and artisans and incorporate their creations into spaces. It also highlights the work of relatively unknown artists.

As an avid collector of modern art, can you name a preferred artist?

Well, it's not easy to choose, but I must admit that Ziad Antar, a Lebanese photographer, is a favorite. His creation process, such as his Expired collection, always surprises me. I am a humanist and I know what I like, what is beautiful.

You co-founded the start-up, 'The Great Design Disaster', with Joy Herro in Milan to facilitate collectors in bringing their creativity to the works they acquire. Tell us a little bit more about this initiative.

I wanted to fill a blank. I used to go to flea markets and galleries to source pieces. Now, I also want to be involved in the design, to be more personal. 'The Great Design Disaster' enables me to design and work directly with artists – together we can create custom-made pieces. I also enable my clients to work with artists on individual collaborations, which has opened up a whole new world. This is very exciting – the process is empowering and at the same time it brings more commissions to artists and supports the work of skilled artisans. Recently, I have been working on a project with an incredible papier-mâché artisan.

Finally, how do you see the future of interior design in Lebanon and around the world?

We are still working but soon we will be obsolete, replaced by automation. The design will evolve and the interiors of the future will use new technologies and smarter methods such as robotics and automation. I think we are the last of the Mohicans. ■

Interview by Sabina Llewellyn-Davies