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Material Distinction

MERGING TRADITIONS
IN A MODERN BEIRUT HIGH-RISE

Architecture by Kohn Pedersen Fox

Interior Design by Joe Serrins Studio

Text by Amanda Vaill/Photography by Vicky Mokbel



When Joe Serrins agreed to design a new apartment for two longtime clients, a Miami-based businessman and his wife, he was hardly expecting to take a flying leap into the unknown. After all, when a designer is working with clients with whom he has collaborated twice before, the expectation of surprise becomes minimal.

But, as Serrins says now, "I was a little naive." To begin with, the apartment was located in Beirut, where both clients' extended families live. When Serrins took on the assignment, Lebanon was enjoying a period of tranquillity and prosperity after years of civil strife, but the peace was soon shattered by an outbreak of sectarian violence and outright war that continued off and on until a little more than a year ago. "Considering that a typical design job's major disruption might be a late delivery or a subpar cabinet," notes Serrins, "the political upheaval was a defining challenge."

For a couple in Beirut, designer Joe Serrins worked counter to local expectations of gilding and palatial details, favoring a modern, subtle treatment. ABOVE: In the entrance hall, a photo by Abelardo Morell leans against the custom carved gypsum wall bearing a map of Beirut. RIGHT: Art by Guerra de la Paz is suspended on steel cables in front of the glass curtain wall in the living area, an open space 57 feet long. Divider and daybed fabrics, Larsen.





LEFT: "We reinterpreted traditional Islamic decoration," Serrins remarks of the living area ceiling relief, which depicts a map of Paris. Bergamo sofa fabric. Carpet, AM Collections. ABOVE: In the dining area, Kim Keever's photograph hangs on a verd antique marble wall. A chandelier of Serrins's design pairs with 1970s chairs covered in a Rogers & Goffigon fabric.

His clients had purchased a 5,000-square-foot condominium in a crescent-shaped high-rise tower designed by Kohn Pedersen Fox. It overlooks Beirut's marina and has spectacular views of the Mediterranean and the Lebanon Mountains. The plans projected a large, high-ceilinged, irregularly shaped living area, with a more intimately scaled bedroom wing; but when Serrins started the job, "the building wasn't even out of the ground yet," so the designer could mold as well as finish the space.

His intention—revealing the influence of paragons like Finland's Alvar Aalto and the Portuguese architect Alvaro Siza—was to create a sculptural white shell, a gleaming continuum of salon, dining area and library extending along 57 feet of the building's glass curtain wall, in which the living areas would appear to float within the larger volume. Although the library, enfolded in white-lacquered cabinetry, would be separated from the main space by a motorized "lace" curtain, and the dining area would be defined by its green-marble wall and the canopy of its aluminum chandelier, Serrins gave the spaces a seamless expanse of white flooring. He opted for a marble emulsion that is poured like glass before being cut and installed in slabs. It's brilliantly hard once laid, but it was also fiendishly tricky to work with, easily chipped or warped if not handled properly. "I really got myself into something there," Serrins admits.

If negotiating the floor material was a difficult task, so was meeting the expectations of Lebanese suppliers and craftsmen. "I wanted to use a very limited palette to unify the space and bring in different kinds of materials to create richness. But the contrac-



RIGHT: Housed in a new Kohn Pedersen Fox high-rise, the apartment overlooks mountains, the harbor and the Mediterranean. The main terrace is paved in the same white marble emulsion Serrins used in most of the interior. "We wanted to do something that flowed throughout the space and unified all the parts," he says. **ABOVE:** In a guest room, he paired a 1965 Danish chair with a bedside table he designed. Calvin Klein bedcovering.

tor and crew were baffled. 'Where's the gold?' they would say. 'Where are the marble columns and the velvet curtains? That's what the Saudi princes have.' Fortunately, Serrins's clients—who gave him "a lot of leeway"—supported his vision: "We aren't flying you halfway around the world because we want you to do what's done there," the husband told him.

Acknowledging the apartment's setting, however, Serrins picked up the pinks and golds of the surrounding cityscape for some of the fabrics on the minimalist pieces his studio made for the salon. In the bedrooms, where walnut floors, woodwork and fabric-upholstered walls created a warmer ambience, he used the greens, browns and grays of the mountains. "I didn't have to look far for inspiration," he says. "The colors there are just spectacular."

But his definitive homage to the project's Lebanese context was the creation of two large-scale abstract relief maps, one of Paris (where his clients also have a residence) and one of Beirut, that form a floating ceiling for the salon and a curved wall defining the entranceway. Made of carved gypsum plaster, a traditional Islamic form of decoration, they were executed on the ground by local craftsmen before being painstakingly affixed to their places. When Serrins's Lebanese colleagues saw them installed, they forgot about gilding and velvet—and Serrins knew he had made a soft landing after all. "They were so proud," the designer remembers. "I think that's what won them over. It changed everything." □

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