

A Sioufi Memoir

BLANKPAGE x PLATFORM
collaboration unveils 1950's
renovated apartment

Text *Stephanie Nehme*
Images © *Marwan Hamouche*



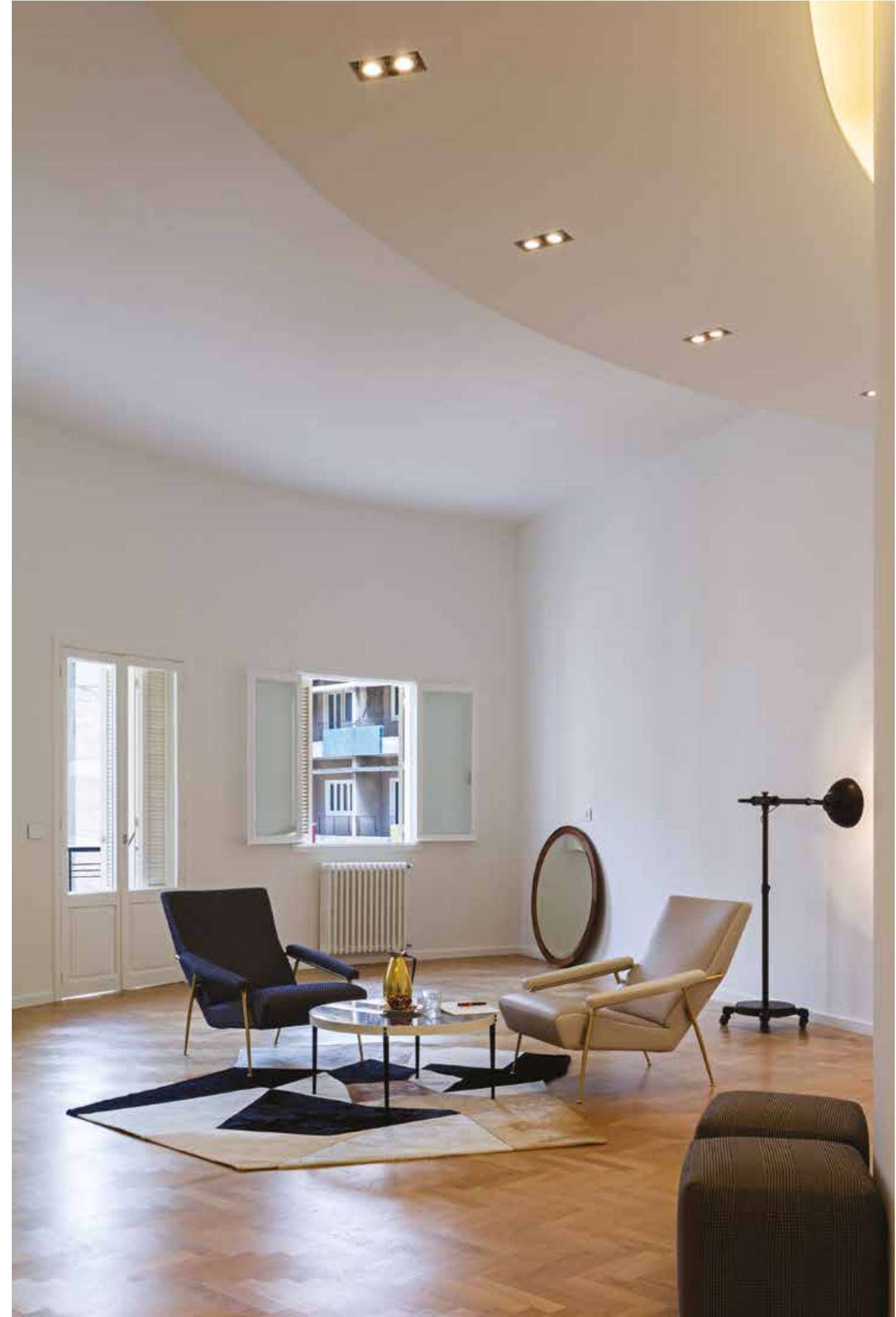
It's 6:00 p.m. Zeina is back from the market. She takes off her shoes and walks over to her son Abdullah's bedroom, where he plays with his Snakes and Ladders puzzle and picks him up in a warm embrace. Her husband Khalil gets off his typewriter and heads outside for a break on the balcony where a fainting sun is going down on their apartment in Sioufi in 1954. But it's actually year 2015 and the apartment is void but of still furniture and lights, which Khalil probably forgot to turn off. Those imaginary inhabitants or others make up the fictional characters in a story unwritten but directed by BLANKPAGE Architects.

BLANKPAGE, founded in 2000 and headed by Patrick Mezher, Karim Nader, and Walid Gbantous, starts every project from a blank page: without preconception of form or style. This collaborative design studio's work is driven by the desire to produce architecture of high quality and craftsmanship. Each project

responds to the specificities of the context it stems from and, driven by the symbolic and historical manifestations that are present in the place and the particularities of the given program, the resulting building would be an event that moves the city and its inhabitants into a novel experience of space.

In the event of introducing one of their latest projects, a renovated apartment in a 1950s building in Sioufi, Ashrafieh, located in a rich neighborhood that is peppered by mid to late 20th century buildings, the studio decided to create a series of staged photos, breathing life into the new but still uninhabited space.

"We wished to recreate the atmosphere of the period as if the apartment is alive in the 1950s. So, we tried to reenact 50s living in a contemporary way. It's stage setting but with a natural feel," Karim Nader of BLANKPAGE told Platform journal.





The photo shoot, a stage setting of mid-century paraphernalia sparked collaboration with Platform gallery. For this photoshoot, Platform provided BLANKPAGE with iconic furniture from the period like Gio Ponti by Molteni&C, Thonet, in addition to other designs from De La Espada and Cole Italia.

Other than using furniture from Platform, BLANKPAGE also chose actual items from the period itself to provide period consistency. "We went through the collections of our grand parents, Abou Jihad antique shop in Bachoura and others where we selected a whole setup of home appliances, fashion apparel, travel items, toys, books and sports gear."

The result is a collection of photos intended to show life in various rooms of the apartment telling a fictitious story of imaginary residents "creating a sense of the living."

Entering the apartment, one is welcomed into the living/dining room where a pair of 1953 Gio Ponti Poltrona arm chairs surround a Gio Ponti table and carpet. "We also put a circular Mathew Hilton mirror which is a gesture to an existing circular window. There is also a vintage lamp we found in an old souk in Lebanon."

A Lorenza Bozzoli trolley carrying a red wine bottle and medium stem glasses rests besides a Knot chair by Thonet. "The trolley is contemporary but you don't feel that it is contemporary. There is this feel of something that is still alive without creating a copy of the past," added Nader.



A modern, minimalist chair with a polished metal frame and a flat, rectangular backrest. A tennis racket is leaning against the chair.

An open wooden box containing various items, possibly a jewelry box or a storage box for small objects.

A pair of black, lace-up boots with a rugged sole, positioned near the window.

A large, rectangular, dark blue velvet pillow lying on the floor.

A second large, rectangular, dark blue velvet pillow lying on the floor.

A small, square, colorful patterned rug or mat lying on the floor between the two pillows.

A white electrical wall switch or outlet mounted on the wall.

A white door with a glass panel and a wooden shutter, leading to a balcony or outdoor area.

A window with a white frame and wooden shutters, offering a view of greenery outside.



In the master bedroom, a vintage typewriter and rectangular framed mirrors by Gio Ponti sit atop a Ponti earth-toned drawers chest. A vintage open trunk and hatbox lie in front of a chair, Kimble Windsor by Mathew Hilton, as if someone was arranging their clothes for a weekend trip. In another snap, the children's bedroom is pictured with a vintage racket and old ski boots next to a Snakes and Ladders puzzle and a Gio Ponti 1935 Montecatini chair.

The family living room displays a vintage Hoover vacuum cleaner that joins an old Loewe TV and S35 armchair and footstool by Marcel Breuer from Thonet. A vintage puzzle makes another appearance besides a stack of timeworn books.

Preceding the photo-shoot were nine months of work from designing the apartment to finalization. In order to avoid all historical pastiche while preserving the spirit of the space, the renovation removed all what is unnecessary in the internal partitioning of the apartment thus liberating a cross ventilated vista from the master bedroom all the way to the living area.

Corridors dismantled, a family living room was introduced at the heart of the house, benefiting from a double volume to an attic transformed into a children play area. It is connected to the maid's room on the same floor and kitchen below via a hidden staircase. The kitchen, in a typical contemporary move, loses its enclosure and opens up as an extension of the living/ dining area.

The building's façade inspired interior choices like replicating a circular window onto the bridge in the children's play area. The apartment benefits from half of the spectacular curve of this corner block where Le Corbusier hints like the curved balcony and the tubular balustrade also inspired the now-open kitchen's curved wall and ceiling.

"An old apartment in an old building of the 1950s in Beirut gets renovated while keeping the spirit of the period. But, the architecture has made a leap and now the apartment is somehow contemporary."

Nader explains that it is somewhat modern as there are items from the period that were kept like the original wooden shutters, windows and internal doors that were all restored to their initial condition and color that merges with the off-white of the existing elevation and the newly added floor finish.

A solid oak herringbone parquet floor unifies the whole space in a further gesture of openness of space. Blatt Chaya, traditional artisanal colored cement tiles, punctuate the bathrooms, "new tiles that give a sense of vintage." An all white paint job and contemporary recessed lighting add to the modern touch. "The lightness, the openness of the space, the transparency in the showers. Those are the new layers."

The final result, a memoir of sorts, has maintained the existing feelings that were present in the relic before restoration while projecting the space into 21st century openness, naturalness and clarity.