

Postcards With Purpose

Joseph Khoury '06's labor of love lands Beirut's heritage houses on a global preservation watch list.

By Winnie Yu

In 2016, Joseph Khoury '06 set out to photograph the historic heritage houses of Beirut, the city where he was born and raised. Many were Ottoman-era houses built for the city's business elite in the 19th century. Others were constructed during the country's French mandate in the first half of the 20th century.

Khoury, who studied graphic design at SUNY Empire's Center for International Education in Lebanon, found the houses visually arresting, and wanted to capture the beauty of the facades and preserve the architecture.

The images later became a series of postcards he named "Bouyout Beirut," which literally means "houses of Beirut." They also became the basis of his first solo exhibition.

Changed by a Blast

The postcard project took on greater significance, when a large amount of ammonia nitrate exploded at the port of Beirut, killing 218 people, injuring thousands of others, and causing \$15 billion in property damage. The blast was one of the largest non-nuclear explosions ever recorded and shook the entire nation of Lebanon and several surrounding countries.



▲ *Photographer Joseph Khoury '06 and his wife and business partner, Gabriela Cardozo, an architect.*

A few days after the explosion, Khoury and his wife Gabriela Cardozo went back to revisit the heritage houses, original postcards in hand. "It was sad, seeing all that destruction," Khoury told a reporter. "We didn't know the exact location of each postcard, so we walked around the streets trying to find them again."

The couple took comparison photos with the original postcards placed over the newly damaged structures. They also left postcards under corresponding façades in the hope that the houses would be rebuilt. The photos attracted a lot of attention. The couple seized the opportunity to raise money by selling postcards and prints, donating some to the Lebanese Red Cross.

A Wake-Up Call

In 2022, the World Monuments Fund placed the Beirut heritage houses on the organization's biennial watch list, which highlights 25 sites around the world of "extraordinary significance,

facing pressing challenges, and where WMF's partnership with local communities has the potential to make a meaningful difference." Since 1996, the WMF has worked to preserve architectural and cultural sites around the world.

Khoury thinks his photographs may have helped bring attention to the heritage houses. He had provided photos and videos of the houses to the Beirut Heritage Initiative, a group credited with getting the historic architecture on to the WMF watchlist.

For Khoury and Cardozo, the explosion also served as a "wake-up call" to try something new. In 2021, they moved to Ghent, Belgium, where they both finished postgraduate studies in digital storytelling at the KASK School of Arts in Hogent.

Today, the couple describe themselves as "storytellers" working on different creative projects. Khoury continues to do photography, with assignments ranging from travel and food to portraits and weddings. ■

Beirut's historic heritage houses became the subject of Joseph Khoury '06's photo project in 2016, which he turned into a series of postcards and later, his first photo exhibition. After the 2020 explosion of ammonium nitrate at the port of Beirut, he and his wife, Gabriela Cardozo, went back and held up the original postcards in front of the damaged structures. These images, shown above, captured the attention of media outlets and preservation organizations. They also helped bring the heritage houses to the attention of the World Monuments Fund, which placed these historic structures on the 2022 watch list of sites that merit preservation.

