

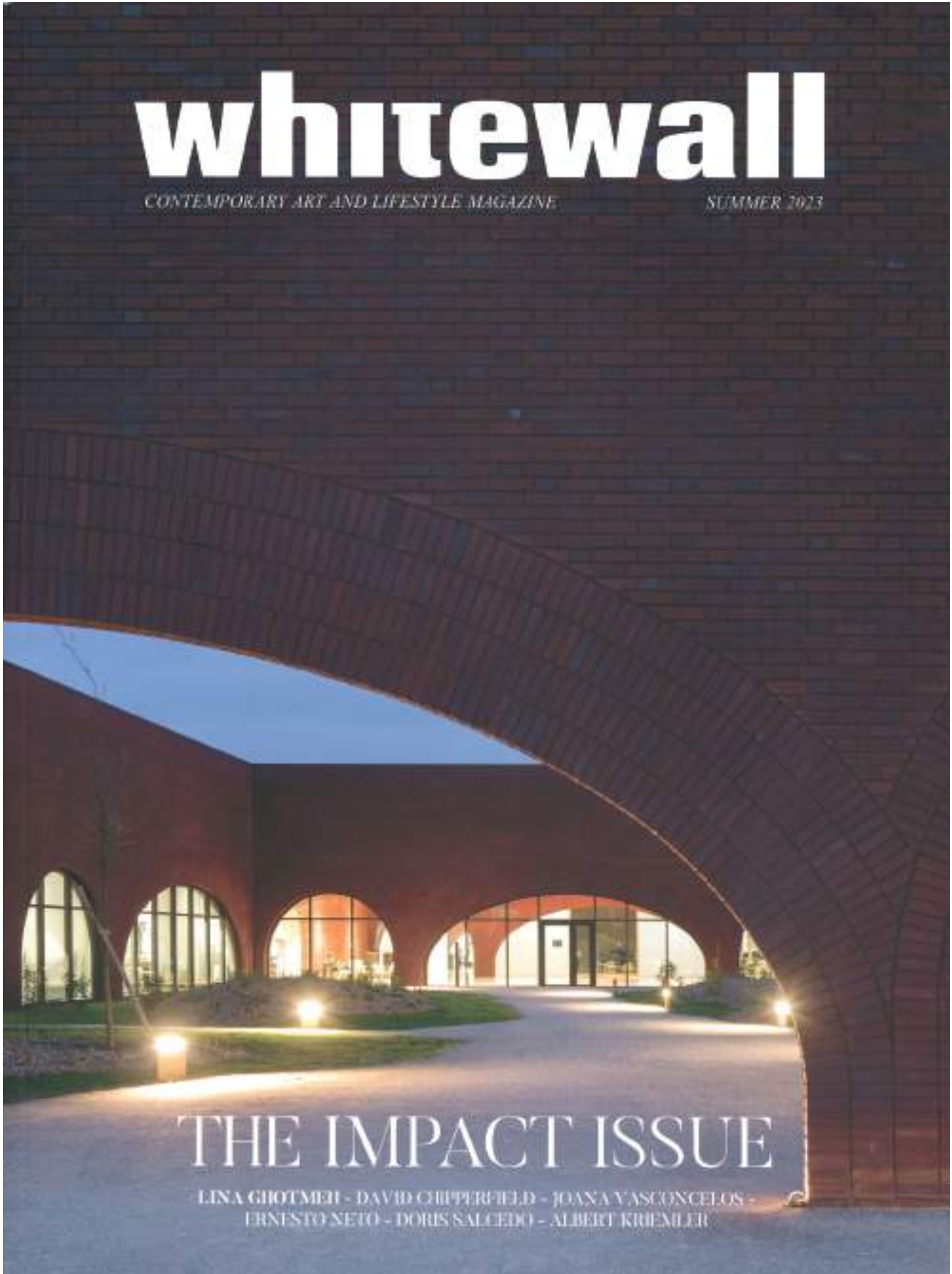
# whitewall

CONTEMPORARY ART AND LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

SUMMER 2023

## THE IMPACT ISSUE

LINA GHOTMEH - DAVID CHIPPERFIELD - JOANA VASCONCELOS -  
ERNESTO NETO - DORIS SALCEDO - ALBERT KRIEMLER



# Lina GHOTMEH

Centering her architectural practice around care for  
humanity and nature, and a reverence for past and future.

BY KATY DONOGHUE  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY KARE HAB





Standing in London's Kensington Gardens this summer is *A Noble*, the 2023 Serpentine Pavilion designed by Lina Ghotmeh. Resembling a sunburst from above, fanning out in 360 degrees of joyous rays, the communal structure's roof of wooden plates references the canopy of the surrounding tree-filled park. An open exterior and a warm interior filled with a series of tables and chairs laid out in a concentric manner. They beckon the public within, encouraging communion in spirit, sharing of meals, and connection through conversation. It calls to the public, "Come, grab a seat at our table."

The Paris-based, Lebanese-born architect behind the major annual commission is known for her attention to place and history. Ghotmeh thinks about how to make bodies feel comfortable and at home within a space. She carefully chooses material, considering energy, carbon footprint, and environmental impact. Her approach of thorough research into the ecological and cultural history of a site naturally leads her to create ethical projects—both for people and for the land. Her work answers today's questions by looking at yesterday's experiences.

Ghotmeh's residential and gallery-space project Stone Garden in Beirut, a textured tower, its inhabitants looking out on a city through plant-framed windows. Its handmade facade alludes to memory and craft, providing a sense of resilience and life in its embrace of the way we live in urban environments—aware of what's lost while hopeful about what remains. Her designs tell stories, as in the Sara Hildén Art Museum competition in Tampere, Finland. They aim at inclusivity, as in the National Choreographic Center of Tours in France. They strive for accessibility, as in Estonian National Museum in Tartu.

A week before delivering the first low-carbon, energy positive building in France, the Hermis Workshop in Normandy—its repeated arches in brick following the galloping horses of the region's equestrian heritage—Ghotmeh spoke with *Whitewall* from her studio in Paris about what goes into dreaming up architecture that cares.

**WHITEWALL:** *What initially made you want to pursue architecture? What was your early relationship to design and architecture, to spaces and environments?*

**LINA GHOTMEH:** I was born in Beirut. Growing up in Beirut was very particular because it was after wartime and during the war, seeing the city completely eaten up by violence. At the same time, I was fascinated in the construction. I was observing the city as an open section, where you can see what it is made of. It gives you the inner look at what constitutes our environment, seeing how nature was taking over the city and bringing beauty. I used to live on the seventh floor, and I remember looking down at kids playing and seeing how architecture can bring joy and play.

I always felt this desire to make beauty, to make places that people could meet, and how architecture could act as a positive role in our society in bringing people together.

I also grew up very close to nature, going to the village where my father has origins and seeing all the vernacular modes of construction. People used to construct their houses with their own hands, block by block, working with stone. Looking at the stone mason, these are moments that were impactful, seeing this closeness to materiality. I was fascinated by archeology, also, by this relationship with architecture to history and how it could unravel a way of doing also.

And then I wanted to become a doctor [laughs].

**WW:** *Oh yeah?*

**LG:** The body was fascinating for me! Biology and genetics especially, this relationship to the DNA and genetic engineering was fascinating. But I started studying architecture and I was passionate about it. I dropped biology and continued architecture. Maybe in another life!

**WW:** *It's funny because I was watching a video of a lecture you gave and you spoke about how the human body is made up of more microbes than human cells, making the parallel that if so much nature is in us, how much nature is in architecture? So that reference you made is starting to make some sense!*

**LG:** Yes! And the fact that our first habitat is our body and how much we are driven by our own flesh, our own being. That's looking at one's body but looking also at the environment as an extension of it and how much you want it to be sustainable and positive to live with.

**WW:** *You also said you were interested in archeology, and your practice you define at the intersection of history, future, humanity, nature. How did you arrive at that framework?*

**LG:** Architecture for me is an investigative act, similar to archeology. You dig in and bit by bit build up the truths or the reality of what had existed. It's only through what you find that you build up a certain story or a certain directive. All our lives are built on stories and the relationship that is told to spaces, and environments.

Architecture is a way of emerging something linked to the past that is new at the same time. This framework started building up in my school working through investigation and then suddenly it became part of my atelier and drew me more and more into projects that are very much related to context, that are sometimes difficult, that have a history, where you have to reestablish this environmental tie to a certain context.

**WW:** *How does that investigative, that research, that digging to and unhooking to place lead to creating an ethical building, a bioclimatic design that responds to local conditions and resources? Like what you've done with the Hermis Workshops in Normandy where a local brickyard was used and reintegrated for building materials, and where geothermal energy and solar panels are employed?*

**LG:** It's about integrating complexity into architecture and allowing it to become accessible. It's about listening to the environment. It is not theoretical research. It's about really investigating the place, its material.

The Hermis Workshop is the first low-carbon building built in France. I was looking at the context in Normandy where the earth is very good for making bricks. We identified a local artisan brick maker. Using the local earth and material is a much lower carbon than sourcing materials from another part of the world.

Then, thinking about bioclimatic design that has little impact on its environment. If you look at the façade, it is hollowed so you enter a courtyard first, and then you get into the building. So it's about trying to respect the local landscape and immerse the building in relation to it. There is this sense of emerging from the environment, the material environment itself. In that sense, it's more sustainable, it's more ecological as a construction.

And from the immaterial environment, we related to Hermis and their history, the history of saddlery and horse riding. Building spans with brick is about making arches and echoing at once the gallops of the horse. In a way it is very environmental, and is about the experience of people into the feel the narrative. Unleashing the imaginary and when they are experiencing the architecture of this building.

**WW:** *Something else that defines your practice is the idea of incorporating a handmade quality to architecture. Often when we think of architecture, we think of it on this massive scale, with materials that are machine-made.*







**LG:** The hand and the work of material allow a connection between humans and the built environment. For example, in the project of Stone Garden in Beirut, people are touching the facade, getting close and this emotional relationship is reinstated. This kind of sense is so important because it allows us to remember that we are part of the environment and people are part of this content of material. We are material and materials are very important in our life. We don't live in abstract volumes. Nature is full of texture, full of materiality, so it's about echoing and continuing that relationship through construction.

There is magic in what the hand can craft. If we're working with glassmakers, maybe advocating imperfections—glass that is not completely transparent and has this texture and bubbles. Things don't have to be slick. Imperfection is part of materiality. It's about working with it to allow beauty and precision.

**WW:** And those slight imperfections, that un-slickness, really does make our body feel different in a space.

**LG:** And we sometimes forget how much we are influenced by the spaces we are in, they awaken our senses and drive our acts.

**WW:** With projects like the residential Stone Garden in Beirut, in particular with its window gardens, you've talked about this idea of architecture as a space for healing. How did you arrive at that idea of architecture's potential to be a site of care?

**LG:** I think it's nice how you say it, that it's about caring—how you care and allow architecture to be caring to its environment. The Stone Garden project is trying to listen to the city of Beirut which has been war-torn. It talks about a personal experience which of course is an experience that is also a collective one. I'm not the only one who has lived through this period of time of war or have seen the city center completely destroyed but refurbished so quickly.

The wound in the city needs time to heal and you need some time to see and to really appropriate it and to pronounce it differently. Stone Garden and its architecture try to look at the city and at the different languages of the city,

like allowing the window to become a place of life but also the memory of what had existed before and opening our field of imagination. The window is a garden and a way of framing the city differently. It's about creating a comfortable experience within the living environment. Letting in curiosity, being porous to the context, and trying to instill it in the building a care about what's happening around it.

Some people look at it like it has existed for hundreds of years, others wonder about the facade, and others feel proud that it has elevated the city of Beirut. It's not neutral. It instigates reactions.

Personally, this building is a healing process.

**WW:** How can architecture encourage and reflect openness and inclusivity—like in the project "Urban Dance": National Choreographic Center of Tours. I loved your description of it as not a space for the initiated. That it is art for anyone.

**LG:** The first approach is always thinking about architecture as a device, rather than as an object. It's a tool to expand, to be beyond its own self. Tours is a good example of that where the entrance becomes this large opening that allows the dancers to go out from the heart of the building and spill over the city and vice versa with people coming in.

By relating spaces in a different way, by creating porosities more interactions can happen. In Beirut this is related to the ground floor, the gallery space, an open space that is multipurpose for exhibitions or talks, and special configurations that connect to the city.

And the warmth of architecture is important. Feeling that you are at comfort at ease that it's not alien, that you are there to actually engage and to feel at ease and to feel good.

**WW:** And do you see bringing nature into these spaces as a way to norm them up?

**LG:** Nature is always part of architecture for me. In the Ateliers Hermès, courtyards orchestrate the entrance and nature can really grow around the architecture.



## “ We are not living in abstract volumes. Nature is full of texture, full of materiality ”

The Stone Garden windows are planters. But it's always measured, it's not about invading the building with greenery that is impossible to manage. It's looking at traditions and practices. In the city, people always have their own planters on balconies, so this is a practice that already exists. So then initiating that as part of the building and then it grows and makes it full of life.

Every time there is this kind of relation to natural context and to scales of nature—whether it's a plant, a tree, or a planter—it is reminding us of time. Nature can give this slow time and this slow relationship to our context.

**WW:** *This summer, you've designed the annual Serpentine Pavilion. You've created a table, an inviting structure to gather and connect, sitting round a table in a shared meal or conversation. What was the process of designing this pavilion like?*

**LG:** It is the space of porosities. It's a place of freedom, it can be whatever it wants to be. It embodies the challenges we have of our time. How can it be the most sustainable? How can it be assembled and disassembled? Reusable? How can it talk about what we need today and allow that dialogue to happen?

I wanted the pavilion to be a place of assembly, a place where people meet under one roof in a modest, intimate space that talks about getting closer to oneself and to the other. It's about sitting around the same table, sharing a talk, a meal, thoughts, a place for an open dialogue.

It's structure and shape echo the trees around it, the nature that is surrounding it, as well.

**WW:** *What materials were you drawn to?*

**LG:** It's an all-wood construction, trying to be as low carbon as possible. The chairs and tables are all custom made especially for the pavilion. There are some metal elements just to hold the structure at points.

It's temporary in this location, and it's reassembled somewhere else, so it lives another life afterwards. It has roots in terms of its form from this place and then it's able to talk about this original place somewhere else.

**WW:** *Are you looking forward to seeing how this pavilion is activated? You've talked a lot about the research that goes into a project. What is the process like observing what happens after its been built? Is there research then, too?*

**LG:** Of course, at the Hermès Workshop, I spent one whole day sitting in an office to see how it's living—watching and listening to all the things that they like or things that need to be adjusted for the site. It's fantastic because you can see how they appropriate spaces, where they gather, how they're working, and how comfortable they feel.

I always feel like when things are done with care, people care. There is more respect, more care, and more beauty in the way they live within the space.