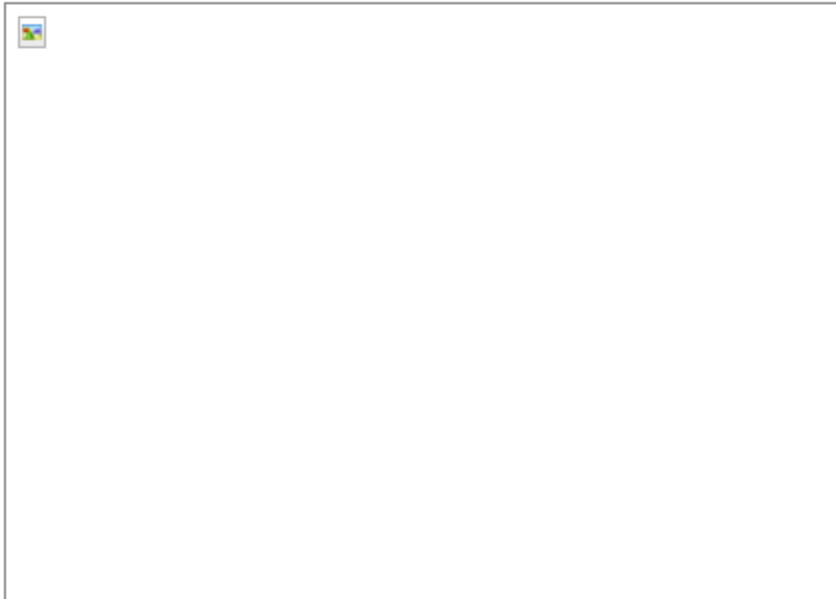


## 290, Rue du Liban

Julia Lindau



The ghost-like figures wandering across the pages of *290, Rue du Liban* make you question what the images are all about. The address, 290 Rue du Liban, used to be that of a building that was constructed at the turn of the 20th Century, but that no longer stands today. The recently self-published photography book by Engram titled after the address attempts to chronicle the history of a once beautiful building now gone.

Photographers Caroline Tabet and Joanne Andraos, who make up Engram, were particularly interested in learning about the building's past. Tabet had lived there until it was torn down and supplanted by a commercial development project in 2005. Engram's exploration of the space not only produced a series of beautiful photographs, it also uncovered a fascinating tale that in many ways reflects the layers upon layers that make Beirut the city it is today.

Born in Lebanon, Tabet's parents moved during the civil war to Paris, where she studied photography. Andraos, also Lebanese, was born in France. Despite growing up in one of the art capitals of the world, they both returned to Beirut to pursue their art careers in their ancestral homeland.

According to Tabet, Beirut "is a fascinating city. I get more inspired here than in France. Although in France I love the light, there is not a lot I want to do there. In Beirut, there is so much to it... I love the architecture. It is very rich, and [for an artist], there is a lot of potential."

Perhaps Engram finds the city so inspiring because both Tabet and her partner are drawn to old, abandoned or destroyed buildings, and Beirut undoubtedly houses a plethora of those. "Something about them attracts me," Tabet told NOW Extra when discussing some of the decrepit venues in which she's worked, from the Egg in downtown Beirut to the Grand Théâtre de Beyrouth, to the abandoned train station in Mar Mikhaïl. "With buildings like these, you have a certain poetry that comes naturally. It's very inspiring."

*290, Rue du Liban*, which was self-published at the end of 2010, certainly demonstrates the duo's interest in exploring the history these old structures hold. They were first displayed at an exhibition in Beirut in 2006, and capture the eerie yet beautiful feeling of the house with fluidity.

According to Tabet, she and Andraos "are both influenced by film and cinema in general... Our series work

like a film strip, [and] they tell a story when we put [the photographs] all together. It's quite sequenced."

Black-and-white photos comprise the bulk of the project and are filled with so much light and movement that at times the viewer cannot make out the figures present in each. This is, of course, intentional. Andraos and Tabet used seven models, themselves included, to evoke thoughts of ghosts and "to materialize all the people and all the energy that had passed through the house." The point is to give the viewer a sense and an understanding that the life and vibrancy that were once a part of the residence are no more.

But not only Engram's pictures are included in *290, Rue du Liban*. While investigating the history of the building, the two photographers discovered negatives from a shoemaker shop, which was located on the building's ground floor until the civil war broke out in 1975. These photographs were included in the publication.

Thought was also put into the book's layout; a definite plus that helped with the story's narrative. Some photographs stand alone, while others are paired, with blank pages scattered throughout. "In the progress of the book, you have pictures that really talk alone and others that work well together. Also, some need to breathe. Sometimes, the movement of the image tells us if it's going to be on the left or right-hand side. Sometimes you want to do a series, because they say something [together]," explained Tabet.

Engram's project illustrates Beirut's rapidly-changing landscape with heritage being buried under development and modernization. Ironically, the strongest evidence came with 290 Rue du Liban's demolition, when a Roman necropolis was discovered underneath that included a number of tombs and artifacts.

"It's very sad because [the Lebanese] don't know what they're losing. In a few years, they'll turn around and the character of the place [will be gone]. It's influenced by both sides: the oriental side and the occidental side... It was like this but it's not any more. It's a heritage that [we're] losing."

*290, Rue du Liban* by Engram (Joanna Andraos and Caroline Tabet) can be bought for \$35.



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