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DAR BAYRUT
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Civic Ecology

To propose a House for Arts and Culture in times where both notions are questioned; isn't an action reducible to an architectural project.

It is rather an invitation to integrate a versatile cultural and artistic production-consumption to the new dynamics of the city.

We ask ourselves two questions.

What is art in the city?

Manuel Borja-Villel, director of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid replies for El Pais: *We didn't realize that this creativity and radicalism had become labels for consumption. We must reflect on where we are, what we want and where we are going and ask ourselves whether what we are looking for is an art that contributes to the public space, or on the opposite, whether what we are interested in is to create a new label to show off in parties.*"¹

What is Art in Bayrut?

Going to Dar Bayrut is an urban civic practice before being an intellectual one. Departing from the concept that art is a form of awareness by means of all the senses, Dar Bayrut proposes a dialog with the surrounding environment. Awakening new perceptions, it tries to induce the happening of activities that confer a communitarian identity to the site. The house opens up to the « public », tames it, avoiding an intimidating and exclusively elitist art representation.

On Civic Ecology

Civic

From latin *civicus*, from *civis* citizen: of or relating to a citizen, a city, citizenship or community affairs.²

Ecology

From german *Ökologie*: The totality or pattern of relations between organisms and their environment. ²

Dar Bayrut seeks to establish a Civic Ecology pattern. It is a platform of exchange: With the city, by means of restoring a **citizen's activism**.

With the urbanization, by means of **sensitive acknowledgement** of a place.

"At a time when the term city is bandied everywhere, reducing its centrality to a purely logistic notion, it is useful to recall the fundamental difference

*between civitas-the origin of the term city- and urbs - Civitas is the political institution that signifies the collective will of a community to inhabit and coexist in one place. Urbs is the infrastructure that ultimately materially supports this choice. When the city is reduced to mere urbanization, cityness itself is reduced to a "Potemkin village"-an urban caricature devoid of any real social or cultural centrality"*³

In the post-war reconstructed down-town of Bayrut, the contribution in "city-making" of a "constructive collectivity" is vital. The Centre of Art and Culture of a city being one of its most natural and emblematic places for one's self-expression, identification and belonging; plays therefore a meditative role between the collective and the city's public realm.

Ambiguous Liminality

Lot 128-04: a liminal parcel.

"The liminal state is characterized by ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy". "Liminality is a period of transition where normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behavior are relaxed - a situation which can lead to new perspectives." ²

Positioning itself on the border of the down-town and the Fouad Chehab avenue, one of the major vehicular axis of the city, Dar Bayrut is caught in between two distinct identities.

In the Ecology pattern it seeks to establish; it recognizes the infrastructure as an element of spatial composition and a potential for interaction. It draws its key interventional elements: A wall, a plaza, and an L shaped volume, from this interlude between infrastructure and a compact urban matrix.

Key Interventions

a Wall as an open limit

The wall acting as a border of 8m height with the Fouad Chehab avenue is a limit between two velocities at which the project is approached: a high speed highway and a pedestrian strolling pace.

It is re-cycled as a vertical support for freely self-expressed art and as the background of all the activity taking place on the ground floor level.

From the highway, it is crossed by delivery trucks accessing the centre, making the downloading of the material a display in itself.

On the ground level it delimitates the open core of the project: al-Saha (the plaza).

From a limit, it becomes a transition. From a flattened surface it thickens as a volume which rebounds and absorbs the activities and behaviours of the public and the artists

Interacting 3 Elements

a blown-up Threshold

Facing the wall, an L shaped volume: DarBayrut.

Angle corners: Drawing an L plan on the groundfloor, DarBayrut borders the Ghalghoul and the northwest streets creating an outer closed angle and an inner open one. In elevation, the L shaped profile of the building projects its corner angle towards the Fouad Chehab avenue, extending swiftly over the inner space and constituting its floating cover. "Standing tall" on the limits of the lot, the high rise elements of the volume constitute a **blownup Scale Threshold** identifying and sheltering the inner public space of the Dar and inducing a ritual of passage outside/ inside and vice versa.

The content/functions within the volume follow two logics of distribution:

Stacking the variety of functions of the program in the feet of the L volume and **Cantilevering** its most noble features: the movie theatre, and the concert hall

Wall. Threshold .Void

a core as a Void

In between wall and threshold, cantilevered roof and ground floor lies the void: al Saha. It is the open air public core of the project: being wrapped within an envelope grants it an intimacy within the public. It also generates an urban tension at the scale of the sector J of the Bachoura district, with other cultural equipments as the Grand Theatre of Beirut nearby. It is also the ending point of a pedestrian passageway planned to end in the plot and starting from the Nijmeh district , where is located the main plaza of the downtown. The plaza creates a low-pressure gap from which the project is mainly accessed; from the northeast street and from the parking underground, it suggests various scenarios of crossing visually, physically...the lot. The vertical volume of the centre on the north, separates it from the nearby small plaza, enhancing it with an exclusive small scale identity not overwhelming it.

Inside Out

The main aim of DarBayrut is **communicating** the artistic and cultural content of the volume; and **absorbing** the “production” of the space by the users. It constructs a framework of spaces allowing this dialog.

a vertical Split at the angle of the volume is the main entry from Ghalgoul street and is in the prolongation of the planned pedestrian passageway. We enter in a shaft-like hall that widens out on the plaza or stretches up, with the eye glance or elevators, to the successive above floors.

screen as an Art billboard

The stage of artistic production is a display that transgresses the hall's limit and projects itself in the city.

Frame-Openings, zoom and reframe particular vistas of the city and surroundings.

Units of interaction, the stacking of functions creates interesting interstitial spaces, exploited to create inner transparency and interesting perspectives for visitors and residents that erase the

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Upside down

difference observer/actor.

Ground floor a Palyground

The plaza engages informal uses, ephemeral activities... that along with the cafeteria and fluxes of circulation keep DarBayrut a live centre.

Suspended Green squares. are samples of urban gardens, connecting art and culture to nature and opening new vistas on the environment.

Materials a tactile language

to best insert the building within its context and suggest space usages: Rough concrete façades are softened with a peculiar ornament Fann (Art) and Thakafat (Culture) written in Arabic calligraphy. The envelope wrapping the plaza is of two L “carpets”: One extending under the surface of the cantilever and along the inner north façade is in copper absorbing the soundscape and reminding a factory like space of production. The second L carpet stretches from the ground floor up on the back wall is of neutral polished concrete, a blank sheet inviting to scratch.

DAR BAYRUT

We started with two questions on art; we end with a conclusion on Culture.

Transmitting Culture

A delicate word in the particular context of the city of Beirut! Beirut being a sedimentation of various cultures in the conventional sense of the word and also a currant always draining new input; as in the case of DarBayrut open to the Omani production as well. Therefore culture lies in this ability to understand and integrate various forms and backgrounds of knowledge.

Re-locating Culture within the Quotidian

Preserving a big cultural and artistic tradition but relocating it within the present time.

The power of art and culture in public domain lying in their potential to reflect intensified forms of the quotidian, while presenting the possibility of a heightened experience of the here and now.

¹ - El Pais 03.11.2008

² - Merriam-Webster's Dictionary

³ - Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara, *The City as political form* (Visionary Power, NAI Publishers, Rotterdam 2007)