

# **boîte magique**

## **intention**

We would like the new Beirut House of Arts and Culture to be a very public place in this densely built city, where different groups of people with a wide variety of interests are intentionally brought together to mix. Partly this will occur naturally through the planned combination of public spaces such as the theater, conference halls, cinema, documentation center and exhibition space. Our strategy goes further however - we stack these required spaces of the program in such a way that two additional, unforeseen public spaces are created: the covered space of the entry plaza fronting and extending the Bacri House square and the walled sculpture garden on our western rooftop. These will be transitional places where the visitors to different events can meet and interact.

The street level entry plaza is the grand open-air foyer to the center, the place where everyone from skaters to fashionistas can see and be seen. Here something is always happening, going and coming, street traffic, pedestrians, an obvious meeting point. The walled garden has a very different nature - more secluded, filled with pine trees, surrounded by the city, yet twenty meters above street level: a place to take a coffee and sit under the shade of trees, reading the paper.

These new public spaces are connected to each other in section over the diagonal by the grand hall, so that filtered sunlight falls through the void space onto the plaza and the street level visitor is made curious about the building interior.

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We imagine the cultural center as a series of containers, whose content is always changing – the magic box. Our priority is to create a flexible structure, which can be radically transformed and reinterpreted by the directors of a wide variety of events. Highly adaptable, the entry plaza and the sculpture garden can easily take on different functions. The small performance hall, for instance, can be completely opened to the plaza, so that the plaza becomes the stage. Or the seating is reversed, and the audience is located on the plaza, looking in towards a stage inside the performance hall.

Similarly, the street-level foyer of the large performance hall can be completely opened to the plaza, creating an uninterrupted flow between interior and exterior and transforming the plaza into a large covered foyer for theater visitors during intermissions. This organization also allows the use of the large performance hall independently from the rest of the center.

At roof level, the dramatic space of the restaurant also flows without interruption into the sculpture garden through large folding glass doors, permitting a variety of functions to take place both inside and out: a fashion show, a concert in the garden, a poetry reading, an important celebration. The exhibition space is a high, top-lit space without columns, which can be divided easily into smaller galleries – with or without natural light – for different exhibitions.

### **organization**

The building program is stacked vertically into three sections: a massive base housing the performance spaces including the Italian-style theater, the small performance hall, cinema and conference halls; an interstitial zone containing the administration, documentation center and workshops; and the large, cantilevered volume of the exhibition hall and restaurant adjoining the sculpture garden. The layers are not absolute, but instead expand up or down as the program requires – the dance and art studios are located in the garden, for example, initiating informal contact between visitors and artists.

Each layer has its own identity and atmosphere accentuated by differences in natural light, materials and even structural systems. Services and parking levels are below grade, accessible over rue Ghalghoul.

### **circulation**

Pedestrians generally arrive at the entry plaza, which addresses the Bacri House square. The primary vertical circulation is organized in a grand hall through the building, which acts as an internal street and provides escalators, bridges, aisles and elevators for access to the upper levels. The performance halls and conference rooms on the ground floor are visually and physically connected over the grand hall to the cinema, bar and café spaces located on the first floor.

Continuing by escalator, visitors can access the working spaces of the building - the documentation center and the workshops - before arriving at the exhibition level.

The exhibition space is connected to the sculpture garden through a very high room with a continuous brise soleil, where the restaurant is located and which culminates in a view down onto the entry plaza below. Alternatively, visitors and staff can take the short cut using the bank of elevators in the south circulation core, which also provides wheelchair access to all floors.

## **icon**

Public buildings usually distinguish themselves architecturally from the surrounding urban fabric through scale, material, form, placement, or any combination thereof. As we study the surroundings in the Ghalghoul district, existing and proposed, we recognize a common characteristic - density. Most structures appear blocky and massive, maximizing their allowable floor area ratio and economic viability. In the House of Arts and Culture we have the luxury of the void – the envisioned program does not require the full occupation of the site. In recognizing the void as a valuable public space in the city – as the entry plaza and the sculpture garden – our proposal appears in context surprisingly small, sculptural in volume and most of all, unusual in its horizontal massing compared to its neighbors.

This horizontality is emphasized by the strategy of stacking the program into distinct levels and by wrapping the lower floors in a continuous gold (brass) mesh. The mesh consists of different densities and patterns, responding to requirements of solar shading and views in and out. Particularly at night, when the mesh is backlit, the material identifies the cultural center as an inviting, permeable building.

Possibly the most iconic element of our proposal is the dramatic cantilever of the exhibition box, which by its placement and volume defines and addresses both the plaza below and the garden above. Media facades clad three sides of the exhibition box. Here we imagine work by contemporary artists, video installations and excerpts from performances at the center to be presented to the city as on a moving billboard.

## **environmental impact**

Using current technologies - geothermal, photovoltaic, and solar collection - our goal is to design the House of Arts and Culture as an autonomous building, satisfying its requirements for heating, cooling, electricity and irrigation water independently of the public utilities. While the initial investment in these systems

exceeds the cost of using conventional utilities, independence will dramatically reduce yearly operating costs and be amortized over a reasonable period of years. The cultural center can and should act as a catalyst and example for other projects looking toward an environmentally sustainable future.

## **construction**

A reinforced concrete structure is proposed – many of the columns, wall and ceiling surfaces are in exposed concrete, constructed from partially prefabricated elements. The organization of the building is characterized by the stacking of large, column-free spaces of various sizes. Three basic structural elements are used to solve the problems of spanning large spaces at the lower levels while supporting more regularly structured spaces above: the story-high deep beam, the storey-high truss with regular diagonal struts and pre- or post-tensioned reinforced concrete T-beams.

The exhibition space at the top of the building cantilevers about 24 meters over the entrance plaza. The structural walls on the closed sides act as deep beams – the fourth side of the space is glazed and open to the roof garden, with a storey-high truss connecting the roof with the floor plate to form a cantilever system and contributing to the lateral stability of the open box. For the long-span roof structure, pre-tensioned beams span approximately 19 meters, creating openings in between for natural light from above.

The levels below the exhibition space have skeleton-framed structures with regular column grids, open plans and lightweight partitions containing offices, archives and workshops. In the archive level, regularly spaced diagonal struts connect floor and ceiling plates, forming trusses to span the large spaces below, at the same time supporting the floor slab at short intervals and reduce the depth of the floor package.

The lower levels – performance spaces - form a massive base for the more open levels above – the structure is supported by load-bearing reinforced concrete walls. In the large auditorium, the available depth needed for acoustic elements in the ceiling is used for pre-tensioned beams spanning 20 meters and carrying the columns from the level above.