

The House of Arts and Culture

The Lebanese-Omani Centre

The House of Arts and Culture has a fundamental role in supporting the renovation of Beirut's Central District. It should be seen not only as an important cultural and artistic facility, but also as a place for social integration and democratic participation, a place where ideas can be exchanged freely and Lebanese culture is not only presented, but also nurtured and fully supported. In this building, the Arts and Culture are not only meant to be sheltered, but also to be given the ideal conditions to blossom in new and innovative manifestations.

A place such as this must become part of the cultural identity of Beirut's citizens; it must stand out as a landmark among the surrounding urban tissue, a beacon of light signaling the place where culture and creativity are the order of the day. It should stand out as an iconic building, impressive but not overbearing; its forms must imply dignity but also be inviting and friendly for each and everyone. It must establish a relation with the city's past history and present condition, while also aiming to support a better and brighter future, one in which culture assumes a vital and central role in its citizen's everyday life.

To comply with all these complex (and at times conflicting) prerogatives, the project for Beirut's House of Arts and Culture presents itself through two different "faces", which could be considered the "outer" and "inner" faces of the building.

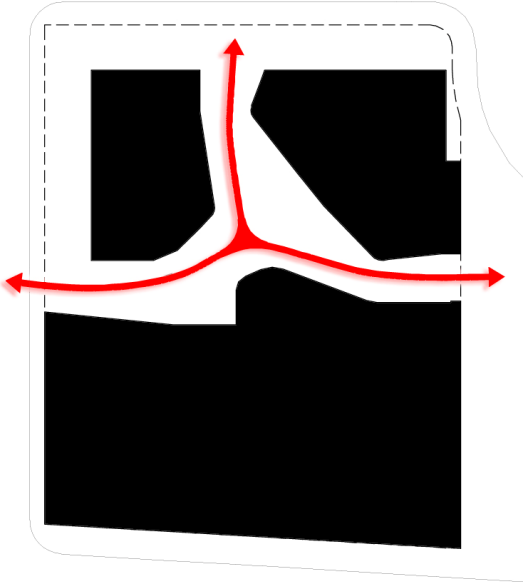
The outer face, the one which is turned towards the surrounding city, assumes a solid, monolithic character, composed of angular forms clad in rough stone blocks. This face relates to Beirut's rich history and acts in accordance to the surrounding urban form, adopting a volumetric composition similar to most of the Central District's blocks. The impervious rock skin is dotted with a few small "carved" openings that create a sensation of mystery, allowing just a little glimpse of what may be hidden behind the solid walls. However, this respectful manner is abruptly and unexpectedly subverted in some points of the building, as the angular forms are bent in dramatic and unexpected directions towards the center of the building.

As the visitor starts exploring these fissures, he is taken to a wide public plaza that crosses through the middle of the building and connects three of the surrounding streets. This public plaza is where the House's second or inner face is finally revealed, a face whose character is drastically contrasting to the outer one: fluid and crystalline glass skins undulate back and forth, configuring a sort of "glass cave" inside the exterior rock shell. Through these curving glass forms the visitor can see most of what's taking place inside the building; he is suddenly overwhelmed with the sheer force of the sum of creative stimuli that is all at once unveiled before his eyes. This architectural solution allows the visitor to be "in" the building

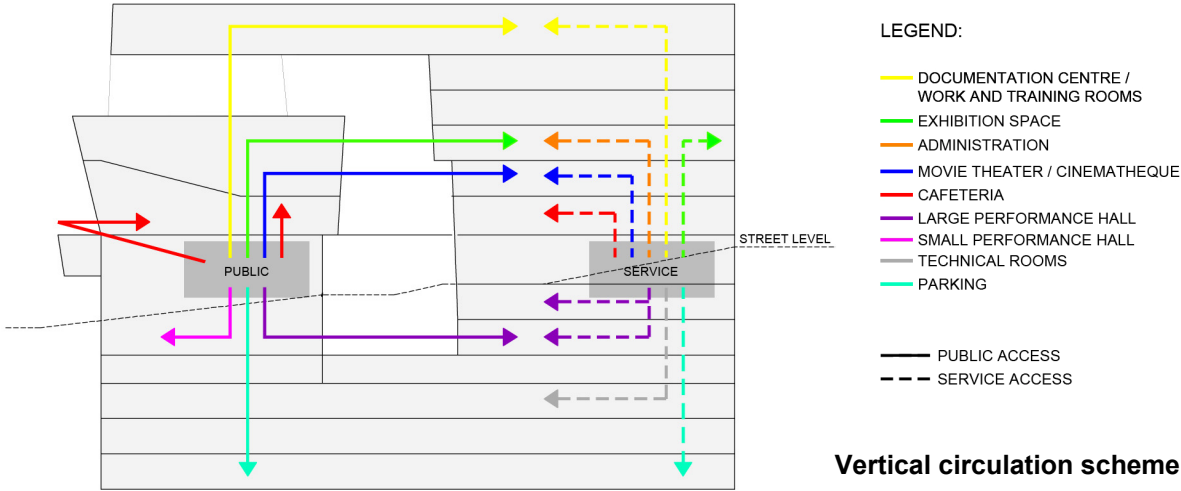
without having entered it yet; he is outside the building but is standing right at its geometric center, observing the numerous activities that are taking place all around him. Such a proposition would render Beirut's House of Arts and Culture an archetypical form that is both abstract and contemporary.

The main entrance to the House is positioned inside this plaza, and opens up to a broad, 30-meters high atrium that articulates the access to all the sectors of the building. From this entrance hall the visitor may go down to the lower floor, where the access to both the performance halls and adjoining foyer are located. The foyer is located right under the ground floor's public plaza, and the volumes housing the performance halls respectively rise up 12 and 20 meters, configuring the monolithic base of the building.

From the entrance hall the visitor may also access the different upper levels, where the cafeteria, movie theater, cinemateque, exhibition hall, workshops and documentation center are located. Elevators give access to platforms in different levels of the atrium, which in turn lead to walkways that cross over the public plaza to reach all these areas, which are positioned on top of the performance halls. These walkways slash through the glass skin that surrounds the atrium, deforming it in sinuous shapes protruding over the public plaza. Pedestrians in the plaza can watch the people inside the building moving through these walkways, further increasing the sensation of dynamicity one perceives even before entering the building. This "walkways system" would further increase the relation and interaction



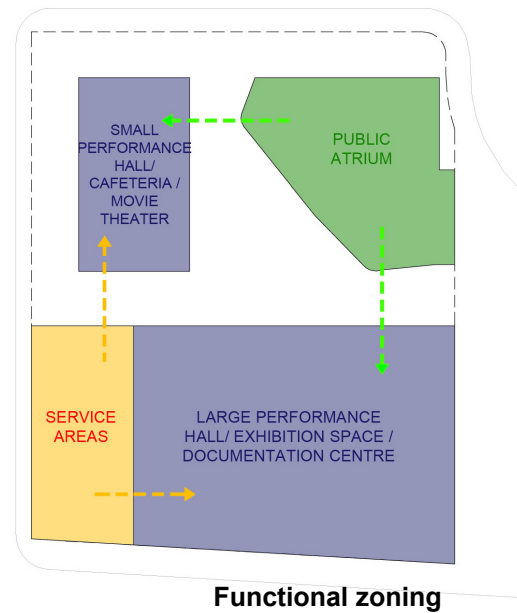
Public Plaza and Building permeability



Vertical circulation scheme

between the multiple activities housed in the building, as each activity has a unique point of view of the others and can also be seen from a multitude of angles.

The uppermost level houses the workshops and the documentation center. This level has a significantly larger area than the others and is positioned on top of the public plaza, sheltering it from the harsh sun or bad weather and shadowing the sinuous glass forms of the “inner face”. This solution effectively allows the glass skin to be totally protected from the sun in any given time, allowing great transparency without causing uncomfortable conditions.



The service entrance is located in the secondary street on the west side of the building. This entrance gives access to all the supporting spaces of the various sectors of the House: the delivery area on the ground floor; the technical rooms on the underground floors; the set workshops, storage rooms, changing rooms and backstage areas of the performance halls; the service entrance of the cafeteria; the exhibition hall’s workshop; and the service areas of the training rooms and documentation center.

The underground parking floors are accessed through an entrance near the northwestern corner of the block. All the 278 required parking spaces are distributed among three underground floors.

Special attention was given to the design of the two performance halls, especially regarding their flexibility of use and formal configuration. Both were designed according to a modulated structure that allows a wide range of possibilities for this space, in terms of public and stage access. While being adaptable, it could be transformed in an Italian style theatre, a round theatre, a congress hall with platform, or a flat space, without jeopardizing all the optimal acoustic, technical and visibility conditions.



Detail of the flexible lay-out system of the Performance Halls

This flexibility is only possible due to a system of rails disposed on both sides of the performance halls that allows the movement of metallic beams that support movable platforms in which the seats are located. The whole structure was designed to be retractable from the floor up to the acoustic ceiling, while being adjustable to the different configurations and spatial needs.

To sum up, the project for the Lebanese House of Arts and Culture intends to give the city of Beirut a building that not only serves to house a multitude of creative, artistic and cultural endeavors, but one that visiting would be a creative experience unto itself. A House like this one must strive to rend each and every visitor deeply touched and intrinsically transformed. A House that is given to Arts and Culture, but that is also built, from brick to soul, on Arts and Culture.