

HOUSE OF ARTS AND CULTURE

Beirut, Lebanon

Urban and architectural theory

The outcome of this project is the result of a detailed analysis of the City of Beirut. In this process, we have 'learned' from the City and theorized three main paradigms of its urban architecture: *Monolith*, *Courtyard* and *Icon*- and solidified them into a new archetype: a modern yet classical House of Arts and Culture.

I – Monolith

Beirut is filled with exceptional buildings that stand out by their simplicity and massive clarity, with subtractions as a result of logic requirements. Rationalism is found in different degrees depending on program, orientation, and urban image.

We have reduced this condition to its minimal degree, to a zero absolute, to engender the most remarkable and pure monolithic building. The result is a cubic monument of forty meters, with platonic origins yet no actual comparable precedent.

II – Courtyard

The second condition that we have reconsidered is the courtyard, an important and ubiquitous Lebanese typology. We have simplified it to its most fundamental qualities. A 'house' is a series of rooms; a *room* is the minimum unit of a 'house'. The courtyard in our design is simply that: a *room* of 30 x 30 meters where the cultural and artistic life will be engendered. The courtyard walls (as the walls of a room) are the simplest interface between inside and outside. The whole history of architecture is based on the transition and design of this interface. The project is the representation and quintessence of that universal principle.

III – Icon

In 1965, Joseph Philippe Karam designed the *Beirut city center* project, where an 'egg-shaped' cinema complemented the late modernist rationality of the complex. This project is a relic of Beirut's golden age. The 'Sabouneh', as it is nicknamed by locals (meaning 'soap') is haunted by its role in the city's past of conflict, but nevertheless still shows a dilapidated beauty.

With or without its demolition, this Lebanese typology has taught us two important matters: that history should be considered and that a building can be iconic without compromising its architectural quality –unlike most contemporary, complex and superfluous icons.

We have –deliberately- taken and reinvented this paradigmatic project, inserting it in our courtyard. Maximized into an ideal functional performance hall, it becomes the 'incubator' for Arts and Culture.

Functional and spatial organization

I – Program

The above ground program is positioned within the 40m height set-back area. The maximum envelope of our design proposal is defined by a precise 40m square extruded to that very maximum height.

The organization of the building is straightforward, with two main components interacting in an incomparable symbiosis: an ellipsoid void contains the performance halls and the frame services the performing cavity, as well as including all the necessary program of the project. The frame makes the courtyard functional allowing its pure outline. Clear lines and curves unite in an ideal balance of function and form.

The Courtyard has two kinds of voids: the first 'void' is for the performing arts in ellipsoid form where both identical plan and section revolve in 360 degrees to generate the arts 'incubator'. This void is clad in hexagonal convex mirrors, making it 'disappear'.

The second –actual- void is the result of the intersection between the frame and the ellipsoid: this open space forms four shafts of light and air across the full height of the courtyard. The experience of being under the fragments of spherical reflections will be an astonishing experience in architectural design, where sunlight and space do not have a definite end and constantly evolve into each other. Both the access and exhibition areas share this unique quality.

The paradox is that the most important and massive part of the building it is not 'there'. Up to now, the design of performance halls have been based on the presence of the chamber. This is its antithesis, as the design is based on its absence.

The 'frame' services the performance areas and provides all the other functions of House of Arts and Culture.

The ground floor allocates reception and information while framing the exhibition spaces under a glass ceiling that 'receives' the suspended mirror sphere. One fundamental aspect of our proposal is that we have conceived (or give the possibility) of having the exhibition space as a *grand lobby* for the House of Arts and Culture (additional to the required by program): a 30 x 30 m space where the major exhibition is architecture itself. This is an spectacle of architecture and nature mixing and changing according to the time of the day.

Level one houses the cafeteria and commercial spaces, where a large terrace with transparent glass floor extends the entire level.

Level two is located at the parterre level of the main performance hall and contains the access lobbies for the main performance hall.

Level three is a private service level where the 'adjoining rooms' to performance are placed.

Level four and five will house the library and audiovisual services (documentation centre) and give access to both balconies to the main hall.

Level six and seven allocate workshops and training rooms, whereas level seven also includes the control rooms of the performance hall, at their appropriate height.

Level eight contains two types of functions: performing areas (small hall and movie theater) at the top of the ellipsoid, and the national cinematheque within the frame.

The highest inhabitable level is the ninth, where administration is distributed. Above this, an open terrace allows 360-degree open views to the city.

Parking facilities are allocated to three underground levels, the first basement level also allocated to delivery. Basement level four is allocated solely to technical areas.

II – Plaza

If the building is the monument, the plaza is its podium. Three subtle steps offset the footprint of the building and create a 'classical' podium, engendering a processional approach to the monolith.

III – Flexibility

Opposite to the fixed configuration of the performance hall according to the program specifications, the frame offers flexibility both horizontal and vertically. Most of the programs within it can be relocated to encompass the changes that the program and their specific relationship might trigger.

Technical and building solutions

I – Structure & MEP

The structural system is composite: a concrete load-bearing outer façade is complemented by a fine steel structure at the courtyard facade. Both systems support the suspended concrete shell containing the performance hall. Due to its double-curvature, this spherical shell spans across the width of the courtyard transferring loads to the various specific points.

The steel columns at the inner courtyard transfer into concrete pedestals within the parking levels. Four main shafts at the corners of the building divide the MEP services in four equal quadrants, distributing installations evenly via false ceilings. A ring of technical areas at a fourth basement concentrates the equipment, guaranteeing noise reduction to the different functions.

II – Circulation

Four cores include four elevators and four 2.5 meter wide stairs that run rationally throughout the building. The building is fundamentally public, but nevertheless some restricted areas are controlled by key-card doors to guarantee the security of the building. CCTV cameras offer 24-hour safety control via the security center at the ground floor.

Parking and service is accessed by the street at the west side of the plot (as per Q&A suggestion). Two three-meter wide lanes and equal circulations allow proper flow. The 278 parking spaces have the required dimension of 2.5 x 5 meters. Additional parking for motorcycles is provided at the south end of the basement levels. The wide open ramp allows car access to basements and temporary service parking ramp for any size van or lorry.

III – Materiality

From the city, the façade of the House of Arts and Culture appears to be blank and solid. Nevertheless, numerous openings allow for visual contact to the city from the inside. These openings create a 'screen' that permeates the outside noise and filters lighting.

Specific large openings occur at specific locations: at the main access, two large electric doors of 2 x 4 meters clearly define the access at the east side of the plot. Further, large openings of 4 x 4 meters in the north and south facades at the level of the performance hall, offer the potential for light to enter into the main performance hall, if the event permits. We have also introduced more light into the exhibition areas by integrating a logo-window that defines the identity of the House of Arts and Culture.

The façade produces a panoptical effect, where the user can see to the outside and from the outside the building appears to be fairly massive and monumental. In the night, the effect is reversed, becoming a three-dimensional grid of lights and inside movement.

The exterior façade of the building is white structural concrete. The interior façade is UV protected transparent glass. The concrete ellipsoid is clad with convex panels of mirror that do not focus collimated light. In other words, these panels do not produce undesirable reflections of light -akin to plain or concave mirrors- that might disturb the activities within the building, but rather diverge light.

Finally, and importantly, as the project program specifies a typical Italian theater, we believe that the combination of the utmost classical luxury interior would certainly be an appropriate combination to the suprematist exterior. Therefore, as we already have the proportions and necessary acoustic and visual curvilinear lines, the interior of our performance hall would aim to reconsider and use the materials that have made these theaters grand and recognizable: golden walls, red velvet seats, exquisite details, finishes and joints. By this, we do not mean literally copying those interiors but rather abstracting the fundamental notions, taking that line of classical taste, but in a modern way, corresponding to our contemporary reality, and potentially with the sun shining inside. The House of Arts and Culture in Beirut, Lebanon, will complete the history of Grandeur in Theaters, Concert and Opera houses.