

DAR BAYRUT INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION | ENTRY # - 1 -



nahda2.0: open UI for arts and culture

In Summary

The contemporary arts and culture scene throughout the world is in unprecedented expansion into new territories and new spaces. In particular, it seems the current trend is towards reappropriation of industrial buildings that seemingly provide generic yet ultra-flexible spaces for housing art exhibition and production. It contrasts with projects that are still hoping to emulate the so-called Bilbao effect through the creation of extraordinary architectures that come with huge architect fees, high construction costs, and often lack flexibility. From Lisbon to Paris, from California to Shanghai, the examples are numerous.

In Beirut, the unusual decision to create a new-build cultural centre on high value real-estate should be taken as a once in a lifetime opportunity to provide a project that can combine the best of worlds: an iconic building, built like an industrial structure, tailor-made for culture and public visits. Ultimately, it would be built with enough robustness to allow continuous updating and upgrading of its equipment, and even its spaces.

Our proposal presents therefore a highly “democratic” image and function: open, accessible, changeable, and most importantly, appropriatable – a very web2.0 attitude highly relevant to our current cultural moment: the perfect platform for a nahda2.0 revival.

Artitude/Altitude/Attitude

A clearing in a forest of high towers, a bridge over an 8m chasm, a gateway through a border. A new UI for a cultural renaissance 2.0: Urban Interface between the city and the city centre, User Interface between citizens and culture.

On a deceptively unremarkable site, the opportunity to plant a wedge in the virtual protective wall that surrounds the city centre has been met with decisive clarity.

The project takes its cue from its urban surroundings, reacting to the towers by insisting on its own scale, opposing fixed mass with a celebration of void as a creative zone of infinite potential.

Accepting the ring road as uncrossable only for pedestrians (who can now use a proposed subway tunnel), it offers itself as a gateway to intercept passengers dropped on the southern edge of the site, and a pleasant shortcut into the urban life of downtown, and vice-versa for travellers looking to catch public transport or a proposed "Culture Bus" that can shuttle between the network of nascent arts venues throughout the Lebanese territory.

Urban Strategy/Call of the -VOID

The squarish site is zoned into three parallel strips. West side, aligned with the existing Bakri House, the first strip is materialised into a raised bloc housing administration and production spaces, a volume clearly confined within the site lines and height controls. East side, an open, sloping/terraced platform bridges the 8m difference in level between the ring road and the garden, and clearly projects its territory all the way over the north side public garden, proposing a new landscaping treatment to unify the whole length of urban space. Between the two strips, a new kind of urban space: the über-VOID, a 22x40x62m frame creates a volumetric empty canvas open to all interventions. Respecting the site boundaries only physically, it projects visually and conceptually over its surroundings, framing views of downtown from uptown and vice-versa, and framing views of its contents from the surrounding towers, and up to them from its viewing platform. It functions as a framework for interventions, on it, under it, within it, around it: it can be skinned, pimped, filled, projected on, become a performance stage, or a giant pedestal for giant sculptures. It is the constant call of creativity in 4-dimensional spacetime.

As a recognisable yet ever-changing form, it projects its iconic presence clearly beyond its geographical locale, putting Beirut firmly back on the international contemporary culture scene: the Unique Identifier.

Circulation/Clarity

Externally, 100% of the site surface is accessible to the public, from the cascading platform to the west, to the rooftop garden restaurant to the east, passing through the raised arts platform and the -VOID in between. Different times of the day, different programme or logistics requirements can limit physical access to the raised -VOID platform and the rest of the building. The cascading

platform is and will always remain completely accessible as urban public territory. Internally, things are more controlled:

Public and Artists

The project proposes three public entrances, that can be subject to different control strategies depending on the programme of the venue. The main public entrance is to the north, off the existing public garden, at level 0.00. It opens onto a 12m high lobby animated by the cafeteria structure hanging 8m above the ground, a large commercial boutique/bookshop with transparent sides, and a sculptural escalator inviting the visitor up to the exhibition spaces. A grand staircase goes down 6m to the main foyer common to the performance halls, cinema, and meeting rooms. The information desk and reception is topped by a train station or airport-style information board clearly showing an updated programme of events at the venue.

A secondary entrance, from the East and off the cascading platform, meets the first run of escalators (@+3.50) and from there, a second and third run of escalators takes the visitors to the restaurant (@+8.00) and up to the main exhibition reception lounge and bar and the entrance to the documentation centre (@+12.00). This level is also freely accessible through a third entrance off the public platform reached through ramps from the outside.

At this level, visitors with tickets can access the main exhibition space (@+15.00 and @+18.00) or continue up the building and visit artists in their workshops at the higher floors of the building. All these spaces are linked through two large public elevators obvious in the main hall.

Staff and service

Staff and service entrance is off the west side road, and links down to showers and changing rooms (@-3.00) or up to administration levels. The Staff core links all levels of the project.

Goods and merchandise

A main delivery area is at the south-east corner of the site, including loading docks and reception offices. A 6x6m high capacity freight elevator connects this zone to the basement storage and workshops (@-6.00) and up to the exhibition platform (@+12.00). Another service freight lift of 4x4m near the south-west corner of the site links all exhibition rooms to the basement facilities including secondary delivery at first parking level.