**House of Arts and Culture**

Michel Chiha once wrote:

Amid the changes sweeping the Middle East and the Lebanese Republic during French Mandate—the National Pact which served as [Lebanon's] foundation—acted as a framework justifying the Lebanese "fact", which no longer appeared as a constraint, but rather as an amalgam of advantageous functions and interests. Lebanon came to play a variety of roles which made its permanence imperative: it was a country where an almost equal number of Christians and Muslims coexisted on a basis of equality and liberty. It was a meeting place for Christianity and Islam and for East and West. It was a land which welcomed all minorities and respected their identities. It was a haven for public and private liberties; an area of prosperity benefiting a large middle class which guaranteed stability, and which opened the way for social mobility. And it was a land of great culture. Lebanon was in the heart of the Arab world... a source of equilibrium, a link.[1]

Beirut has historically served as the meeting place between East and West. From the early days of the Crusades till the present, commerce, culture, and currency has centered in this busy coastal city. In the early 1920's when the League of Nations carved out the Lebanese state and awarded her to the French, Lebanon became both the West's door to the Middle East and the East's window to Europe and the Americas. As Thomas Friedman contends that *"*Lebanon made its living - and a very one at that - by being the entrepôt between the West and the Arab world*"*[2]*.*

The House of Arts and Culture in Beirut Central District will function as a meeting point of international culture and a starting point from which the forged Lebanese culture spreads out to the world. Metaphorically, it grows and develops just like a tree - just like the Cedar of Lebanon perhaps. Through photosynthesis, the cells of the tree conduct nutrients down the trunk from the leaves to the roots, and nutrients are stored and sap is pumped upward from the roots to the leaves and distributed laterally in the trunk. Formally, the House of Arts and Culture is likewise nurtured by the local and international cultural and artistic atmosphere. This local and international energy is absorbed by the multidirectional blocks attached to and surrounding the main hall, which

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1 Michel Chiha**,** *Politique Intérieure,* Editions du Trident, Beyrouth, 1964 (p. 269)

2 Friedman, Thomas. *From Beirut to Jerusalem*. Farrar Straus Giroux Publishing. New York, 1989 (p.136)

itself is animated by spontaneous events from within and without. These blocks are not turned to any one direction, they purposely tilted and oriented in all directions to capture and absorb a plethora of both planned, intertwined, and spontaneous cultural and artistic events occurring in the ancient and modern cities of Beirut, Muscat, Byblos, Damascus, Rome, Tyre, Paris, Sidon, Berlin, Florence, Beijing, and Tokyo. . .(Figure 1).

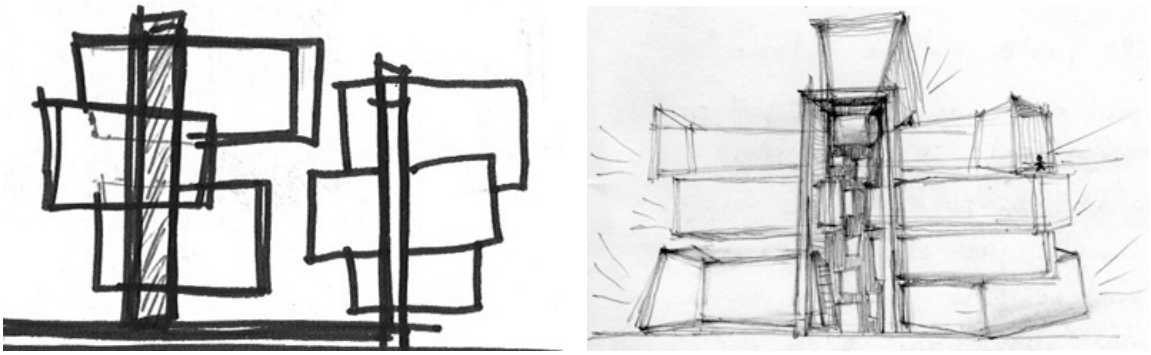
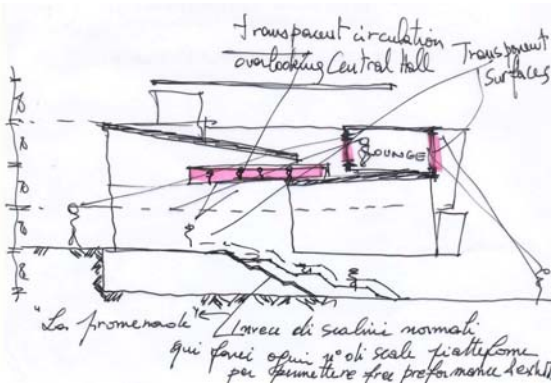


Figure 1

**FUNCTIONAL AND SPATIAL ORGANIZATION**




At the ground level, the House of Arts and Culture functions as a free and continuous promenade starting from the square in front of the Bakri building crossing through the House itself and freely reaching the main reception at the level of the Fouad Chehab highway. The enclosed flights of intersecting steps and ramps ascending eight meters, punctuated by four large landings, stretching an average of 8.00 m long, will host spontaneous events with musicians, poets, painters, artists cultivating while celebrating the very life and sap of the Tree-House. This tunnel-like space, the *Trunk* (to continue the metaphor) links the sidewalks of the central district with the inner life of the House. Residents, visitors, performers, and anyone who just happens to be passing by, can freely use this space for whatever they want - from the sublime to the profane. This open space is alive every day and night of the year. This free space of spontaneous cultural and artistic expression, with an average height reaching 20m, and open to all the activities of the House, allows for both physical and visual exchange and interaction.

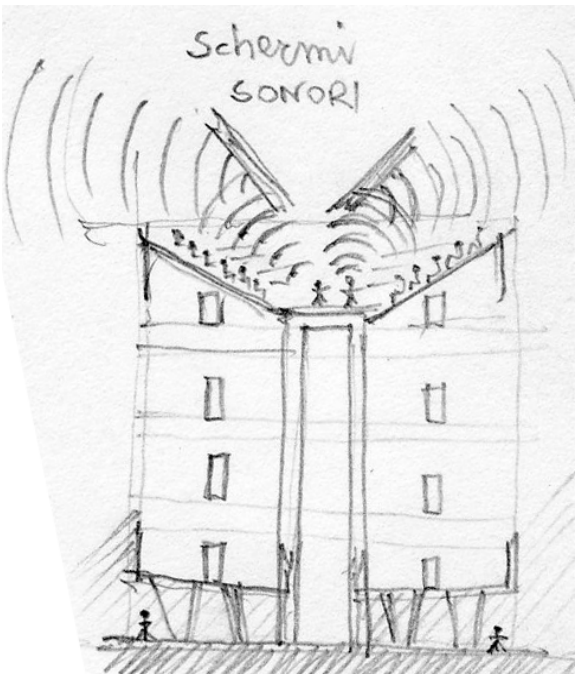
The solid internal walls of the tunnel are designed to receive permanent, temporary, physical, or projected images, whether fixed or fluid.

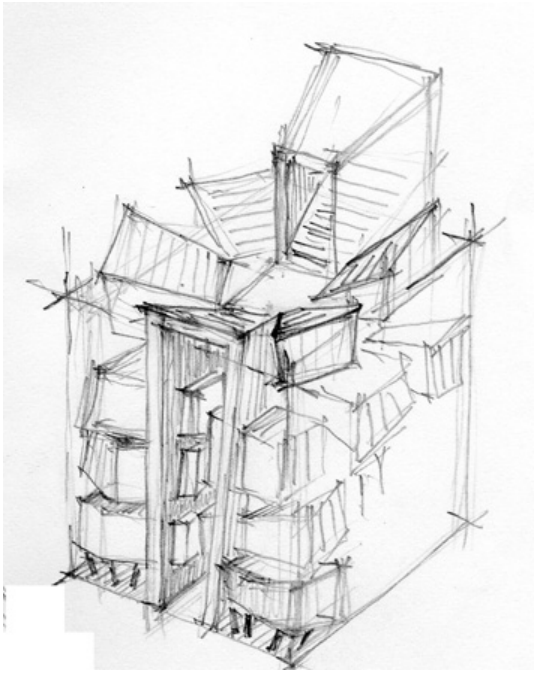
At the level of the square in front of the Bakri building (+/- 0.00) and in the north - east corner is the cafeteria/restaurant, accessible from the *Trunk* - and just porous enough to allow the visitors of the House to extend their hospitality to any passer by. To the west, and also accessible from the *trunk*, the exhibition area branches out from the level of +2.00 and are 8.00 m high.

The workshops and training areas are also accessed from the *Trunk* at +4.00 m level, branching off to the west, while the commercial shops branch off to the east. The western branch, though on two levels, constitute one space with the lower level (at the level of the square) only accessible through the upper level by an internal staircase.

The *Trunk* of intersecting steps and ramps reaches the reception hall at (approximately + 8.00 m) allowing even the handicapped to experience the House from the perspective of both spectator and actor. The point of controlled accessibility begins at the reception hall, which provides an annexed information and ticket selling area; this hall is a buffer between the public and semi-public realms. A vertical distribution spine, made of a series of escalators, starts from the reception hall area and climbs upwards towards the different levels of the House. From the spine people enjoy visual contact with one another throughout the entire span of the *Trunk.* The administration offices are also on the level of the reception hall, and are located on two levels towards the north-east, overlooking the *Trunk.* Beginning at the level of the reception hall, extending towards the administration offices, is an escalator ascending 8 meters, reaching a landing that introduces the documentation center at + 16.00 m. From the landing, another escalator connects the reception hall to the lounge at + 24.00 m. The lounge is intertwined with the *Trunk*, and from it two branches extend. The eastern branch east holds the small performance hall and movie theatre areas, while the western branch contains the grand performance hall. The lounge is open towards the Beirut Central District to the North, providing a dynamic transparency that allows visual contact between the inside of the *Trunk* and BCD. The grand performance hall is structured after the style of the classical Italian theatre.

Two elevators, and a security staircase, located off to the east side of the reception hall, allow for rapid vertical circulation. The elevators reach the roof at +32.00m, where an open air theatre, covered partially by a canopy, provides space for summer performances.



**Technical proposed solutions**

The building is bearing over a reinforced concrete underground box with planar elements positioned according to the volumes of the superstructures. The superstructure is essentially an assembly of autonomous reinforced concrete box - like elements, superimposed and anchored to the main tunnel (the *Trunk*). The *Trunk* is also composed of two juxtaposed and adjacent semi – tunnels. Although, the structural elements of the superstructure are not vertically aligned, the box – like structure allows the overlaying of elements and an appropriate distribution of the loads.

The walls are obviously composed of different layers to provide each internal space for adequate technical, climatic and acoustic characteristics.

The enclosure walls of the grand hall are very thick to allow for a satisfactory mass quality and guarantee the required qualities of acoustic isolation. The glazed surface of the grand hall's foyer will be made of laminated glass panel to guarantee the necessary isolation from airborne sounds.

The glazed surfaces are also characterized with different solutions in relation to the required technical functions. External horizontal or vertical – depending on the orientation of the surface - metallic louvers will protect the internal spaces from direct sunlight and glare, and will decrease the use of mechanical means of heating and cooling.