THE BUILDING, A PASSIVE POLITICAL AGENT

INTRODUCTION

Inevitable as it is to avoid the proximity of the conflict, we reinterpret this urbanscape into a healing space, we derive such an effect from the psychological sequels of experiencing a devastated city, from the result of the deep sense of self-protection and hide-out spaces, from the unbearable experience of the city as a deathscape... the space that flows through the voids of the building, filled with the sound of voices, of activities, of colours, of the nearby sights, turn the harshness of Beirut into a peaceful ambient, clear, fluid and characteristic of a civilized society, built in a decisively abstract language in order to avoid any relation to any particular agenda aside from the urban experience it stands for, turning the experience of walking across shattered urban spaces into a colourful and rich promenade of cultural spaces, open and/or closed. This promenade, which is continuum of the exterior space is a labyrinth, a carved space, a negative space of a solid entity, of a dense object. Yet, the interior is rich in relations, activities, and as people ascend more surprises and shades of light enrich the experience of the new city centre, open to the New District and its adjacent public park, and to the magnificent sight of the Mediterranean Sea.

A Cultural Building in Beirut: through the labyrinths of creation

The labyrinth is one of the richest and most enigmatic figures of our culture. The origin of the labyrinth is mythical and its form has marveled many. History's first labyrinth could be traced back to the island of Crete where only an impression of it can be found on a stone. What we know about that first labyrinth comes from Greek mythology. Daedalus constructed it to imprison the Minotaur. Theseus then entered it to kill the Minotaur helped by Ariadne who guided him with a thread that would help him find his way back out.

Both in literature and painting we frequently find works that make allusion to the labyrinth. Picasso, for example, found inspiration on this myth for one of his series of engravings; Borges wrote several short stories taking the labyrinth in Crete as a reference; and let us not forget Octavio Paz. The labyrinth is a myth to be interpreted and its meaning goes beyond simple form. It is an imaginary space, an intellectual space, it is a concept, an image, a spatial form, and in its form, an architectonic space.

The labyrinth

If we are confronted with a real labyrinth, a constructed one, our first impression will be that of a wall for it cannot be grasped completely from its base. What makes a labyrinth is the wall that separates the outside from the inside.

A labyrinth invites in, a labyrinth is not such if one is outside. The action happens inside, the labyrinth stimulates action, movement, movement that implies a course of time and space, thus a narrative. If we think of a labyrinth we do not only think of a wall, we think of a serpent, of a garden or a drawing of spirals with one way in and one way out, we imagine it from a bird's eye point of view. This means that we always think of a labyrinth from the outside and above. And it is natural if we want to solve its secret for the best position to do so is from where we can contemplate the whole.

A trace in the labyrinth seems to show us the way and invites us or makes us walk through it. This makes it a narrative space, a sequence. For Koolhaas architecture is a negative space, in it things happen, life goes on in its absences, in them we expect something to happen; the non-built space signifies and gives value to the architectonic.

The concept

The pleasure of a labyrinth - paraphrasing Roland Barthes - lies in moving through it. The labyrinth is not only the center but also the whole, walls shape its form but the space that has any sense to us is the space we can move in, the negative space. And this negative space, is it not the one that interests architecture?

For cabalists the image of the rose was important because it was seen as a metaphor for the cognitive process. We don't know the rose while loosing its petals because the rose is not the sum of its parts nor the center of it. To know what the rose is we must understand that it is a whole and only then will we know it. The labyrinth is like the rose; we don't grasp the labyrinth while in it; we know the labyrinth from the outside but we must go through it. The labyrinth is a whole. From the moment that we see the labyrinth as being able to represent a more abstract concept than form, we can also see it as a representation of a way of thinking. If we're no longer on the right path and we see that even progress is not marked by the straight line, we can believe in the circularity of biological processes or even philosophical, and build a different reality from the one we live in. It is possible that our inability to understand other cultures is due to this simple difference between one labyrinth and other, or to clarify, to the conception of one metaphor or other.

The city as a labyrinth

The underground philosophies, no other than different conceptions of the world, are opposed to western mental constructions. In our societies there still persists underground streams of thought in which architecture is sub ministers itself for its spaces. The labyrinth is a form that we interpret. Or, we can also say that it is the form that tells us: interpret for the world is made for that. And if you are stubborn, understand it.

Architecture, as a human activity, is unnatural and thus aggresses the environment. "…each architectural vision involves a wave of violence…the potential for delinquency is present in every architect…" The architectural act implies destruction, for each building superposes itself either to an existing one or to nature. But building is also an act of cultural continuity, the city represents its society's culture, it is the way in which the city communicates with its people, with its own language. The city is also a labyrinth. It is that negative space that we see from a bird's eye point of view. But it is down there and once in it we don't see but its walls. But we know that it is there because we live in it. But to understand it we have to visualize it from above. The city is not the buildings on the main square. The city is each square, each street and each garden that makes it up.

Our cities have characteristics of both types of labyrinth. We have the effective way to get to an appointment as soon as possible or, the long way if we want to get to know the city. The city keeps its labyrinthical spaces for our pleasure, our confusion or for the most profound reflections from its center.

Materials

The building takes advantage of the sustainable, real and constructive rather than theoretical principle of embodied energy. This means that within its walls, its construction systems, methods and details, the rational process can only go in the direction of less energy consumption, measurable in megaJoules. The interior wood façade and the exterior concrete prefabricated elements point into this direction.

Fragmentation

The fragmented aspect of the building is the reflection of its conceptual approach. The building celebrates not a particular representation, but rather a series of logical steps during the design process. Such are for example the location of the activities, divided into north and south to face in different ways the two faces of the city center. At south, where the radiation from the sun should be avoided, the activities are mostly closed, except for one… the lost room, a space so subtle that it is the only perforation facing south. The clear and rational axis that divides this two areas is occupied by the vertical necessary connections, the technical vertical core, auxiliary spaces an the horizontal articulation between the open and the closed programme. To the south the building is pure expression: the activities are melted into a monumental public space where the void is as important as the closed spaces, this means that the building makes the most use of the space, practically using to the fullest the narrow site given.