

URBAN AND ARCHITECTONICAL TARGETS

RE-APPROPRIATION, RE-UNIFICATION, MULTI-CULTURAL AIMS

As a symbol-opportunity to carry out and achieve new social and cultural equipment, the **House of Arts and Culture** is an intervention of crucial importance both for the city itself as well as for its inhabitants in a area of vital significance, being on the border between the main road with heavy traffic flow and the city centre in process of renewal.

Urban transformations, often abrupt due to social, political, and religions conflicts have been and still are matter of discussion as to post war reconstruction choices - in this respect Beirut was and still is faced with problems previously occurred in other cities - such as Sarajevo and Berlin; but not only that: it is necessary to take into account Beirut's identity. In fact one should talk about various identities, first of all the urban one, but also the demographic, cultural and political ones. When the political power - the **Public** - requires from the project architect to be represented 'at best', the various and complex identities and therefore requirements to be taken into account make the task harder, though more stimulating.

Such project is intended to interpret the urban situation in its various aspects taking it back to different identities. Conflict is not acknowledged or shown, nor are war and contradictions; the purpose is to elaborate tragedies by turning them into a positive proposal able to improve the situation, in order to bring back to life the feeling of belonging to the Nation and recovering the meaning of one's own individuality within a collective frame. The project conceives articulated functions by suspended volumes, as if they were branches of a fruit tree producing different fruits. A kind of national cedar reaching its highest peak by superposition of horizontal branching.

The city-centre, being a non private space, must represent a sort of projection of the whole country's **social-cultural conditions** with no ideological characterization: it must create and carry in **multi-cultural petitions** materializing in interpersonal relationships. Here is the significance of its collective acknowledgement and therefore its symbolic **re-appropriation**, by mean of a polyedric memory, helping **re-unifying** the country in such 'social sites' destroyed by wars.

THE URBAN SQUARE - A POLY-FUNCTIONAL PUBLIC SPACE

The choice made is to super elevate buildings in a substantial area of available space, in order to open a 'pedestrian square', partially covered, being an extensions of the **House** aggregation and entertainment spaces. The allowance of additional public spaces available proves useful in solving the junction's continuity in crossing the heavy flowed road assuming the shape of '**urban squares**' aimed at becoming meeting-places, social aggregation centres, entertainment and **open-air activity** places in a site emphasizing the relation with the garden behind the 'French building'. Such stone floored public space running from – 0,90 to 0,00 m. at different levels all connected by a non stop flights system, results as a physical and ideal link between the various city areas.

In order to save visual, social and identity memory, the city centre must not be closed in itself as if it were an island of prosperity, an affluent site so to say, physically, culturally, economically; but it

should in as much as possible involve the other urban areas reaching up to spontaneous growth areas. The concept effort and the theoretical technique applied to the centre – by the way richly heterogeneous in itself – must spread into the whole urban, perhaps even regional extension: otherwise the city boundaries could imply socio-political caesuras to remain as they are and prove destabilizing.

The project is conceived as part of a theoretical frame acknowledging the architectural patrimony both in what recovery and re-construction are concerned, as well as towards new and innovative buildings: it was not intended as a historical landmarks and series of buildings, but as an **urban texture**.

Exterior space's drawings' geometry is influenced by the sites' conditions and morphology, absorbing and taking into account the requests. The difference in level between the Ring and *Rue Ghalghoul* is solved by a kind of excavation emphasizing the buildings' structures by their superimposition and co-penetration within each others. An **urban pedestrian's infrastructure** purposely excavated and cut to supply light and add quality to under-laying spaces. The eye is attracted and addressed by the perspective of a new look, the image of the contemporary city.

The whole system is intended for **meetings, exhibitions, cultural** and **trading** activities and aims at re-develop and make the most out of the historical, artistic and archaeological patrimony of the city in order to re-insert Beirut and its Region in a circuit connected with other urban equipment such as historical and archaeological sites; in this way it could become competitive and able to attract an international tourism flow.

VARIOUS ACCESSES AND PERMEABILITY

The urban role performed by the *House* appears immediately as a new, basic presence for those who enter the city from South. The significant volumes' expression - especially of the South –West ones resulting as "City door"- is enriched by a project promoting an **easier access** way by partially transforming side streets and the opening of a pedestrian underway acting as a symbolic and physical link between the various parts of the city.

As to the perpendicular intervention towards *Rue Ghalghoul*, stressing the rotation of the ground on line with *Avenue du Général Fouad Chehab*, this does not appear confusing: on the contrary the solution acknowledges the flows and shunts them. The various car-ways are channelled and addressed towards the underground parking entrance on *Rue Ghalghoul*, on which there is access also to service areas for loading and unloading of goods, on the South-West corner, under the wide hall, strictly connected and in touch with vertical service links for goods, workers, technicians, actors etc...

URBAN CONTINUITY: SEA - SOIL - AIR

The selection and choice of external coating materials is subject to the influence of nature on the project. The sand coloured floor stones have grey *nuances* and underline with darker stripes on the surface slabs differences. The buildings' basic structure is metallic in order to better suit the type of buildings; while the exterior volumes' cover is made of **multi-coloured glass** sheets - except for the Reception and Information hall of natural glass-colour - slightly opaque because of anti-ray systems subject to changes and iridescent according to the variation of natural phenomena and to Beirut's light. Volumes can in such way show all their prospects resulting from a kind of double "skin" whole glassed with an in-between space allowing the **control and modulation of light and heat**. According to sun-light changes the surface can reflect or make the surface partially opaque; while at night, the building being lit inside, it will appear like an opalescent light-house that can be seen from the City showing the South access to it.

The large plain surfaces, in addition to serve as landscape terraces and true extensions of interior spaces and functions, are used for collecting rain waters to be used again for non-drinking purposes: buildings' equipment functions, soil watering where needed for technical and ecological purposes. Furthermore, the South placed glass surfaces and some suitable portions of covers are coated with special panels as well as of photo-voltaic cells, offering in such a way a substantial contribution to the **sustainability of the project**.

SPACES AND FUNCTIONS - PROJECT PROGRAM AND DIMENSION DATA

The House of Arts and Culture consists of a series of volumes - being part of a whole - variously dislocated as to plain space; their disposal does not definitely occupy the visual field, but on the contrary allows frequent open views and unexpected perspectives. Such composition of volumes at first looks fragmentary, stressed by a lack of **chromatic variation**, helps in showing a true usage flexibility of the whole complex allowing a remarkable management simplification since each functional area is practically independent from the others.

Access floors to buildings with staircases and elevators are 1 m. 50 from each other so that the *ensemble* benefits from a modularity that organizes and rationalizes variants.

As indicated and required by the competition banishment scrupulously taken into account, this project locates the Entrance Hall's volume in the very centre of the whole composition.

When entering from the *pavée* square one can immediately perceive the space of the "Foyer" of the *Performance and Conference Hall*; this one, by its staircases and elevators' system parallel and complementary to the one of the *Entrance Hall*, sorts out and shunts the access flows towards the various sites of activity: it occupies a large, full height space under the Large Hall. While going up one reaches at first, in fact, the *Large Performance and Conference Hall*; then comes the Small Multimedia Performance Hall with its own large "Foyer" ahead; the *Adjoining Rooms Common to both Performance Halls* follow in turn: these are served by vertical service connections on the

North side sorting out the flow of common workers, workmen and actors: it keeps their flow completely separate. The various halls were conceived in such a way to enable their independent functioning; however by means of mobile walls separating them from one another and disappearing at need in suitable housing places; they can also be used all at the same time becoming a unique space of about 1310 sq. On top we find the *Meeting Rooms*, the *Movie Theatre* and the *National Cinemateque* as well as annexes. The *Cafeteria* and *Commercial Spaces* were placed respectively at East and West sides of the Halls. To this one accedes also from the outside, so that they can operate as well when the *Centre* is closed. This need appeared essential in what commercial activity is concerned.

From the inside of the two - levels Cafeteria connected by a free staircase in double height of the volume, through the large glass-wall one can "live" the road underneath, having in front the French building and its garden behind it.

Access to the Bookshop is directly from the Entrance Hall at a lower-level, being easily reachable by staircases and flights determining its spatial perception. The outline of the section of the Large Hall is clearly indicated in the exterior volume accompanying and following the one of outside spaces; the difference in levels of the project areas is therefore not noticed and it appears as if it were laying on an artificial hill. The wall on which the space behind the *Large Hall* insists is all-glass and looks towards the *Avenue du Général Fouad Chehab*: it has therefore a double function: people can look from inside at the turmoil of the city moving about, while it may serve also as an informative screen of the Centre's activities.

On the South-East and North-East sides, also reachable through the high space of the *Reception and Information Hall* equipped with a wide hoist, are the volumes of the *Documentation Centre and the Exhibition Spaces* as well as the *Administration, Workshop and Training Rooms*, all linked with each other and interconnected. As previously mentioned, the building terraces represent an extension of the inside space: one can look at the city's landscape and to the sea, whereas at the same time one can be seen on a reverse shot.

The terrace of the *Documentation Centre*, squeezed in between the other volumes, is intended as an open air reading or study place; and it's also equipped with the coffee tables of the adjacent snack-bar. The *Administration, Workshops and Training Rooms* are conceived as rational and functional work-spaces and management services for the whole Centre.

An important piece as to future urban and infrastructural assets, the functioning of the complex foresees an underground parking is subject to enlargement under the side carriageway of *Avenue du Général Fouad Chehab*, if later needed. 278 car park places now, as required 450 boxes later. Such spaces are directly connected with the Delivery Area, including stock rooms, workshops and other service spaces. The car access from the *Rue Ghalghoul*, as mentioned above, leads both to the Delivery Area as well as to the underground parking by flights inserted in the empty space offered by the low volume of the Cafeteria.