

BEIRUT CULTURAL GATEWAY \ HOUSE FOR ART AND CULTURE

Concept design

The challenge of the House of Art and Culture in Beirut is to function as a magnet for youthful cultural expression. We have used an architectural language that seeks an original interpretation of the multi-faceted dynamism of Beirut, its ancient culture and its contemporality: in other words, vocabulary from the vernacular which has found contemporary expression.

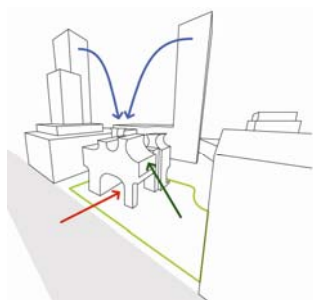
On an urban level, the main concern has been to create a public space on the ground level where the artists and the public interact. In order to do so, the exhibition spaces have been elevated and the theatre lowered. This liberated the ground floor for a series of semi-open piazzas functioning as a cultural souk, attracting and enticing interactivity on a street-level. This area is designed to be a hive of activity, a place for encounters, eating and browsing.



In terms of the architecture itself, the five arched towers recall the old souk of Beirut, the archetypal social meeting place where the Lebanese combined business and amusement. The curved skylights which form part of movement of the ceiling/roof are inspired by the collective forms of '*jarra*', earthenware urns used throughout the ages in Lebanon for carrying and storing water, grains and items of value.

They also functioned as natural refrigerators, the contents were kept cool by the clay and heat was released through the narrow, open necks. Apart from being an aesthetic inspiration, the *jarra* are a metaphor of containers and carriers of culture, and physical instruments for climate regulation.

Approach



The House of Art and Culture fully addresses its context.

The east side of the House of Art and Culture addresses the city centre. There is open access for pedestrians to the main piazza and to the reception and theatre foyer. The west and opposite side addresses the highway (known as 'the Ring'), from where the vista of upper skylight forms are an iconic presence evoking a Mediterranean port city.

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The west and opposite side addresses the highway (known as 'the Ring'), from where the vista of upper skylight forms are an iconic presence evoking a Mediterranean port city. On the lower ground level, glimpses through greenery and the arched towers over the piazza reveal the BCD beyond. The location of the House of Art and Culture on the periphery of a commercial district gives it a critical function as a cultural gate to the BCD from the Ring.

Public Space - the Cultural Souks

The main public space is divided into four piazzas, separated only by different patterns and the zonings allocated to them. Their limits are delimited by the arched towers that act as boundaries.

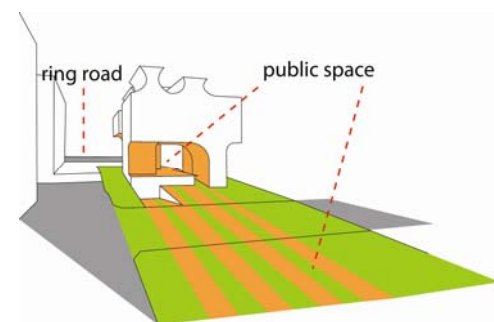
The central piazza, the 'Hamza', is a space for experimentation and communication between artists and the public.

The casual eating piazza we called 'Sofra' (dining-place) is accessible from the pedestrian walkway.

The third piazza, the 'Hakawati' (story-teller), is a critical space for people to come and air views, discuss and debate in public.

On the north side, the service space is accessed from the service road. A series of three shops giving to the Hamza piazza will be used as an outlet for some of the creative products of the workshops.

Although the functions of the piazza have been differentiated, the piazza is open on all sides, interconnecting equally with all areas. It is surrounded by a 'soft edge', green landscape which both connect it to its surroundings, enclose it (around the Sofra piazza) and filter noise (on the side of the Ring). The Cultural Souks reinforce the importance of public space in a cultural setting, and culture in a public setting.



The five arched towers

These support the elevated platform of the exhibition area and skylights. Their functions are as follows:

The Stage tower is a continuity of the 20m stage shaft above ground. It is the largest tower of the Cultural Souks, symbolic of the theatre presence.

The Reception tower houses the main vertical circulation of the project.

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The Souk tower houses three shops on the ground floor and administration above.

The 'Sofra' tower has a cafeteria on ground level and guest studios on upper floors.

Hakawati' tower has a shop on the ground floor and guest studios on upper floors.

The Functions

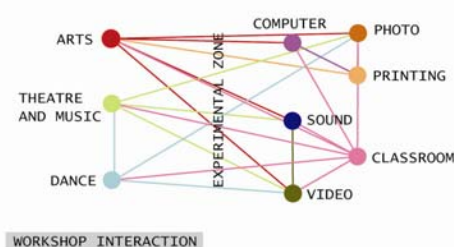
Circulation

The three main spaces (underground, ground and elevated) are linked through vertical circulation in the arched tower containing the reception. The lower space is mainly the theatre and its associated areas, but also the parking, the storage and delivery areas. It has an arrival bay that gives elevator access to all the activities of the building. The parking includes the technical area and is can be reached from the service road area.

From the reception there is access to the black box, cinematheque, workshop and documentation areas and the main space which is the exhibition hall and its restaurant. Although separate physical entities, these are all visually interconnected. From each one of those the dipping, curving shapes of the roofscape are visible.

Workshops

The workshops are the onsite creative core of the House of Art and Culture. They are situated between a central courtyard and two outer terraces. The central courtyard provides an interactive space which could be used co-operatively by the practitioners of different disciplines as a cross-fusion zone of experimentation. Within it is a void



from where the volumes of the arched towers can be experienced from above. The outer terraces are filled with greenery, visible from outside the building and experienced from the inside as buffer zone

Exhibition Space

The exhibition space is the elevated platform situated between the arched towers and the skylights. It is divided into two areas, the lower space encircled on three sides by a ramp that leads to the upper spaces. While moving along the ramp glimpses of the terraces, the cinematheque and the documentation area are revealed.

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The spatial organization of the building becomes comprehensible along this passage to the upper exhibition area. On the highest level is the restaurant, which overlooks the exhibition spaces. From any point in the space the user experiences of the movement of the roof and skylights.

Theatre

The theatre will be designed with a youthful, contemporary spirit, with unique box features for balconies. Functionally, it conforms to a traditional European-style theatre incorporating the requirements for a 20m-high stage. It has a seating capacity for 800 people, including the balcony areas. The auditorium is reached through a two-level foyer, which is accessible from the reception through a series of interlocking staircases, and from the parking by elevator.

Service Area

At the ground level, a service elevator and staircase service deliveries, storage and the technical room underground and the dressing room, restaurant, documentation and exhibition areas in the upper levels.

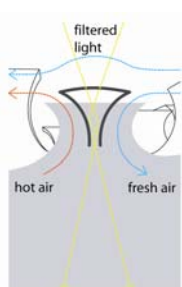
Structure

The five towers carry the project through a series of columns coming up from the parking, transforming into walls at ground level with perforated holes for doors and windows. Some of the columns are supported on beams that transfer the load onto the foundations. The upper part is a simple construction of walls, pilotis and slabs.

Materials

The lower part (including the arched towers, the cinematheque and the black box) is made of cladded stone, similar to that used in BCD, while the upper part (the exhibition spaces) is a perforated, white, fair-faced concrete shell.

Environmental Impact



The skylights will be used to generate a favourable climatic condition for the building, i.e extract the hot air through the towers and filter natural light in. The piazza itself will be a pleasant area with air currents generated through the multiple openings and light and shade areas that change according to the time of day. The green landscape encircling the building provides an intermediary zone that gives it breathing space.

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