

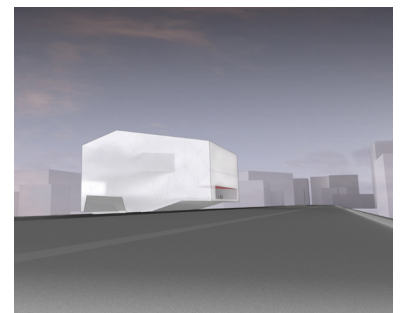
Urban and Architectural Objectives of the Project

The freeway which traverses Lebanon's north-south axis connects together key destinations along its path – a piece of national infrastructure which literally unites the country it traverses. Yet the freeway both connects and separates – cutting a swathe between previously adjacent neighbourhoods and redefining the hierarchy of the city. This is most pronounced between the Beirut Central District and Bachoura. The spaces under the freeway bridges adjacent to these stress points have emerged as new zones of exploration and occupation as the adjacent suburbs try to understand the new urbanity thrust upon them.

The ambiguity and opportunity of this space promises much for a House of Arts and Culture whose proponents understand that its conception risks the destruction of the very culture it is set up to support. Released from the constraints of typical urban rules and conformity, the choice of a site adjacent to the freeway is an inspired one, allowing the project to define its own territory. That this undercroft space is not fully understood holds hope that the building can break free of urban orthodoxies and meet its ambition as a booster for cultural activity that previously had no place it could call home.

Faced with a site lacking in a defined context beyond that of the freeway, this proposal foregrounds the freeway as the site itself. The building clips to the freeway, bringing it into the project while at the same time urbanising the road itself. The strong preference for movement by car in Beirut is encompassed in this strategy which foregrounds cars in a spatial sense and which also brings them into the public-ness of the project via the route for parking and circulation.

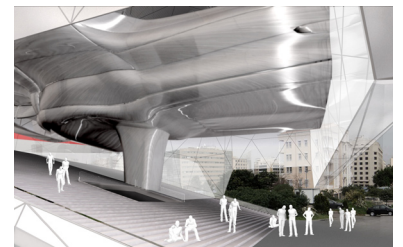
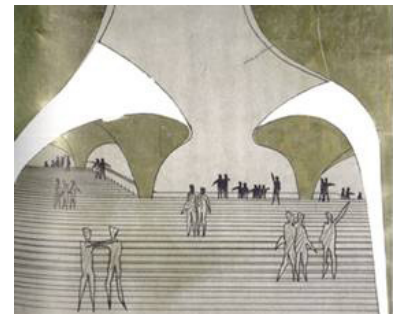
The project then is of both the city and the freeway. The theatres are protected within a giant fuselage – a sort of carburettor or engine which negotiates and mixes the various inputs and outputs present at the site. The robust arrangement of theatres follows both best practice theatre design while anonymous enough to enable great flexibility in their use and presentation. A key gesture toward the city – a major opening at the rear of the main stage – transforms the theatres from the mundane to magical places from where the city can be contemplated. The folds of curved metal surrounding the theatres invite and protect access to chambers within where foyers, small meeting places and services take place.



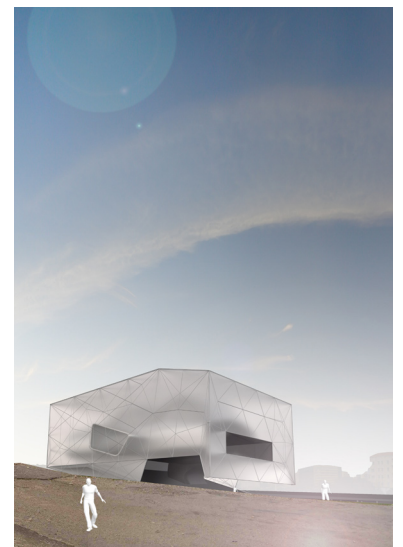
This mixing chamber is shrouded by a giant curtain of frosted glass – a fragile shroud which contrasts with the resilience of the theatre fuselage yet is able to protect and moderate the environment around it. The shroud is pressed fully to the allowable built area of the site, anticipating the continuation of the perimeter block urbanism which so characterises the BCD - but transformed here to an indeterminate space and boundary which speaks directly to the cycles of construction and destruction that have become synonymous with this place. Thus the permanence of the perimeter block is met with the temporality and ambiguity of the delicate and sheer skirt – a public response to the curtains which moderate privacy and openness through the city.



The lifting of the frosted glass curtain invites the citizens of Beirut into a space pregnant with opportunity. The edge of the skirt is lined in red such that the curtain of the theatre bounds the entire site. This key space does not exist in the brief but is that via which the building will avoid cannibalisation of the very thing it is set up to support. Shielded from the summer sun, this giant outdoor agora is both the meeting point between the city and the fuselage at the heart of the building – a moderator between the separate logics of car and city which meet here. This is the booster in built form – a place that challenges the artists of Beirut to address it in new art forms and practices. Below the agora lies the gallery, embedded in the earth via its location insisting on public engagement. The rear of the agora is lifted to the freeway – a constructed undercroft which leaps toward and freeway and provides a space for outdoor cinema and performance events.



The ghosted silhouette insists there is a place for indeterminacy and ambiguity in spaces devoted to rethinking the production and dissemination of art. Both the inner and outer - in the slippery and reflective surface of the fuselage and the ghosted white shadows of the curtain - present two different attempts to suspend a final reading and understanding of the space. For, with the end of this fantasy and its dislocation with the real dies the hope of a nation and its arts culture.



Functional and Spatial Organisation

The clear organisation of the building has been developed to reinforce the urban and architectural objectives.

At the centre of the project lie the theatres and associated break-out, servicing and entertainment spaces. They are galvanised into a singular element which maps the capacity of the various functions within. This element stretches to make contact with each of the four facades at which point a key aperture. From the main theatre this aperture, when activated, connects the audience to the Mediterranean. The foyer has an aperture overlooking the freeway while smaller theatre has a connection to the sky. Thus, before, after and during intervals in performances, the city of Beirut returns to the foreground in the minds of participants and visitors alike.

This complex object is shrouded by a glass facade which follows street level and the height setbacks required under the planning scheme. The space between this facade and the theatre block is left open on two sides and used for the location of office and associated program elsewhere. At ground level, this combination of screen and theatre object covers a dynamic urban space for use in concert, art installation and other modes.

The groundplane ramps up from the entry street to the freeway. This change in level is used to create an active public platform above and a new arts space below. This outdoor undercroft sits adjacent to the freeway and will be available for free urban art forms including performance and cinema. The undercroft is also used for servicing by large vehicles.

Below the ground lies the carpark and art gallery (and associated service spaces). This subterranean location of the gallery actually places it in direct proximity to the public spaces and gives excellent natural light (from skylights reaching back to the shaded public space) and has excellent temperature stability.

