

## DESCRIPTION

### A PLAY IN THREE ACTS WITH AN EPILOGUE

#### Characters:

Visitor – act I  
Architect – act II  
Manager- act III  
Narrator – epilogue

#### ACT I VISITOR

*( stage directions : Visitor reacts to the surroundings with great emotion)*

I leave the bustle of the capital behind me and enter the space between here and there. I wash the city dust off my legs. I feel the rich moist grass under the bare skin of my feet as the shimmering light descends all around me. I'm inside. There's time to stop, think, feel, live. There's time...

(...) I ascend steadily like Dante in the Divine Comedy. The sounds, the images, the movement, the smells – all go right through me. I become the sounds, the images, the movement and the smells. I am at once the creator and the audience, the actor and the director. I bury my hands in the cool moist clay. Today's the day my sculpture will come to life.

Even when I don't intend to come here, the magnetic attraction of the building pulls me in. The path may be long and winding but it always leads to the inside. The raindrops, the fragrance of the flowers, the animated conversation. The café patio vibrates with the sounds of heated discussion about modern art. I recognize the faces. I'm tempted to stay for a small espresso.

I've got to go now. It's nearly midday and it's time for our own SMILE AT THE WORLD from Beirut. In a minute I'll take the lift to the top floor of the nearby skyscraper designed by Jean Nouvel and today I will also send the world a smile. 😊

#### ACT II ARCHITECT

*( stage directions : Architect speaks in a matter-of-fact way but not devoid of emotion.)*

The landscape of Beirut is dominated by two horizontal lines – the line of the sea and the line of the sky. The plan of the HOUSE OF ARTS AND CULTURE reflects the relationship between these two vast expanses of space. I allow the water to flow and the air to fill in the spaces between.

The white of the façade has been chosen not only for practical reasons but also because of its symbolic associations with cleanliness and peace.

The curving lines of the elevation interact with the exterior – the building at once reflects the city and allows it to penetrate to the inside.

The concentric plan with lines coming out from the focal point in the middle gives the impulse in which the centre spreads outwards. The apparently chaotic surface reveals the mathematical clarity of Pythagorean geometry and the harmony of nature underneath.

The pentagonal symmetry of the flowerbeds recalls the idea of the Divine Harmony reflected by each living thing - the geometry of life.

The vertical lines are significant not only as part of the composition, they reveal the structural frame of the building and also suggest a route which the visitors may follow.

The dialogue with the Renaissance forms is obvious – the building should become the symbol of the modern city reborn. Just as when the Italian movement of Humanism spread into the neighbouring countries, the aim of the The House of Arts and Culture is to fulfill a similar role.

“The starry sky above me and the moral law within me” (*Immanuel Kant*). While entering the main hall one instinctively looks upwards. The mathematical perfection of Nature is evident in soft curves, waves and contours of the land. It’s enough to look at flowers, trees, leaves, and clouds to see that the world around us is devoid of straight lines. Why then do we always enclose space within four straight walls?

The structural frame reflects the aims of the composition – the walls, pillars and ceilings do not serve solely structural purposes but like the structure itself they are a part of the larger whole.

Many avoid visiting museums in the belief that so-called high culture is not for them. In today’s world it is becoming more and more clear that art should attract and encourage the audience, meet them in spaces which look and feel familiar. Art is enjoyable, playful and witty. It emanates beauty rather than pathos.

Following this argument further, we should ask ourselves the question of how to appeal to the young people who live largely in the world ruled by technological gadgets, media and the Internet. The answer seems obvious – we should use the same means of communication as the “code” they are used to. This way we’ll be sending clear messages – “You are welcome here.”

It is now possible to travel without moving from one’s own chair. The precision of satellite photography allows one to “stroll” in Central Park while actually sitting on a bench outside one’s own home in Australia. This is why the plan of the fifth ground is so important – the satellite signal will show the world famous picture of a smiley face. The image speaks clearer than a thousand words and will become the message that Beirut sends to the world.

On the ground level the compositional axis is formed by the main hall and the outside circus - the area designed as a meeting point and the site of the less formal artistic performances and happenings. The other key role of the circus is to act as a link between the outside and the inside of the building. As it is so close to both the main hall and the information point, even the accidental guest of the café may be led to ask themselves the question: what fascinating things must be happening inside the building if there is so much going on outside?

Two rooms in particular – The Small Multimedia Performance Hall and The Large Performance and Conference Hall – are a particular challenge for the architect, mainly because they should reflect the Investor’s demands in terms of their mobility and suitability for multimedia purposes. The two rooms can be rearranged to make one space large enough to accommodate over a thousand seats, and fit to house events of great importance.

The building should create a friendly atmosphere not only among visitors but also among its regular users – the workers of the building, the participants of the workshops and the restaurant guests. While creating each space the idea was to leave it as neutral as possible and thus allow the users to fill it with their forms, sounds and interactions. For this purpose stone, water and plants - the elements of the nature outside - were brought in to create the atmosphere inside.

### **ACT III MANAGER**

*( stage directions : Manager speaks the language of economy and finances. He is brief, laconic and to the point.)*

– In today’s world, cultural centers cannot be solely dependent on governmental support and assistance. Money rules the world, and without it, it is impossible to promote high culture.

- In terms of the whole project, it would have been futile to consider the initial costs only. It has been shown more than once that badly designed buildings cost a lot more in practice than was initially predicted.
- The key matters considered during the project revolved round energy saving and the usage of available natural resources.
- Every square inch of the roof is covered by a solar panel – not a ray of sun will be wasted.
- Natural building materials were used in favour of polyurethane blocks and the usage of the latter reduced to the absolute minimum. Thus we feel we will be able to look the future generations in the face.
- The building sets new standards of quality.
- The workers work effectively, are creative and willing to embark on individual projects which will be beneficial to all.
- Some cities take pride in the change of guards in front of Buckingham Palace, others in the national anthem played at a certain time of the day. We are proud of our SMILE AT THE WORLD.
- At midday there is a break for all, during which most observe the smiley face appearing in the skyline for a moment.
- Our diary is full of events – today an organ concert and a conference on environmental issues, and tomorrow the house of Prada fashion show. We manage it all well and there's order everywhere and room for everyone.
- The cafe and the restaurant make a significant addition to the budget. Their central position is for some businessmen incentive enough for the first visit. And when you have been here once it is impossible not to come again. Great food served in the pleasantly shady space filled with real plants and the murmur of flowing water encourages conversation and tempts one to stay longer.
- The cafe and restaurant can comfortably sit 180, and even 200 if necessary. They earn enough to allow the financial support to all manners of events, which have now become almost an integral part of the circus and the restaurant.
- The same can be said of all the minor cafes on the terraces of the building.
- The shop has proven another profitable venture. Postcards and posters with the images of the building have become a must souvenir for all visitors to Beirut. It was worth investing in the good looks of the building after all.
- Although I'm not at work today, I've found myself here again. This time I've brought my daughter. We're going to see a play for children.

## **EPILOGUE - NARRATOR**

The building has been designed using the technology of monolithic reinforced concrete combined with glass panes in vertical walls and in parts of the flooring on the terraces of the top floors.

The shape of the building recalls the shapes appearing in nature. The effect has been achieved by introducing curved walls supporting the structure, and at the same time including the overhanging upper stories with additional support elements within the building, all of which together create the consistent image of an edifice blending in the natural surroundings.

The existing shape of the terrain is reflected in the structure, which uses the different levels of the site for constructive purposes. The contrast with the monumental character of the overhanging top floors creates a feeling of movement and dynamic within the elevation, which though clearly embedded in and communicating with the surroundings, remains a dominant architectural feature. The ground level creates an impression of lightness and openness thanks to the elements of glass, terrace entrances and organic forms of the concrete pillars. It seems an integral part of the existing public space.

The underground consists of three levels of open layout car parks with the skeletal structure of columns and slabs. It is accessible by the entrance ramp and communicates with the ground floor by a number of independent lifts and staircases leading up to the control zone of level 0.

Above ground there are ten stories all of different outlines, each designed to perform a different function within the building, yet all joined together within the composition of varying heights as well as, on the functional level, communicating with each other both horizontally and vertically.

The structure of the building rests on the reinforced concrete frames for the outside and inside walls and the system of curtain walls, which attach to the skeleton of the building and support the monolithic floors.

Concrete, as a building material, proves both economical and long-lasting. It enhances the acoustic properties of the building, makes it safer in case of fire emergencies, and is at the same time easy to access and assemble. Concrete lends itself well to be shaped into the desired structure of the elevation, which will then create additional areas of natural shade and thus serve as an energy saving measure.

The natural resources and materials play a key role in the structure and the outlook of the building. The roofs designed as green terraces seem not only a functional and aesthetically pleasing solution but a solution which has many advantages from the technical point of view. During hot sunny days, the layers of cool wet soil will significantly lower the temperature of the roofs and protect them from the UV radiation. In low temperatures, on the other hand, they will serve as a thermal coating, while the rain water will be a natural supply for the growing plants. Incorporating a maximum amount of green surfaces into the building has in time become the main object of the project. The achieved effect is that of a refreshing oasis in the dusty urban surroundings.

The other elements serving a similar function are open water tanks placed in the areas accessible to the public. They add to the special atmosphere within the building, lower the temperature and create a healthy microclimate.

The dynamic outline of the building, achieved by emphasis on both the horizontal and the vertical combined with the nature-suggestive elements has been toned down by the usage of light colours and glass planes on the entire elevation. The solution recalls the building tradition of the region and immediately gives the building a historically meaningful context. At the same time, light colours will reduce the absorption of heat into the building and so make it more environmentally friendly. Moreover, a light elevation will make a pleasing background for the green areas and emphasise their value as gardens within the walls of the city.