

House of Arts and Culture

Beirut, Lebanon

R 9576 SLY

Context

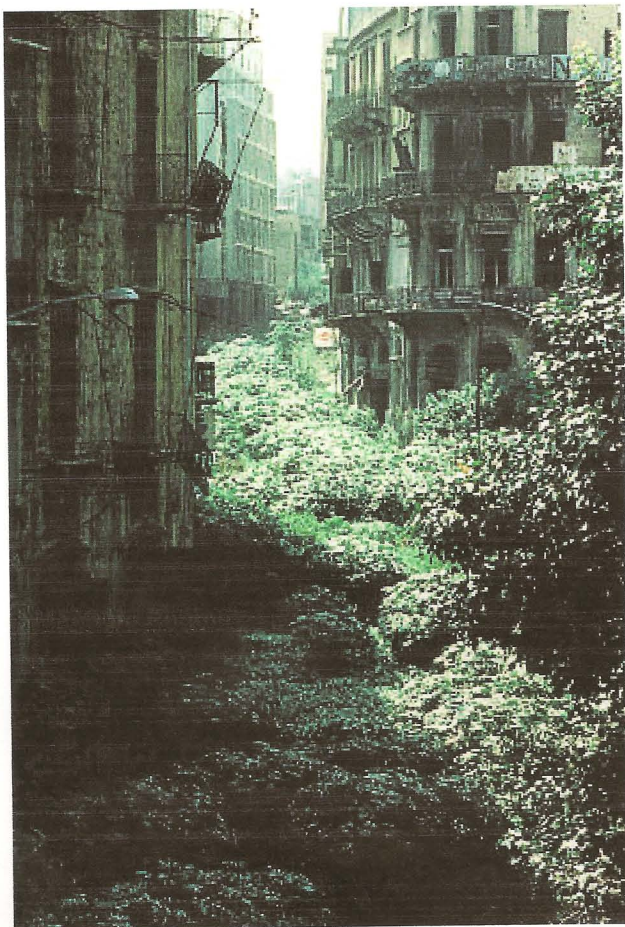
Being a city in the making, Beirut oscillates between destruction and construction. The city center nearly destroyed after the civil war 1975-1991 left a heavy heritage for the urban planners: The decision to completely dismantle the whole downtown-area was criticized by many people and led to serious confrontations in Lebanese society.

After a huge effort of politics and money, the re-erection began, creating a boom-town environment in the Ghalgoul district. The whole nation was literally rising like a phoenix, when suddenly the 33 day war destroyed many peoples' hopes again. Striving for a new, modern city while being dragged back by age-old conflicts: This might be a good description for the ambivalent Beirut.

Mindset

Architecture is not a proper mean to heal the wounds of the civil war nor to bridge the gap between the opposing religions. The only thing architecture can do is to provide a space. Space, which in its condition is sheltered, but at the same time non-restrictive. Space, which allows dealing with the Lebanese culture in all its dimensions, without exclusion.

The potential appearance of a house of arts and culture in Lebanon has no reference in contemporary architecture: The intended use is situated in such a complex and always changing environment, that an architecture trying to materialise this will be invalid before the concrete has dried.



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Concept

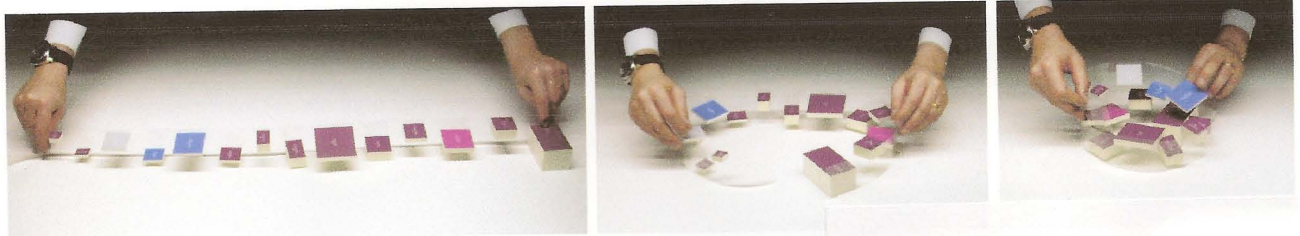
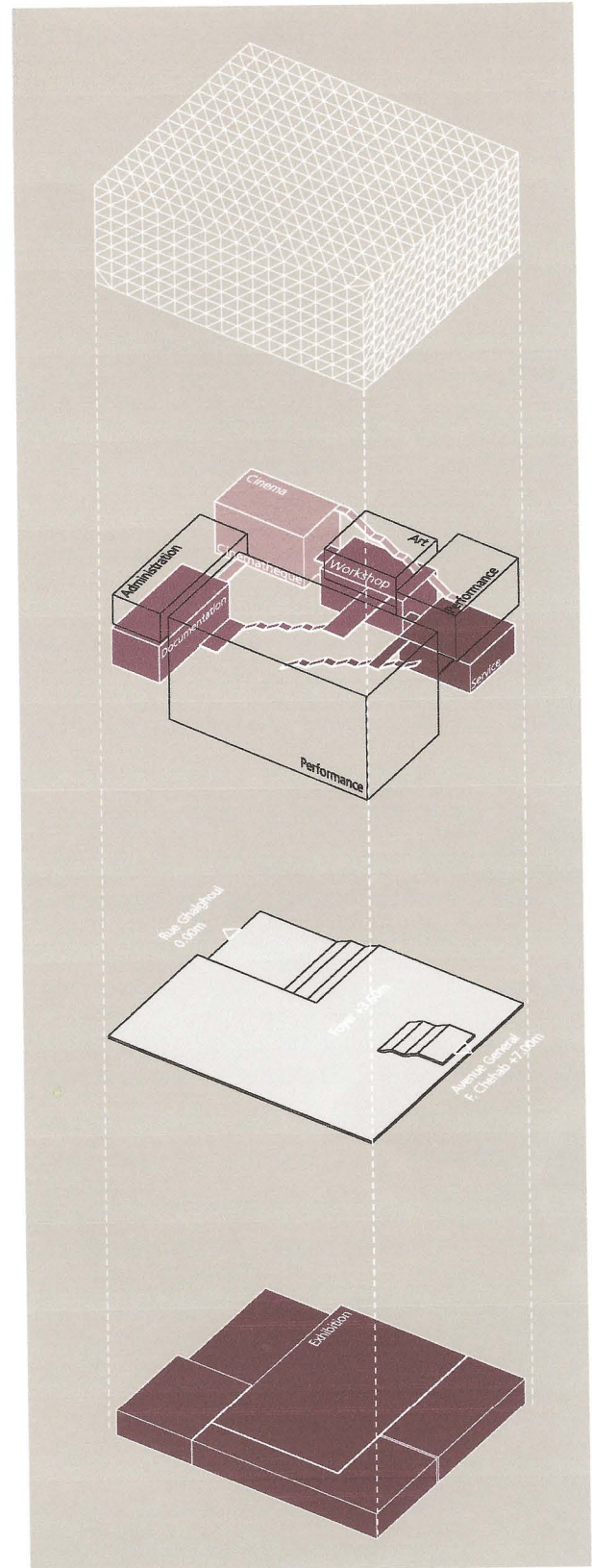
We propose an architecture which is not depending on the urban surroundings, which at this stage seems somehow amorphous. Nearly indifferent on the outside, the building is covered by a veil, which serves as a two-way membrane: The complex structure on the inside is slightly visible from outside, arousing interest and curiosity of the people passing by. On the inside the veil creates an intimate atmosphere, allowing the user to fade in or out the urban environment. The creation of art as an osmosis between the individual and the city.

The simple, cubic outside is counteracting the expressive, mostly eclectic architecture of the new Downtown. As being considered a space for artists, the building avoids expressing itself in a decisive appearance; it rather acts as a projection screen, which can relate to any cultural context. Where there is no figure, any figure can be conceived.

The organization of the inside contradicts the simple shape: Confronted with a highly heterogeneous programme, we decided to make this being exactly the quality of the building. As every functional entity of the programme has its own specific spatial needs, we designed every one of these entities separately.

In a second step, these entities get arranged according to a concept we call "squared murex":

We place the different volumes consecutive onto a band which then gets wrapped in a spiral. This configuration is adapted to the plot conditions, interchanging some of the volumes to create a maximum of mutual benefit. In a last step, we define possible connections and multifunctional areas, which can serve the neighbouring functions.



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Conclusion

The resulting structure allows the simultaneous perception of all the different uses. Each entity works on its own, but is also connected to the others, bound to a diverse unity, whose borders are defined by urbanistic requirements. The visitor as well as the artist can explore the different functions easily, as the circulation for the public uses is strongly interconnected with the circulation of the other uses.

Architecture as an incubator for the imagination, production and representation of art.

In Lebanon, the "murex brandaris" (a sea snail located in the Mediterranean sea) has a significant denotation: Used by the ancient Phoenicians to obtain an incredibly expensive pigment known as "purple" (ca. 10.000 snails equal 1 gram), this colour was for a long time a privilege reserved for emperors.

As this colour has a strong connection to the Lebanese history since ancient times, we would like to make an excessive use of it in the building, because we are very sure of one thing:
Cultural exchange is as precious as purple for today's Lebanese society.



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