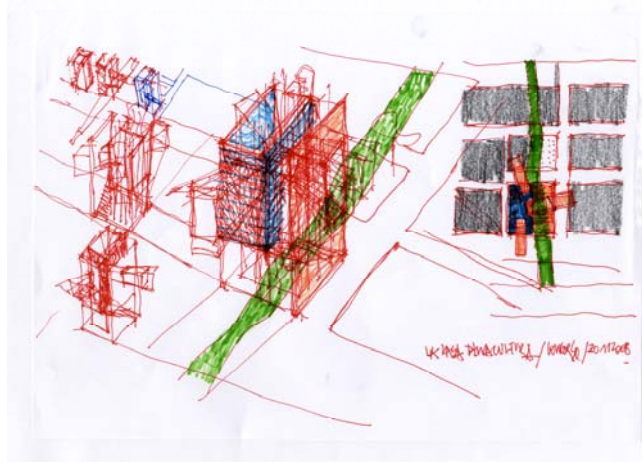**International Competition, THE HOUSE OF ARTS & CULTURE**

The Lebanese-Omani Center, Beirut, City Center 2009


1 Urban and architectural tasks

The site and program for the Arts and Culture Building define an architectural and urban problem of high complexity. The site chosen stands at the edge of the city center, facing the "Ring" highway on the south side and the foreseen hi-rise tower designed by Jean Nouvel on the North side. On East and West sides the site is surrounded by residential and office buildings more or less the same scale than the House of Arts and Cultures. Between our building and the Nouvel complex there's also a public square, which is possibly important for our approach.

In these conditions design approaches can be radically different. One possibility is to consider our building like just one more block, only a "Museum" block, characterized by richness of architectural solutions and public "aura", as a museum should always be. In this way the museum would simply contribute to the construction of the urban edge of the city center and to design the urban landscape crowning Nouvel's outstanding tower. The other, opposite, approach would be to think to the House of Arts & Culture as something different form a simple cube building, rather an open urban device composed by the sum of its urban relations and its complexity of program.

In this second view, which we chose, the building is openly a product of urban issues. The first and founding issue is the continuity of public space. The building catches public urban flows at the Ring level (+8.00) and draw them down into the Square and towards the business and architectural center of the city (+0.00). The building, especially the long ramp connecting the two levels, is therefore a tridimensional passage offered to public life and movement. Below and on top of that ramp, the museum is basically a double sequence: the sequence of individual programmatic spaces – the theatre, the museum, the ateliers etc. – and the sequence of a vertical open pathway connecting all the spaces and finally leading to an elevated "piazza" that is the real center of our project.

Architecturally, the project is the simple translation of these principles into form: the building shows its parts: the public ramp, the layering of programmatic spaces, the long and articulated pathway, the elevated piazza which concludes the promenade to the sky. Once resting on the piazza at level +20.00 the visitor will have a seductive view of the city, not too far from the urban movement, but closer to the tower and to the city center, searching for the sea in the distance.
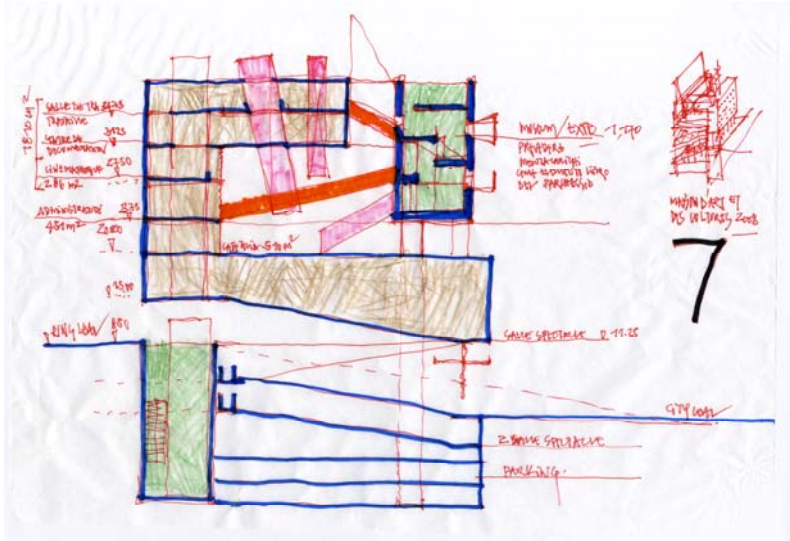

2 Functional and spatial organization

Under these premises it is clear that our House of Arts and Culture will finally consist of a series of important cultural and urban spaces, each one as an independent object defining its own specific relation with the city and the landscape. Looking at it from the urban space we can clearly see them. The first large scale element we see is the large ramp, an urban stairway reminding us of a number of architectural archetypes, an inclined piazza allowing both access to our complex and continuity to the urban flows. Under this ramp (level 0.00) we locate the small conference hall, the movie theater, and the commercial spaces, obviously found at the same level as the Square. At + 4.50 and 8.50 we find also the double-level lobby, allowing fast access to program areas. Over the ramp we feel the volume and the architectural and structural weight of the main conference hall, a large structure for an audience of 800, a roof for the urban ramp and a new ground for the higher part of the building. In fact the roof of the conference theater is a new "ground" for public life, an open air piazza (+20.00) turned to the city and visible from it, again visually and conceptually connecting further activities of our "House" to the community.

The "piazza" level obviously hosts cafeterias and restaurants, virtually extending the urban public space on top of the museum. Leaning over the piazza we can see the volume of the proper exhibition space, a vertical slab going on from level 23.80 to level 34.75. As long as our view climbs along the exhibition space we can see the south upper section of the building, a solid volume containing, from below to top, Administration offices (+23.80), (+27.50), the Documentation Center (+31.25) and the Cinematheque & Ateliers for artists (+34.75).

Besides the programmatic sequence and the monumental unveiling of the single parts of our complex, there is another hierarchy that regulates the tridimensional mosaic of our project. This hierarchy derives from the very different urban condition south and north of the building. As a logic choice, the building pushes all it's most massive and continuous element to its south edge, as a protective wall and a large scale elevation on the side of the Ring. Vice versa the north elevation, overlooking the highly urban context of the city center, and relating to the richness of a micro context hosting other new buildings, open public spaces, hyper architectural towers, avoids a direct confrontation with such monumentality and explodes in fragments, each one directly speaking to the city.

The circulation in the building again emphasizes this condition. Along the north elevation, in the most solid core of the building, we find regular stairwells and elevators, fastly connecting the lobby to the different activity areas. From North, instead, we se a long and slow vertical pathway, ramping sweetly up along the building parts, displaying major urban programs (the expo', the cinematheque, the piazza) along a "street" that penetrates and climbs on the building.

Below the ground level we locate all the other "dark" activities of the complex: storage at -5.00, underground parking at -8.50 through – 15.50.
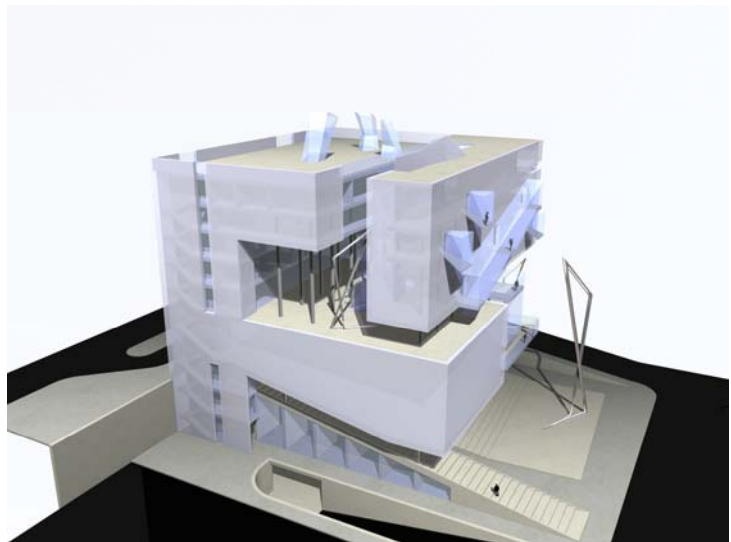
3 Technical and building solutions

As said before, the building will look like a tridimensional mosaic of large scale urban structures. Finally it will be a sequence of solid boxes, each one alluding to its own program. To achieve this result we will do two choices.

The first will be the option of a simple continuous material, like concrete, which will allow us plastic freedom and efficient structural solutions. This will also keep the construction budget within the assigned certain limit. Concrete also allows sophisticated options in terms of transparency, like grids, screens, brise-soleils, easily directing us towards a challenging dialogue with the building traditions of this area.

The second will be an articulate structural device, basing the first levels on a traditional bearing system of beams and pillars, whereas the upper floor will need a more synthetic and XL approach to the issue of structure, intended as a stratification of boxes leaning one on top of the other.

To complete the description of the project we should also quote the dialogue our proposal mean to establish with the history of the city and specifically of this part of the city. Two choices especially underline this aim. First the fragmentation of the complex, heavily influenced by the memory of the old urban tissue once occupying this spot, based on a sequence of small, roughly connected, building elements. Second the simplicity gently shaking the layout of our plans, again allowing traces and memory to modify the orthogonally and the purity of our volume.