

Introduction

The opportunity to create a new House of Arts and Culture befitting Beirut's significant intellectual arena is a uniquely exciting challenge. The development of Lebanese arts and culture is premised on the movement of free creativity. Throughout Beirut's turbulent history the region's poets, composers, artists, painters, writers and translators have met to debate, reflect and develop work and ideas. For the new House of Art and Culture to be a success it must first and foremost promote and sustain this tradition.

We propose a House of Arts and Culture for Beirut centred not only on providing a place for the production and display of arts and culture, but also on the creation of a new Forum that will promote the continuation of the spirit of free enterprise, exchange, debate and interaction.

Organisation

The building is clearly organised into three strata - Performance, Forum, and Exhibition – with performance at the lowest level, exhibition on top and the forum occupying the open space between. Car parking for the building is located discreetly in basement levels.



This stratification of programme allows the building to be easily navigated by visitors, guests and users alike, while efficiently operated by staff. Yet from this organisational simplicity stems an architecture of engaging complexity which makes the building intriguing; rewarding exploration with discovery in a way that will encourage people to enjoy long days within the centre and many subsequent return visits.

In addition, four external courtyards of varying proportion and vegetation relieve the depth of the building's plan and bring light, ventilation and landscape into the very heart of the building, contrasting with the necessarily more introverted nature of much of the programme in the building. It is around these courtyards that the programme is arranged within their respective strata, with careful consideration having been given to distinguishing the public and privately accessible elements of the brief, and ensuring each space has optimal conditions for its assigned function.

Forum

The Forum is the key element in the organisational strategy - a sequence of open spaces between the performance and exhibition strata which mediates between them in both physical and programmatic terms. It is conceived as a continuation of the public space of Beirut - an internal landscape which terraces diagonally up through the building while giving access both to the Performance and Exhibition strata. It collects together many of the most convivial spaces – the foyers where people congregate expectantly before performances, the cafes and restaurants where people keep lunch and dinner appointments or simply enjoy an informal coffee, the shops and boutiques in which people excitedly browse through CDs and DVDs – as well as spaces that allow access to, and dissemination of, information, such as the library and audiovisual facilities. It is the part in the building where people will be most inclined to rest, to browse, to think, to reflect, and in turn to talk, to discuss and to debate in the way that has been so influential to Lebanese culture.



The reception area forms a dramatic introduction to the Forum; while a series of terraces step up into the distance, an inverted series of steps forms the soffit to the forum providing an introverted counterpoint to the open activity upon the terraces; a sensation not unlike entering a system of caves.



Terraced landscape, Lebanon



Jeita Grotto, Lebanon

The Public Forum offers itself up to numerous possibilities, to individual moments and collective experiences, and to incidences of exchange and interaction between users and visitors, both planned and unplanned; these are the qualities that can help sustain the continued development and emergence of Beirut and Lebanon's distinctive arts and culture.

Exhibition

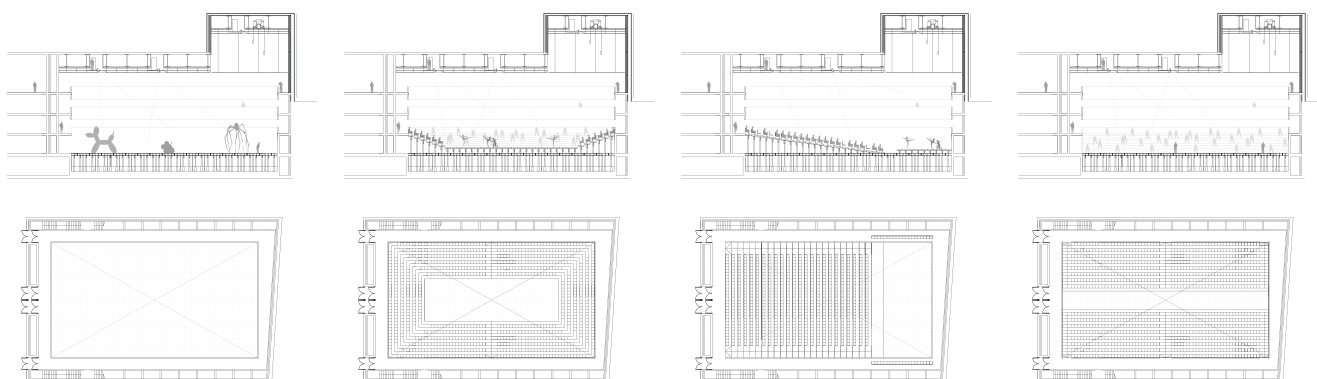
The upper stratum contains the exhibition space and National Cinematheque, along with workshop and offices. The exhibition space itself comprises two large modular rooms which can be reconfigured quickly and easily to create the optimal conditions for the display of art in any media.

The two rooms are, as desired by the brief, as neutral as possible, allowing the art on display to have primacy in the space. Nevertheless they are afforded a distinctive character through their generous proportions and lighting characteristics. The exhibition rooms have been specifically located at the top of the building in order to benefit from high levels of natural, top-lighting. A system of rooflights will bring in north light giving even diffuse light to create optimal viewing conditions for most artwork. In addition each of the two interlinked rooms have a large window providing external views. The rooms will offer the possibility of being 'blacked out', and will be supplemented by an artificial lighting system. Hygrometry, temperature regulation and alarm systems will ensure the protection of the works of art in all respects.

Performance

In response to the highly serviced nature of the accommodation, the lower stratum contains the two performance spaces, along with their associated service facilities and below ground car-parking.

The large performance hall has been designed as a modular space with a capacity of 840 which can be quickly and easily reconfigured (flat floor, end stage with proscenium and orchestra pit, theatre in the round, congress etc) through the use of the *Spiralift* lifting system for auditoria. The addition of narrow side balconies provides an alternative seating location as well as offering possibilities for performance and access to raised platforms. In addition to the use of modular ceiling baffles, the fascia to the balconies will be profiled to ensure perfect acoustic conditions.



Large performance hall: possible configurations - flat floor, theatre in the round, end stage, catwalk

The second performance hall, with a capacity of 252, will take the form of a traditional 'black box', which will again be flexible and suitable for multiple uses.

Both auditoria will be constructed with double skins to achieve the necessary acoustic isolation.

Structure

As a result of the brief's requirement for a number of large, flexible spaces - performance halls, exhibition halls and cinema - and the architectural ambition to realise the space of the forum as a single continuous volume there are only a few locations where vertical load-bearing elements pass through all storeys.

We propose a hybrid system. The primary structural elements of the upper floors are formed by in-situ cast concrete beams and steel Vierendeel trusses concealed within the walls which enclose individual spaces. These beams support secondary spanning elements and transfer loads through the vertical load-bearing elements formed by the in-situ cast concrete circulation cores, columns around the courtyards and the external walls. The forum and the lower storeys are structured more conventionally with loads transferred via cellular walls at more regular centres. The vertical circulation cores, and bracing concealed within the walls and floors, stiffen the structure. Where the beams on the upper floors are punctured by openings, structural integrity is maintained through the accommodation of thickened top and bottom chords within floor and ceiling depths.

Environment and Sustainability

We propose a building which minimises energy use during operation through use of a range of passive environmental design strategies which are integral to the building's architecture. The deep plan of the site is relieved by a range of courtyard spaces that bring natural light and fresh air deep into the heart of the building as well as providing attractive sheltered external green spaces that can be enjoyed by building users and help promote increased biodiversity in the area. The building's perimeter is veiled in a double skin glazed facade which, together with the high thermal mass of the building, helps to regulate the building's internal environment to comfortable levels throughout the year by acting as an insulative layer during colder months, and in warmer months helping to expel warm air through the stack effect. In addition a number of active systems are proposed: heat recovery and exchange systems will help minimise energy consumption; ground source heat pumps will provide constant low-level background heating to spaces; rainwater harvesting and water recycling will minimise water usage.

It is proposed that the environmental impact of the project be assessed against internationally recognised standards such as LEED or BREEAM with a view to achieving the highest level possible. This will ensure a sustainable solution which is part of the larger social and architectural vision.

Conclusion

The proposals presented illustrate a House of Arts and Culture which is not only centred on providing space for the production and display of arts and culture, but also on the creation of a dramatic public forum which is fully inclusive and offers an informal place for all members of today's multi-cultural society to meet and engage with the creative arts.

The resultant architecture is conceptually clear, spatially complex, structurally innovative and environmentally sustainable.