THE HOUSE OF ART & CULTURE IN BEIRUT (The Lebanese-Omani Centre)

1. URBAN AND ARCHITECTURAL OBJECTIVES

1.1 The Historic Context: The design of Beirut's House of Art & Culture ("HA&C") provided us with a unique opportunity to gain an insight into Lebanon's most exciting cultural and historical heritage. Few countries can draw from such a rich history and can benefit from a natural combination of archaeological sites and modern architecture.

To ensure the project's cultural integration, Beirut's historical and social context does play an essential role. In Beirut, the artistic expression began well before the awakening or "Renaissance" of the Arab Literature, Theatre and Music in the 19th Century. Beirut has witnessed the rise of Canaanite civilisation, the invention of the Alphabet by the Phoenician, and absorbed the influence of the Hellenic, Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman cultures. The vestiges of a Roman Theatre, a Basilica and a Forum recently discovered along the *Cardo Maximus* are not far from the location of Plot 128-4; the Ghalgoul District is just outside the Arab city Gate of Bab-Derkeh (itself on the axis of the *Cardo Maximus* of the Roman *Beyritus*).

While the local architecture and the City urban layers of the past were source of inspiration, the design of the HA&C is deliberately contemporary and modern.

1.2 The General Approach: The proposed design reflects a vision beyond a predictable landmark in a prime location. While the proposed site for the HA&C construction is exceptional as it lies along the only access to Beirut Centre from the Ring Road, the plot on which it rests will be surrounded by new large modern buildings (except the "Bacri House"). Thus, to distinguish this Building which is accessible from all directions, we propose a distinctive and ultimately innovative solution that satisfies the prerequisites of the competition program: to have a building that is a "Free Space of Artistic Expression with No Boundaries" and at the same time is "accessible and highly visible".

The proposed building integrates images of the past in an overall concept that is pleasant, functional and enclosed in a modern "envelope".

1.3 The Overall Building: We envisaged a building that rises from the past, where the past are its foundations and the subsequent history of the city is captured by the shapes, the colours and the two-shell structure of the building. More specifically, we viewed the Roman ruins and remains (*i.e.,* this project's parking levels) emerging from the ground and starting to distort and twist at Level 1 as to indicate the temporal evolution which has marked the history of Beirut. The building's dual nature is embodied in its two main elements, one solid and one transparent. Through its transparency, the outer "envelope" is today's viewers lens through history. The inner building is in golden sandstone to reflect the old city walls and defenses, the city's history, architectural development and traces of time. These traces are represented here through colored protrusions and linear slots. They illustrate Beirut's joyful and painful events, victories and defeats, successes and failures.

1.4 The Influence of Beirut's Main Historical Periods: The principal features of each historical period that have primarily marked the City's character have guided our choices. They have thus inspired us with respect to the HA&C's organization as well as its architectural style and the animation of the overall project.

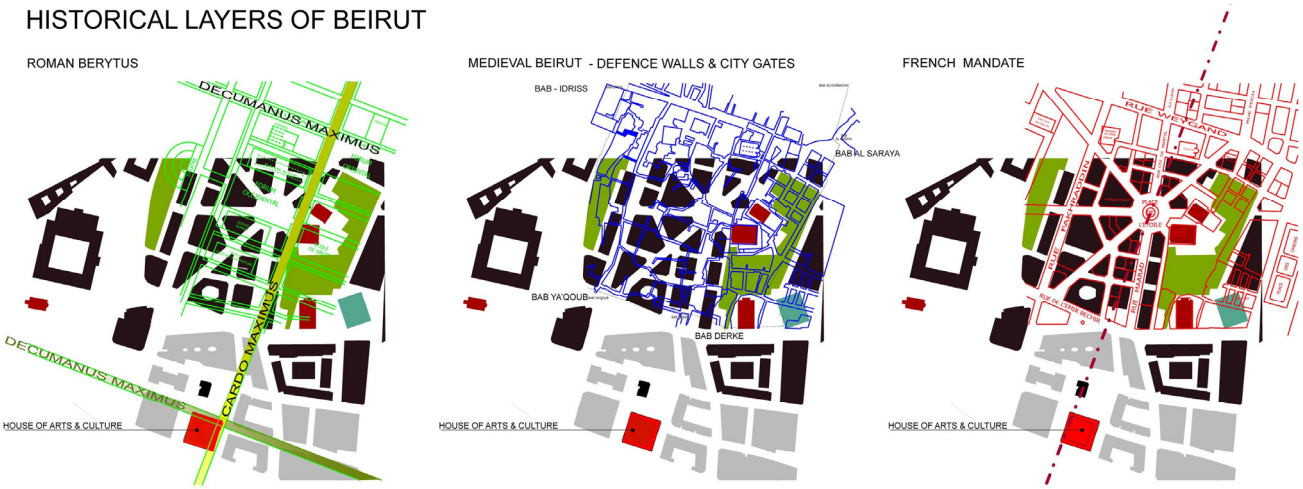
Lebanese House: The project's volumetric and architectural language is reminiscent of the traditional and Mediterranean architecture. The imagery evokes a typical Lebanese home with a central courtyard, of a type that was first introduced by the Phoenicians.

Roman Trace: The building's inner core is intended as a reincarnation of the typical Roman house composed of regular rectangular blocks or *insulae*. The Roman orthogonal matrix inspires the structural weave of the building. Access to the various areas is at the intersection of the "transposed" *Cardo Maximus* and the *Decumanus Maximus*, as detailed in the typical Roman city plan in the diagram below.

The Medieval Trace: The Medieval trace's primary character is vernacular. As a result, it influences the circulation through the building. The vernacular trait will give the visitor the impression of strolling through a labyrinth. In addition, each access to the HA&C will be named after the gates of the ancient city Bab-Idriss, Bab Al Saraya, Bab Ya Qoub, Bab Derke.

We aimed at making of the HA&C not only an emblematic construction for the city, but also a "house" for the local population and the visitors from neighbouring countries.

DIAGRAM 1: The Layers



2. FUNCTIONAL AND SPATIAL ORGANISATION:

Based on the above reflections, "influences", function and geometry and considering the competition rules, the plot configuration and BCD regulations, we have designed an Architectural Proposal characterized by the following Elements.

2.1 THE CENTRAL CORE: A square construction of Concrete and Steel (37.50x37.50M) built on a grid of 7.50x7.50M set orthogonal to the Roman grid, rises from the Basement to the Top Roof. It contains the main activity of the Building spread on 8 Levels above and 5 levels below the ground floor. At Ground Level and below, the central core extends on the same grid lines to cover ~ 70% of the plot.

2.2 THE OUTER ENVELOPE: A Larger Square Construction of Glass and Steel 52.0x52.0 M set orthogonal to the Ghalgoul Street is suspended from Level 8 (the regulation level of +32.0 M) and tapers down to Level 1 where it is twisted to meet the Glass Wall of the Entrances at an angle of 5°.

By its position along the main road, the project's urban presence is recognisable by its double solid and transparent layers.

2.3 THE ACCESS:

The Ground Floor (Level 0) has been set at mid level between Ghalgoul Street and the Ring Road.

The Main Entrance : to the Ground Floor is from the Pedestrian Walkway. It is the most practical and logical for this use. The walkway - considered as a “Piazzetta” - should be landscaped in harmony with the HA&C.

The Parking entrance to the parking levels in the basement, is accessed through Ghalgoul Street on the lowest part of the plot at street level (+30.50 from sea level).

The Secondary (Back) Entrance : On the small west street, next to the Cafeteria / Restaurant, it overlooks the exhibition gallery below. This entrance, generally closed, will be open on special occasions and serves also as an emergency exit.

The Service Entrance : is provided for small trucks from the ring road (street level 38.00) to the delivery area on the ground floor through a ramp and is reserved for the kitchen, the storage and technical rooms (on Level -2) as well as all the upper floors through a freight elevator (2.00x5.00 M).

2.4 THE SPATIAL ORGANISATION

- From the Main Entrance:,we access the Entrance Hall - with Reception, Information and Security Service - which is the distribution centre for:

- **The Exhibition Space** starting from the Lobby at Level 0 and spiralling through the Exhibition Galleries down to Level -2, with the natural light distilled through 30.00 M of glass wall.

- **The Administration** in the Central Core on Level 0 and Level 1 through a dedicated internal stair.

- **The Commercial Spaces & Cafeteria** in the Central Core around the Atrium of the Escalators.

- **The Library** on Level 1, under the outer shell, with a ceiling height of 24.00 M (it is also accessible directly from a dedicated stair or through the Documentation Centre).

- **The Atrium** in the centre of the Central Core with 3 sets of escalators (independent from the Elevators and Stairs) is the circulation artery towards:

- the Documentation Centre on Level 1,

- the Workshops & Training Rooms on Level 2,

- the National Cinematheque, Performance Hall, and Movie Theatre spread on Levels 3, 4 and 5,

- the large Performance & Conference Hall on Levels 6, 7 and 8.

- **The Parking,** on Levels -3, -4 and -5, is accessible through separate stairs and elevators to avoid security problems.

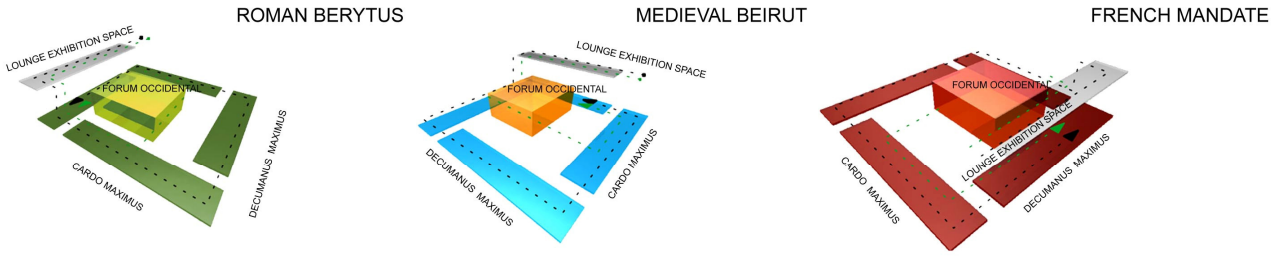
2.5 THE BCD Regulations: The Plot is not subject to Built Lines. We considered the reference street level +32.00 - level of the west street at the centre of the lower section - as base point for the building height as defined by the BCD regulation (Article 16.1 page 26). The Building footprint and total built area are within the permitted area as per BCD regulations.

The architectural solution we propose maximises the allowable construction base area in response to the surface. It enhances the spatial quality and interior comfort, and optimizes the use of natural lighting. It favours internal walkways through the temporary exhibition and public areas.

The above descriptions are complementary to the diagram below, and are intended to facilitate the reading of the Complex Plan and Circulation.

DIAGRAM 2 The Circulation

EXHIBITION AREA AND CIRCULATION
THEMATIC ROUTES



.3. TECHNICAL AND BUILDING SOLUTIONS:

3.1 Materials: The materials proposed mirror the historical layering. They primarily include glass, steel and golden sandstone, which endows the building's interior with texture and a more intimate spatial composition. The building absorbs the external light, and welcomes the visitor with a rich atmosphere that will present different faces according to angle of vision, daylight and weather.

3.2 Shapes and Forms: The building's "envelope", or outer layer, consists of clear glass with acid etched designs at low level and will include a large inscription in the Phoenician Alphabet and in Arabic Calligraphy. The glass panels are fixed metal consoles, held in place by large clamps. Through its shaded meshes, the multilayered façade is an autonomous wall construction which harmoniously fits with the interior and acts as a weather skin, daylight modulator, sun shade and thermal insulator.

The self-bearing façade rises from the basement's pit and, without firm contact, embraces the solid structure. With its golden sandstone covering, the internal building becomes a large monolithic form and has almost a sculptural character. This visual impression is enhanced by the use of essential materials, without detracting from its usability and functionality.

4. CONCLUSION:

Imposing itself as an unavoidable focal point in the urban site, the project's uniform structure becomes a prestigious urban monument.

By integrating architecture and engineering, this holistic approach maximises the efficient use of the site's nature and character. The combination of traces of the past with technology of the future is a key feature of our design. It will also serve as an essential factor of sustainability.