

HOUSE OF ARTS & CULTURE – BEIRUT, LEBANON.

Architecture is an indicator of place. It resides in 3 dimensional reality...belonging to a particular place and people. It has the innate ability to be a transmitter of society's beliefs, about itself and the world around it. Often times a society's beliefs are reflected in the myths that it tells. These Myths are allegorical stories (lies) that reveal deeper truths.

Many ancient cultures such as the Greeks and Egyptians had buildings which were integral to the representation and actual reenactments of cultural myths. The Temple Horus at Edfu in Egypt was one such building. The design of the front façade was at once a representation of the land flanking the Nile River Valley (two tall towers flanking a shorter front entry) and a metaphor for the boat journey of the mythical sun god Re over the sky. The actual building itself acted as a stage for the physical reenactment of that journey. Architecture has this innate power to connect with the society that builds it by basing its design on deeper truths that are part of that culture.



As a House of Arts and Culture, this building will be of central importance to the people of Beirut, and Lebanon as a whole, and will be crucial to the understanding and dissemination of art and potentially deeper truths of the Lebanese people. It will be in part a transmitter of the new myths of this culture. As Picasso once said “Art is a lie that reveals the truth.”

The Lebanese people are descendants of the ancient Phoenicians, who were contemporaries of the ancient Greeks and Egyptians; although far less is known about them due to the fact that there are very few records left. The Phoenicians were the great sailors of their time, building large sturdy sea worthy vessels out of the local cedars. They established trading routes throughout the entire Mediterranean. The name Phoenicia and Phoenicians was coined by the Greeks to mean “purple or red people”, which related to the purplish red dye that they invented and was in high demand at the time.

Many Phoenicians believed that they were the descendants of the mythical Phoenix, a bird that after 500 years of life built itself a nest of myrrh, set itself ablaze and died. A new Phoenix would then rise out of the ashes, build an egg of myrrh, place the ashes of its father in the egg and deliver it to Heliopolis. It is the universal story of life, death and resurrection. This is a fitting metaphor for the country of Lebanon which has lived a glorious life, essentially died in the flames of civil war and is resurrecting itself.

Building Design

The building is organized into two distinct areas represented by the two shapes: on the south side is a glass box housing a cedar clad oval. The glass is surrounded by a series of motor driven adjustable fins to block the sun. These shapes house the large performance hall and are directly related to the egg and the nest in the story of the Phoenix. The shape and material of the hall also recalls the wooden ships used by the Phoenicians.



Front view of Phoenician Boat

The performance hall will act much like a modern interpretation of the ancient ships, as a vessel to deliver the stories, beliefs and myths of a culture through art, dance and music. It should be noted that the ships used by the Phoenicians did much the same things in indirect ways. Through their expertise in trading and sailing they set up colonies all along the Mediterranean coast and directly exported many of their beliefs and customs. They also exported their early alphabet which became the bases for all known alphabets in the west.

Adjacent to the glass box is a 5 story stone and wood clad tower which houses the small performance hall, dressing areas, library, administrative offices, workshops and exhibition space. The tower is a series of offset rectangles sitting on top of one another at roughly each floor line. This is a physical manifestation of the story of the Phoenix as well, the idea being that there is only one Phoenix at a time; each bird creates itself on top of the foundation of the bird that came before. In this case each floor acts as the foundation for the next.

It was noted in the design brief that the existing condition of art in Beirut is one in which artists create their art within a disparate urban context, one without a central home. As such I felt it important to try to create an accessible building, one with several access points, and to create a dialogue between the inside and the outside of the building. This notion to dissolve the visible barriers between the inside and the outside and to expose the hidden “art” of human interaction informs the fenestrations throughout the project. The performance hall surrounded by glass, and windows being strategically located in areas of activity such as the main entrance and the dance studio, all work to show off the action inside the building. This creates an opportunity for the users inside to become part of a natural performance viewed by the casual passerby. In addition to these glimpses of areas within the building, there are also multiple exterior areas for performances. A large outdoor covered plaza/exhibition/gathering place located on ground level can be used as a multi-functional space for outdoor dining, impromptu street performances a general gathering area. The roof also incorporates an outdoor plaza which can be used for exhibitions.

The building can be accessed in several ways; using elevators from the below-grade parking deck, via sidewalk along the access road to the north, or from the ground level plaza via a long ramp and pair of escalators. All accesses lead to a two story main entrance at level 1. From this location all parts of the building are accessible via stairs or elevator.

Spaces

The performance hall is a fully transformable space. In the drawings, it is shown in the traditional Italianate configuration with seating for 800 on the main floor and the two balcony levels. The floor is adjustable to accommodate both sloped and flat configurations, and the balconies being tucked into the side of the egg shape allow for the main floor area to be fully useable in a congress type setting, as well as allowing for seating in a center stage theater.

The balcony design also prevents the need for telescoping seating and thus allows for quicker transformation between events, if necessary. The other advantage to the oval shape is the isolation of sound. The double wall construction creates a more isolated performance hall and better acoustics.

The exterior skin consists of 3 separate systems to reflect the materials inherent to the history of Lebanon; glass, limestone and cedar. The tower element utilizes modern rain screen technology, incorporating a main waterproof weather barrier wall with an outer aesthetic veneer separated by a small air gap. This provides improved wall performance over traditionally constructed walls. The glass at the cube utilizes a double glazed vented curtain wall with adjustable aluminum screens for sun control to prevent heat gain in the hot climate. The roof incorporates both a green roof using native planting, and a drainable hard-scape plaza for outdoor functions. All water will be captured and used for irrigation of vegetation. The roof of the tower is designed using solar panels along with curved light reflecting sun controls over a glazed skylight. These reflectors capture sunlight, redirect it and diffuse it, sending it through the skylight to illuminate the art exhibits on the top floor. This method will provide better, more natural and diffused light for the art while reducing energy consumption.