

It is not easy to interpret, from books or newspapers, the meaning of a place, the spirit of a culture that pursues a new birth after such a dramatic experience. It is not easy to get into the deep and practice needs of people working to piece together a nation. Not easy to take the decision to participate to a competition with so many significant issues.

In the end prevailed in us the desire to challenge with this city, which self defines the “Door to Orient”, using the instruments of architecture and without any haughtiness of giving a final interpretation.

We decided to participate using the city as an access point to a culture so close and so far at the same time. A project works if it brings knowledge and growth.

## URBAN RELATIONS

The project site, located on the limit of the “old town”, has a high value for Beirut. It is part of the border, sensitive and ambiguous place, where two urban areas, so different and distinct, have a dialogue. Since the beginning of our approach to this competition, we focused our attention on the interpretation of the border. Border means limit, cut, scar, discontinuity, but it is also the place where people, cultures, differences meet. The research of a new identity based on this concept might give a deeper meaning to the future.

Through this approach, remaining inside the site limit, we conceived the building to a human scale.

Our purpose was to realize a permeable space, a place for gatherings, meetings, exchange, in other ways a “piazza”. It all became clear: consider the limit as a “piazza”, a modular space between the two distinct areas and transform it into a place for conceptual debate.

Beyond the symbolic and urban values, it seems correct, for a Mediterranean city, to create an outdoor space for art and culture. A place where socializing is encouraged, a place to share together with the other public spaces of the city.

The top of the building, set as low as possible, becomes a “piazza”. The floor design, following an “arabesque” arrangement, as been extended to the front space of the building between Rue Emir Amine and Rue Galghoul, to Jean Nouvel’s tower. The extension beyond the plot, which is optional, comes from the need of having an interaction space in proportion the cultural significance of the building.

The preliminary analysis and 3d simulations highlighted a volumetric and vertical predominance of the surrounding buildings, which drastically decry the significance of a edifice of this kind, suggesting a horizontal solution for the project. Treating the building as a piece of design was one of the ways to make it gain value in such a comparison, but we were not really interested in this approach.

The functions which don't need to be naturally illuminated (workshops, performance halls, storage, meeting rooms) have been placed underground to minimize the external volumes. We generated a void opposite to the large size of the surrounding buildings. The other functions have been organized within in a linear building [32 m high].

## SYMBOLIC VALUES

A building for culture and art can be conceived, to our opinion, following two strategies. One is a case, modular, a neutral frame to fill with exhibitions, shows, concerts. Another way is to consider the building as part of the artistic values that occur inside, giving to the edifice poetic, expressive, communicative and evocative features. The case reflects the content.

We decided, after a harsh debate inside work team, for the second choice. Has prevailed the idea that in the history of a city or during the times of changing and urban transformation, like Beirut is going through, architecture, for its symbolic features, has a predominant role in the construction of a new configuration.

A labyrinth drawn on a white stone carpet acts as the metaphor of a urban structure, of a city. A city looking for a new identity, but hard to achieve due to its amount of directions. The ramps created into the surface, were generated by deep scars which meaning mutates from being a division sign to evolve into a strong communication element, the access to the building. Through a discontinuity

you reach another dimension, a mental dimension, place of the art. A place symbolically linked to the historical city, a fragment of a bazaar. Dimensions, spaces, pathways have been projected to the man scale, in the attempt to recall the human spatial experience inside an ancient city. Art evokes history and tradition, not trough vernacular processes or oriental settings, but researching its deep meanings with fine allusions. We would like our project to transmit an aware and tragic optimism, an unstereotyped question over human nature, essential task of each culture.

In silent opposition to the part of the project described, there is a linear block were have been distributed all the functions preparatory art: library, workshops, administration. Study and inspiration necessitate intimacy, are personal experiences, they have to be preserved from show blast and hast communication.

## THE BUILDING

The project articulates the House of Arts & Culture into two distinct parts. The design of the “piazza”, with its large hexagonal matrix, to be seen from overlooking positions, evokes a labyrinth, a twine of directions. The background is made of white stone while three different darker shades delineate the drawing. A thin oxidized copper skin wraps all the vertical openings generated by cuts and translations. Light penetrates the perforating metal sheet, acting also as sunscreen, generating the proper environmental comfort. The natural light, for example, dominates the foyer entering from the wide triangular windows between the ramps, reproducing the enchanting effect of light typical of the Arabic-ottoman architectural tradition.

A Cartesian fabric wraps the vertical building. A sunscreen made of metal and vertical ceramic pipes, slightly detached, confer to the façade a natural and vibrating aspect.

## ACCESS

The public has access to the building at level + 4,00 m either from the piazza through the ramps, or directly from the underground parking. The artists and staff entrance is placed in the rear west side of the building, while the delivery area is in the rear east side at level 0,00 m.

## EXIBITION

At the reception level we find the exhibition of which the triangle shape piazza, directly connected, is the outdoor extension. In this outside space, ideal fragment of a bazaar and also used also for parties, overlooks the bookshop introducing a commercial function. A ramp takes from the piazza to the bar and its terrace.

The exhibition spaces are modular and dividable depending on requirements. Simplicity characterizes this spaces in order for art to prevail.

## FOYER

A wide stairway from the reception takes to the cineteque, at level 0.00, the meeting rooms, the foyer of the performance halls and movie theatre, at level -6.40. There is a further access to the stalls at level -9.60. The space of the foyer has been conceived as a complex system of pathways, accesses, flying bridges, triple heights.

Natural light dominates this articulated space, where the terrace of the bar opens into a pleasant space for a break.

## MOVIE THEATRE

The movie theatre has been projected following the projection of the ramps. What could seem pure formalism actually corresponds to the need of having a wide screen despite the small dimensions. High visibility is guaranteed by the sits arranged on grades.

## PERFORMANCE HALLS

The big performance hall, hosting around 800 people, is a modular machine conceived, through a mechanical platform system, to allow 3 different configurations: 1) "flat space", 2) "italian theatre", 3) "round shape theatre".

1. The stalls and the stage assume the flat configuration at level -8.60, accesses at levels -6.40 and -9.60.
2. The pneumatic pistons reconfigure the stalls rising the platforms with the seats from level -9.60 to -8.60. The acting space is made of the stage at level -8.60 and the orchestra pit at level -11. The audience can be made to enter at levels -6.40 and -9.60.
3. Part of the stalls, in the flat configuration at level -8.60, becomes the stage. The stage, in configuration 2, is reconfigured by the pneumatic pistons in grades. In this arrangement the scene gains a central position with the tribunes all around. The audience can be made to enter at levels -6.40 and -9.60.

The small performance hall, hosting 250 people, has been conceived like a technologically advanced black box. Platforms on pneumatic pistons allow the floor to be easily reconfigured. The dressing rooms, storage spaces, and technical functions have been placed around the stage area. The loads, from the delivery area at level 0.00 are moved vertically to the stages, exhibition and workshops through a freight elevator.

The workshops, the library and administration have been placed in the higher building. The spaces follow a linear distribution and two stairs, arranged on the short sides, serve all the floors. Access to elevators and stairs is allowed either from the reception or the underground parking.

The double height in the reading room of the library and the workshops overlooking the reception create significant spaces. The restaurant, as in the typical oriental tradition, has been placed on the top. A wide terrace doubles the space during good weather conditions. Customers can be made to enter directly from the piazza as requested.