

The city of Beirut thrives on flexibility, openness, and change. Central to the Middle East, Beirut has been a locus of culture and art for centuries, its harbor a physical manifestation of the introduction and dissemination of life that occurs in this insatiable place. After the theater of war, Beirut is coming back together, turning its dynamism into architecture and its inherent culture into buildings. Its public spaces are gaining momentum while the neighborhoods surrounding downtown are cementing their status as centers of activity.

Beirut's permeability and porosity is key to examining our proposed architectural intervention. Here, different spaces collide and crash into each other. Roofs become sidewalks, stairways become meeting halls, and arcades become courtyards. Building and action become one through the introduction of humanity, through the small accidents and happenings that make up this great pageant of daily life. Nothing is definitive; everything is open-ended. The place is rich with action and possibility.

## **THE BUILDING**

Sited on a former parking lot, next to Jean Nouvel's stunning new tower and facing Beirut's beloved Bacri House and a public square, the House of Arts and Culture is a micro-city of a building. Facing the ring road, a window-punched façade creates a boundary between the structure and Beirut's busy traffic but offers an overlook onto the city at the roof terrace level, while on the entrance side, a terraced interior faced with structural glass and detailed with sandstone opens up onto the existing public space, creating a continuum between urban experience and culture, inside and outside. Ribbed with terraces and covered by a media roof that rivals Beijing's Greenpix, the House of Arts and Culture provides indoor and outdoor public space. Rather than one monolithic structure that attempts to address the inherent life of the city with formal and constrictive shapes, we propose an ever-mutable building whose shifting planes, walls and formats introduce a consistency of exploration and discovery.

## **CIRCULATION**

Because the house is not a traditional cultural center, the circulation isn't either. Passageways aren't used solely for passage, but as spaces to collect and relate, to breathe and talk. A grand set of steps leads up to the entrance and offers a place for people to linger around the clock, while a large ground-floor restaurant and the shops

operate as an extension of the city's connective tissue. The building's glass front offers visibility of exhibitions even when the House is closed for the night, and a pass-through between the restaurant and the rest of the structure creates consistent engagement with the building, even after it's closed for the day.

Inside, the terraces are gradually set back, which gives the building a sense of openness, of peeling layers back from the exterior. The top ribbon is an LED-equipped screen that advertises current exhibitions and events, and is powered by the roof's solar panels. The House's visibility will address the dynamism and vitality of the city's squares, pedestrian areas, and waterfront promenades. Spontaneous exhibitions take over the interior structural terraces, which mirror the complex urban form of the city of Beirut, and offer the same swell of public and private space, cafes and corners.

Every hallway, room, entryway, foyer, and vestibule will have a function besides its basic architectural one. Inside and outside connect through the installation of a green plant wall, the openness of the structural glass façade, and the use of sandstone.

## **PERFORMANCE HALLS AND CINEMA**

The large performance hall is conceived as a big modular space and it will support different uses: Italian-style Theater, large-scale music concerts, dance productions and all types of congresses and conventions. Flexibility is key: a central orchestra pit is surrounded by rigging lofts, wings, and rising tiers of seats, all of which are easily removed in order to create a round theater, U-shaped or flat space. A hydraulic piston-driven system combines with a choice of three types of seating modules—stored on an extra floor—to create an infinite number of stage and audience layouts. Delivery of the stage sets occurs through a unique truck-accessible elevator platform, which allows for massive behind-the-scenes changes unnoticed by visitors hanging out at the level's café – situated on the same floor as the hall's entrance so people can avoid the intermission crush.

A small computer-designed faceted-limestone-covered 250-seat performance hall appears to hang, virtually weightlessly, in the center of the building. By using a hydraulic piston-driven system similar to the one used by the large hall and two types of seating modules, the small performance hall becomes a modular and infinitely changeable space that can support a poem recital, conference, colloquium, roundtable, movie showing, experimental theater, solo performance, or small group

concert. The modular hall has no orchestra pit and no rigging lofts, which ensures intimacy and closeness between the audience and the performers. The flatness of the space can support everything from fashion catwalks to cinema screens – which can be lifted to give a stunning view of Beirut’s lights through the glass façade -- and when the rows of seats and the stage disappear, a space for a standing-room rock concert or banquet events appears.

Conveniently located in the middle of a large terrace—ideal and generous space for cinema related events—the movie theater is directly connected with the Cinematheque on the same floor.

### **WORKSHOPS AND DOCUMENTATION CENTER**

On the sixth floor, a series of workshop spaces allow anyone—young, old, already aware of their talent, just discovering it—to take a class. An interior boulevard creates a street-like sense and becomes a large communal space perfect for master classes and lectures, while soundproof studios provide more intimate learning spaces for corporal expression and dance, theater and storytelling.

The Documentation Center located on the next floor is structured to offer an interactive experience to the public and professionals. Located in an open space, the stacks, computers and multimedia workstations are accessible to all, while private and quiet reading rooms provide an intimate alternative.

### **EXHIBITION FLOOR AND ROOF TERRACE**

Partially overhanging the rest of the building and constructed from a metal truss skeleton, the exhibition floor and roof terrace is an infinitely configurable space detailed with folding and movable walls that can be combined to create everything from intricate exhibition spaces to one long room. With a ceiling height of over 5 meters, this space can host temporary exhibitions of large installation and small sculptures, gigantic canvases and tiny drawings, and artwork created out of media we haven’t even yet invented. The introduction of nature continues in the diamond-shaped skylights, and an outside terrace outfitted with a bar offers another enjoyable gathering space.

## **THE VERTICAL GARDEN**

Continuing the interrelationship between inside and outside is a vertical garden, a panel of green installed on the main façade of the building. Because plants don't really need soil – only the water and minerals dissolved therein – it is possible for plants to grow on nearly soil-less vertical surfaces, their roots climbing up a surface rather than into the ground, so long as water is in constant supply. A Vertical Garden made out of a metal frame, a PVC layer, and a layer of felt produce a permanent plant cover on the walls with a minimum of maintenance. Local species of plants installed on the felt layer are watered by nutrient-enriched tap water as well as filtered rainwater that flows from above, in a system that weighs less than thirty kilograms per square meter. The Vertical Garden adds nature to the visitor experience, a valuable biodiversity shelter, and, because of its lack of soil, an extremely light way of adding life to any wall, no matter its size.

## **THE MEDIA ROOF**

The Media Roof is a large-scale display comprising thousands of solar-fed LED light points at a very large scale and low resolution, which enhances the abstract visual qualities of the medium and provides an art-specific form (in contrast to commercially high-resolution screens in more conventional media façades). The Media Roof – which will advertise the house's events in a way visible from the highly-trafficked Ring Road – will combine sustainable construction with forward-thinking digital technology to produce a self-sufficient organism. This system harvests solar energy (also used to support the rest of the House) from a series of photovoltaic panels installed on the truss-supported canopy by day and uses that to illuminate the screen after dark.

This will be Beirut's first venue dedicated to digital media art, and the custom-designed software will transform the building's roof into a responsive environment for entertainment and public engagement. The full integration of information technology with architecture represents a new type of communication devoted to unprecedented art forms while engaging a vast audience. It defines new standards in the context of urban interventions, while its Day/Night Cycle of energy production and energy consumption provides a new ambition. The media envelope releases the energy accumulated during the day, transforming the roof into a glowing beacon and the building into a stunning visual experience within the nightscape of Beirut.