

International competition for the House of Arts & Culture



Beirut cultural life has been starving for a while, the dependency on private initiative to satisfy the public appetite for leisure activities has resulted in a spread of commercial initiatives whose sole purpose was to generate revenue. The realm of exploring the world beyond one's own home is currently reduced to a choice of international restaurants and coffee shops that are spreading in and around the city.

The art and cultural scenes are confined to the back stage area with a very limited number of galleries and exhibitions spaces that are often used as part of the business of art ie selling paintings etc..

In this context the idea of introducing a building that is dedicated for a variety of art forms is essential in changing the status quo. This change however could come in several forms; the variety of these forms will result in different egos that the new building can embody.

The Cultural centre can be a standalone building with internalised activities. This usually results in an addition to an already existent body of activities around the city. London is a prime of example of such a stream of buildings. While few of the museums spread around the city have iconic values, the majority of the new centres are un-pretention, albeit still decent, buildings that basically provide an environment that is suitable for the current cultural scene to spread and extend into. The newly opened Saatchi gallery in Chelsea is only one example of such buildings. These new cultural nodes form part of a matrix of nodes fulfilling the task of creating probably the most culturally rich city in the world. The addition or the loss of one of those nodes has very limited impact on the overall cultural scene. The creation of such a matrix is the result

of a consented desire supported by a political as well as an economical will spread over several generations. As such this environment cannot be recreated in a short period of time.

A second way for a cultural centre to exhibit itself is to acquire an iconic / monument kind of status. In this way the centre itself becomes the story, and as such the virtue of its surrounding will become subservient to it. The surrounding in this case could be the immediate neighbourhood but it could also be the city that the centre happens to land in. A good example of such manifestation is Bilbao, where the exuberance of the Guggenheim museum is so flamboyant that you seldom hear about the exhibits themselves. The centre is associated with the city to the extent that the two become almost interchangeable in the mind of onlookers. This association is used to raise the profile of a city or even a region; this is now becoming almost a standard practice for emerging cities to bring up their profiles. To place yourself on the map you need to have one of those monuments. In the case of Abudhabi they needed at least four such monuments, other cities are still satisfied with at least one. An example of that is Beijing national museum, the Qatar recently opened regional art museum and the Gothenburg world art museum to just name a few, all high profile PR driven projects.

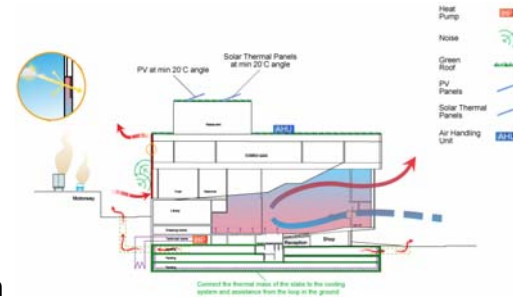
A third way for cultural centres to fit within a city is to morph with the fabric of the city and to try to create change from within. The new addition becomes a catalyst for change; it thus creates a starting point for a series of additional activities to take place somewhere else in the city. Few important factors has to line up for this to be a success, to start with the city should have enough potential that needs to be realised ie there should be other areas in the vicinity of the new centre that could benefit from the change to morph into an additional ring in the newly created chain. The second factor is that public appetite for this kind of activity should be high in such a way that the anticipation negates the need for this centre to announce itself loudly. Thirdly the artefact housed or manufactured in these premises should enrich and inspire the users to prove and validate the premise that initiated the project and also to create more demand for other activities to take place to compliment the scene and to start to form a new matrix of cultural activities necessary for the well being of any city in the 21st century. This type of approach is used by a lot of cities worldwide in their attempt to inject life in neighbourhoods that lacks cultural activities.

In the context of the above discussion the proposal forms part of the third manifestation mentioned where the project will try to inject life not just in the site it occupies but also in other areas around it. The project will thus team up with a series of spaces in the vicinity that have the

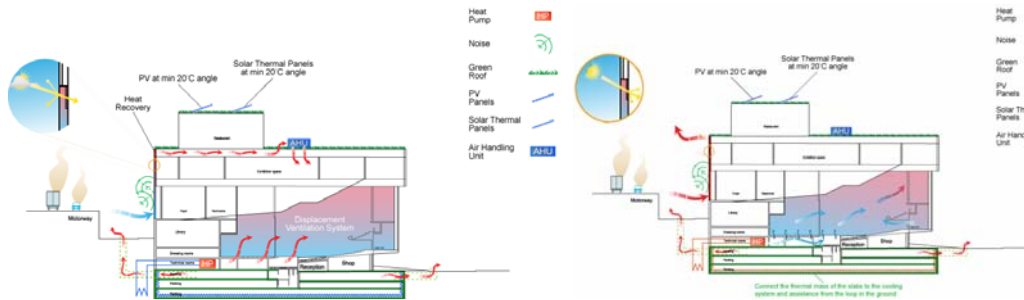
potential to enhance the cultural life but that are marginalised at present. These spaces are all the open public spaces that either exist at present or that are in the making. This network of public spaces needs a catalyst to inject life in it, the consolidation of the links to these open spaces in a cultural building is the catalyst.

For this idea to work there should be a form of communality between these spaces so they are understood as belonging to one family. The areas identified as potential collaborators in this movements are all public spaces, from the new park being built along the marina to the archaeological village behind the blue mosque to the archaeological garden east of the sarail and finally to the under-utilised garden in front of the Esqua building. The open nature of these spaces suggest a similar openness in the new project is eminent for the multiplicity of these areas to read as one network. For this reason the proposal suggest a strong and very visible public zone wrapping around a core element housing the performance areas. This public space is then raised up by a series of ramps and stairs to create an elevated public square shaded by the large exhibition spaces above. This public space is accessible to all and is also used to navigate from one space to another. Thus the building acquires an urban / city like aspect to it, the public space becomes the pedestrian avenue and the different spaces become the destinations.

A glass enclosure wraps around this public space allowing for a number of environmental benefits to take place. The main benefit for enclosing the space is the creation of a noise buffer from the highway, the creation of a tempered half-in half-out space is another benefit. By using the space as source for heat exchange this zone will always be cooler than outside in summer and warmer in winter. The creation of large opennable facade at the base serves as a large gateway in but also, along with smaller openings at the top, helps generate a stack effect cooling which would create a gentle breeze in summer times as hot air dissipates out from high level sucking cooler air in from low levels. The location of the exhibition areas on top help with the shading of the public areas as well as increasing the solar mass of the building reducing the effect of the summer sun while still allowing for the low winter sun to penetrate the space. The top level location also allows for natural light to be used in all the exhibition areas through the use of light shelves in the roof. All of these factors collaborate to create a state of the art environmentally conscious building that enhances the public realm in the areas around it.



Mid season condition



Summer condition

Winter condition

The incorporation of the small open square on the adjacent property in front of the entrance helps in the attempt to link all the public areas into a network of spaces culminating in the public zone inside the project.

The location of the performance hall at grade with the circulation going around it allows the servicing to occur along the side road at ground level thus minimising the use for service lifts and enhancing the functionality of the building. Having the public circulation going around the hall also help in reducing the number of fire exits required. All areas of the project are in compliance with ADA accessibility guidelines which basically mean that physically impaired persons will be able to make full use of the building. Dedicated lifts are provided where a stair is the only mean of access to a space.

Having the public space elevated allows the building help address the main roadway that the building fronts on the south side along with the old and dilapidated part of the city that follows on south of that road. The cultural centre will thus become a bridging point between the old and the new part of town. Due to the high visibility of that side of the site and the frequent use of that road by virtually all the city inhabitants, the elevated public space will become synonymous with the image of the building. The internal activities will thus be exhibited to the outside world like a large dynamic billboard raising the profile of the centre and literally making it part of the daily activity of people living in Beirut.