

**The HOUSE OF ARTS & CULTURE in BEIRUT**

Excerpt from ARCHITECTURAL BRIEF & COMPETITION RULES

Republic of Lebanon

**Ministry of Culture**



This document was prepared by a team of international consultants assembled around GAIA-heritage (sal) and composed as such:

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**The House of Arts and Culture (the Lebanese-Omani Centre)** will be a space for cultural and artistic production, for exchange and interaction between the largest number of Lebanese and especially the youth. It will be an independent space with the aim to contribute to social communication and cultural expansion and to promote creativity in different fields of art and culture.

Therefore, the House should attract a large number of Lebanese every day of the year. Its public should be diverse and go beyond the few “regulars” that attend theatre halls, exhibitions or other cultural centres spread in Beirut and the country.

To achieve this goal, the House should be a free space of artistic expression with no boundaries. Its functions and agenda, multiple but equilibrated, should be open to all kinds of art, including those that encourage interactivity between artists and their public, conferences, workshops, free initiatives, etc.



Tarek Mitri  
Minister of Culture

Through its history, Beirut has been a city of freedom of thought and of creativity. Located on the Eastern shore of the Mediterranean, it is one of the very few deep-sea harbours of the region. Thanks to its geographical location, it has always served as a link between the Middle East and Europe. A trading place between cultures, it has offered a perfect place for the exchange of ideas, for the meeting of religions and for the transmission of thoughts and education.

It is in Beirut that the Arab literature, theatre and music were brought back to life in the 19th century and that the visual arts, inspired by the European modernism, begun in the early 20th century. Until today, the city is the main place of Arab publishing and of audiovisual production while its contemporary artists are gaining international recognition.

Beirut however lacks cultural amenities and most if not all of this creativity remains without any support from the public sector. There is no large quality auditorium in the city, nor is there a place for important exhibitions. Training and production facilities for artists belong all to private institutions and the ability of the State to support the arts is limited.

In the process of assistance to the reconstruction of Lebanon, the Sultanate of Oman has decided to meet a request from the Lebanese Ministry of Culture to fund the construction and equipment of the first Arts and Culture House in the capital, Beirut. This assistance took the form of a grant of USD 20 million.

The Ministry of Culture and the Sultanate of Oman decided then to ask GAIA-heritage (sal) to conceive and develop the architectural programme of this project.

## **Concept and Contents**

### **I. General Principles**

The House will be a major actor in the field of culture, arts and creativity. Its work will be deeply rooted in the history of the country, remembering what Lebanese have already achieved and created and, at the same time, it will be a child of the 21st century, looking towards the future. It will not repeat the past, but will build on it to better project itself in the future.

Being the first centre of its kind in the capital city of Lebanon, the House holds an important responsibility: that of being the leading place in arts and culture. It should therefore assert itself in the international arena of arts and culture as an innovative structure, both in its concept and contents and in its architecture. It will resolutely be looking towards exploring the future of arts and culture and will encompass the use of modern technologies.

A place of creativity and dissemination of art and culture, the House plays an important role in the education of the youth and of the whole population. This role should not be limited to the physical structure of the House in Beirut; rather, it should be able to reach all the country through cooperation agreements and/or a mobile unit. This coverage of the country and its reach of the international arena imply that the House will use advanced means of media communication to enable it play its dissemination role.

To do so, the House will be an active, productive place: far from remaining only a space for performances and exhibitions, it will encourage creativity in a process that will influence the minds and society. The House will therefore be clearly anchored in its Lebanese milieu and culture and cater for the regional and international. It will attempt to project the Lebanese cultural creations in the Arab and international sphere.

Thus and even though it will cater for all types of public, it should give particular attention to the young generations who have already chosen the digital and audiovisual arts and experiment in different styles of music.

In these new fields, young Lebanese are already successful abroad, in the Gulf, the USA, Canada and Europe. Those remaining in Lebanon deserve to be given the opportunity of contributing to the creative life of the country and to gain international recognition.

While offering openings to new forms of art and creativity, the House must contribute to the dissemination of culture and to the education of the population. A forum for the exchange of ideas and of debates, it should also bring to its public the discovery of new avenues through exhibitions, lectures and discussions on global issues.

## 2. Process

Though creativity has always been active in the country and has accelerated much since the end of the cycle of violence that has rocked Lebanon, there is nowhere in the country a public place where this artistic creativity can be easily presented and supported.

To answer these needs the House will be accessible and highly visible. Its architecture and the dynamism and vitality of its programme and events would turn it into a magnet for the Lebanese and the Arabs. It will project Beirut in the art community and become a leading place of the Arab World. In this sense, it would reinforce the leading role of Beirut in the field of arts and culture.

The House is not conceived as a museum; it will not have permanent collections. It will however host temporary national, regional and international exhibitions.

Interactivity between the House, its visitors and the population at large is an essential process. Professionals, scientists, artists, will be invited to organize and lead workshops, conferences, forums, visits of exhibitions and other activities. The House will act as an incubator. It will provide training sessions, spaces and equipment to boost creativity and transdisciplinary exchanges.

It will aim to attract Lebanese and international creators and professionals from all fields of art; it will facilitate the introduction of the Lebanese art and cultural scene to neighbouring countries and abroad.

Short-term workshops hosting artists from Lebanon and abroad would greatly enrich the programme of the House and provide the opportunity of exchange between the invited artist and the local community of creators, professionals and amateurs. Along the same lines, the possible housing in the House of related art and culture structures will be foreseen.

## 3. The Programme

The vitality of the House should be reflected in its programme: the House is a machine, a plant that continuously produces a diversified offer to cater for the many.

Its visit should be an enchantment and a pleasure. Rigidity, routine, conformity, static are to be banned from its functioning and from the presentation of its activities.

A dynamic and changing programme with daily activities of different sizes and scope: exhibitions would run for weeks concurrently with daily or weekly concerts, theatrical events and smaller scale activities: lectures, courses, conferences, displays, creativity workshops, visiting artists, etc.

Other offers will be placed permanently in the House such as documentation centre and computer and video rooms for young creators. Information on the programme of the day, week, month, should be widely disseminated.

The House will include income-generating activities in its programme. A cafeteria and cultural shops will be located in its premises. The rental of space for theatre or music performances and for conferences and receptions as well as for related art and culture structures will also be foreseen. However, the House will issue guidelines about space rental to ensure the quality and relevance of such events. These, with the possibility of the constitution of a trust fund, could reduce the burden of the budget for operations and investments. Like other art and cultural centres in the World, it should rely more and more on its own financing mechanisms.

The architecture of the House will strongly influence its functioning and success and therefore, the architecture and the programme should go hand in hand. The architecture should reflect the House concept, its independence and its openness.

The building should be as environmentally friendly as possible, aiming at using to the utmost the natural elements for its energy. Durability of the construction, its equipments and its functioning should be one of the priorities in its architecture. This would reduce maintenance costs and give the House a physical intemporality and permanence.

The structure of the House should be adapted to its programme while all its floors should be interconnected and included in a single composition. Landscaping and greenery should give the visitor a feeling of being inside and outside a building: it will reinforce the feeling of the fusion between the House and the outside world.

Instead of trying to build a “showy” project by the use of expensive materials for its façades, high quality should rather be pursued by the inventive technical and spatial solutions and their relation to the environment: sound, lighting, connectivity, equipment, energy saving and waste management, etc.

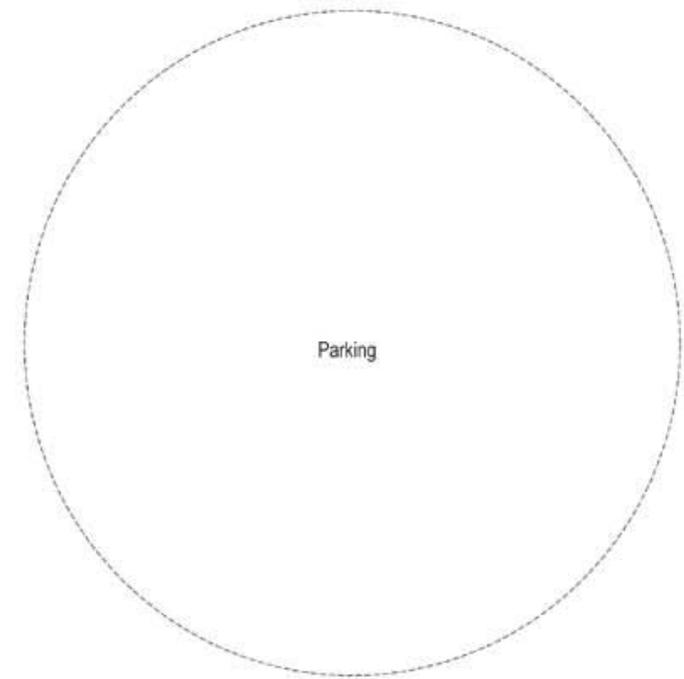
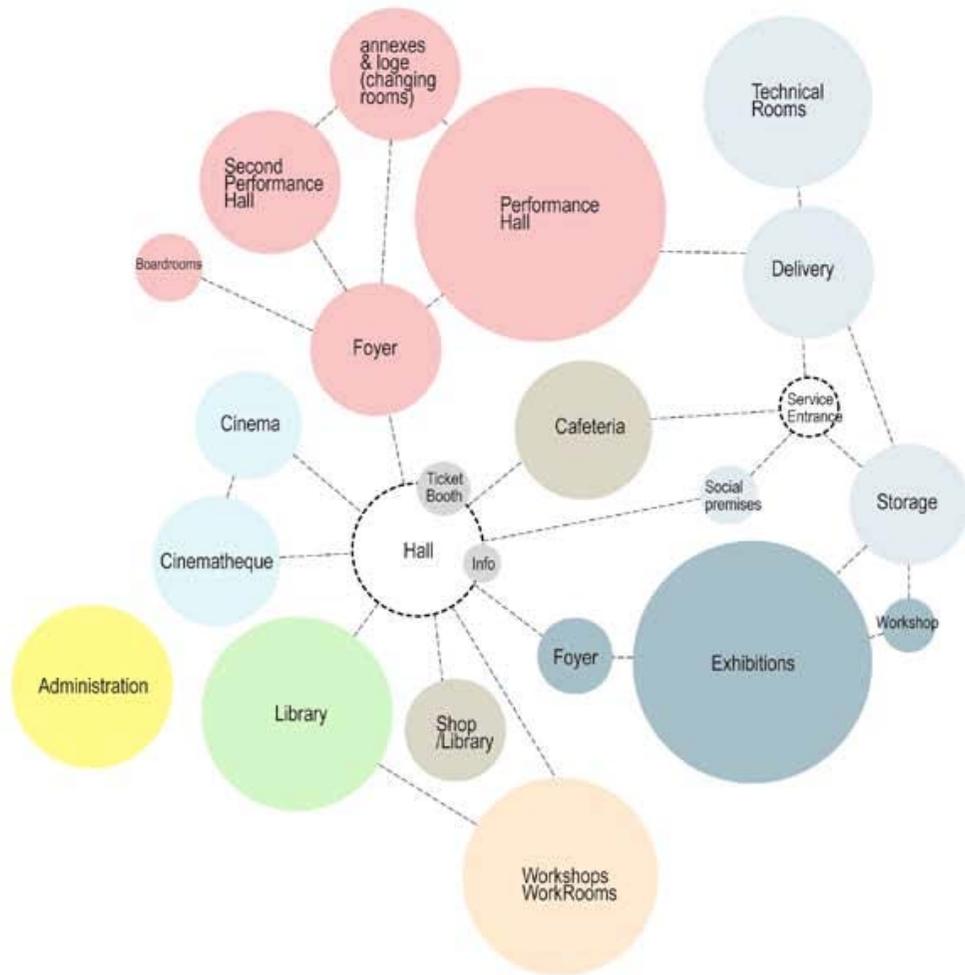
A special attention should be given to the treatment of the roof that should participate in the life of the House and in the urban environment.

Dealing with a variety of domains, the House needs different types of spaces. In view of the above, of what exists already in Beirut and of arts and culture centres in the World, the following spaces and uses are envisaged:

Spaces	Square Metres	Uses
Performance and conference halls, cinemas	2434	Important musical and theatrical events, large conferences, etc. Experimental and specialized musical and theatrical events, conferences, supporting space, films, etc.
Exhibition spaces	1170	Paintings, photographs, sculptures, new media art, video creations, installations and other exhibitions
Workshops and training	670	For all types of activities foreseen in the House: computer and video, Music, photography, etc. These workshops will be used by children groups, artists in residence, individuals, etc.
Documentation Centre & National Film Library	926	Open to the public, linked to similar centres abroad, publication spot of the House. Offices and archives, laboratory
Administration, technical rooms, miscellaneous rooms	1256	Management and functioning of the House. Storage and social rooms. Heating, electricity, air-conditioning, etc.
Cafeteria, Shopping Spaces	510	Shops and cafeteria, coffee-shop, shops of art related objects: CDs and DVDs, books, reproductions, posters, souvenirs, catalogues of exhibitions, etc.
Reception, horizontal and vertical traffic	1135	Connection between the House and the outside, relaxation spaces, communication between the parts of the centre.
Parking and delivery	7800	Total parking spaces (278 spaces) and delivery
Total	15901	

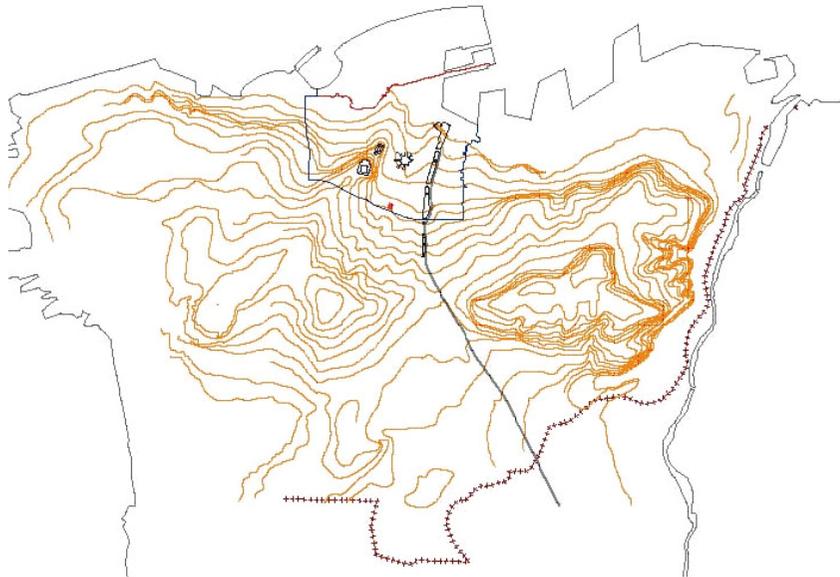
In a single day in the House, a visitor would have the opportunity to either listen to a contemporary music concert, attend a fashion show, see a movie in one of the performance halls, read in the documentation Centre or work on the computers, sip a coffee or have a bite in the cafeteria, visit the paintings or sculpture exhibition on show, or attend one of the workshops or courses.

The international architectural competition that is launched under the auspices of the International Union of Architects (UIA) is based on this detailed concept and ideas for a programme of functioning, of space uses and objectives.



100 m2

Functionnal Organigram



## The Urban Context

### 1. Geography

Beirut is built on a plateau in the shape of a cape projecting nine km into the open sea; it is extended by a narrow, long coastal plain edged by a tormented mountain range which summits peak at more than 2,500m. This range is crossed by deep valleys in the shape of canyons. The eastern and western sides of the plateau abruptly slope towards the sea while its northern side has a gentler slope where the port and the old city were once located. The relief is more or less flat in the south. The city is surrounded by three hills: Moussaitbé, Koraitem, and Ashrafieh that was called the small mountain and stands at 95m above the sea level.

Beirut has a privileged position on the Mediterranean. It is the major import centre of the country and an important regional pole thanks to its harbour and airport infrastructure. The capital of Lebanon since 1920, this sprawling and cosmopolitan city has 1.6 million inhabitants including its suburbs. The residing population of Lebanon is estimated at 3.6 million.

The Lebanese climate is Mediterranean: humid on the coast, semi arid in the mountains, desert in the eastern mountain range and continental in the Bekaa plain. There are some important differences in temperatures depending on the region and altitude. The climate in Beirut is hot and humid. In the hill, or the foothills of the mountains, planted with oak trees, cypress and cedars, the weather is cooler. There are little rainfalls from May till October. The winter rainfall season lasts from November to March and the average rainfall reaches its maximum in January with 191mm, in the shape of strong storms. Some snow patches remain on the mountaintops all year long and the thickness of snow can reach several meters.

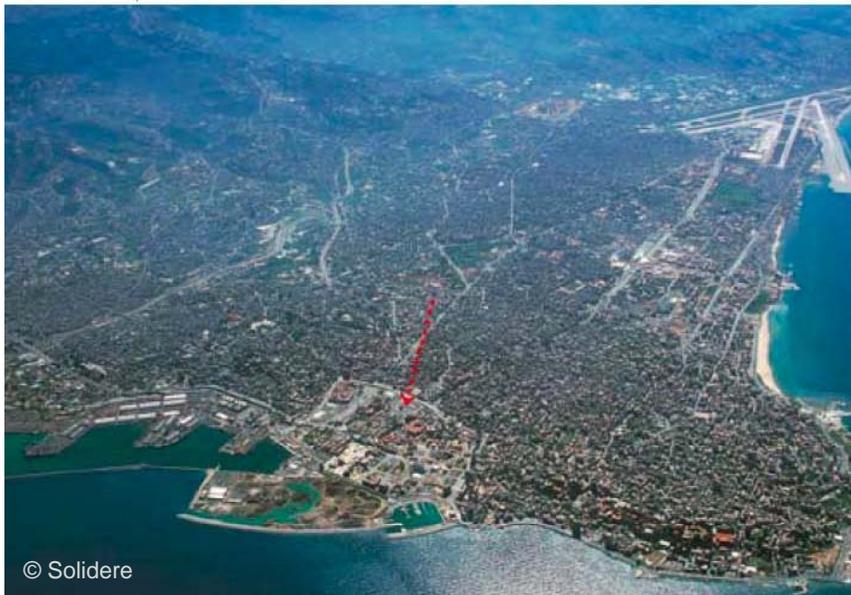
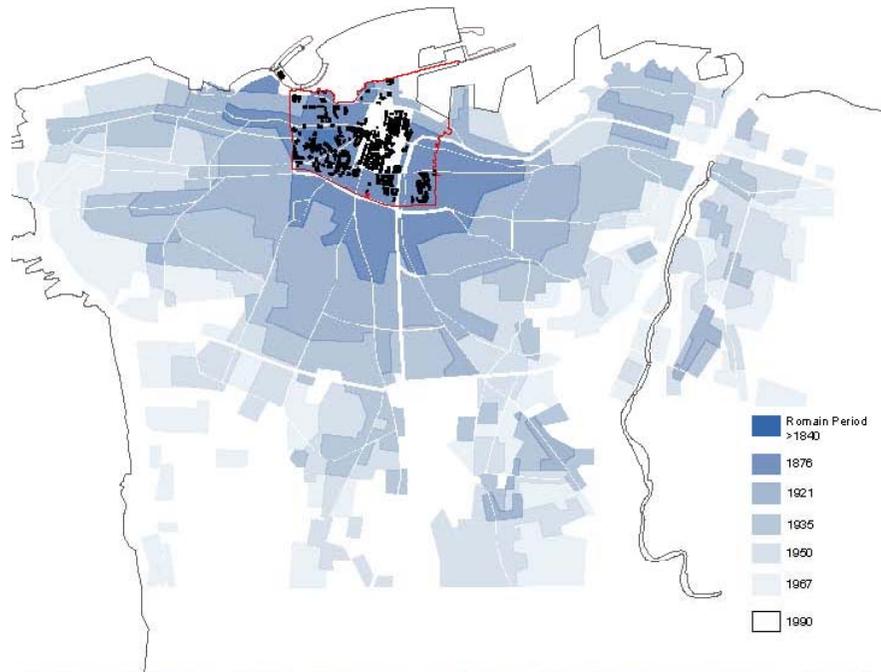
The prevailing winds blow from the southwest and in spring the sandy and hot “Khamsin” wind blows from the desert of Syria. Fall and spring are mild seasons.

### 2. The city of Beirut

Beirut has been influenced by different, and most often, conflicting powers. It owes its wealth and its survival to its capacity of accumulating and synthesizing different cultures.

#### 2.1. The Arab city

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, Beirut was a secondary centre in the Ottoman urban network. It was self-ruled jointly by religious members, notables and traders. The commercial spaces (the souks) and the political space merged in the “intra-muros” city. Beirut was a city without a centre and that was an expression of weakness of its external networks. There were certainly strong spaces around the religious or professional places, but there was no unique central space for the city.



## 2.2. The Ottoman city

Since the 1860's, the city has become the main link between the European economic influence and the Levant. The local elites, traders, and notables making use of the opportunities offered by the Tanzimats, remodelled the city according to specific requirements: to remain the unavoidable link between the European world, producer of goods, and the consumption world of the Levant, while remaining in the heart of the Ottoman administrative system. A general scheme is drawn; on one side, a centre with three centralities: the Serail and its annexes, the port and the commercial spaces, and on the other side the residential areas.

## 2.3. The city of the French Mandate

In 1920, Beirut was under the French Mandate and became the central pole of the French administration in the region. The previous scheme survived, but the downtown is restructured according to the new situation. This resulted in a new spatial distribution and was the starting point of the outburst of traditional centralities.

The commercial activities and services gradually became confined to the narrow frame of the colonial economy. A new urban morphology appears with the construction of a new business district to replace the old souks. Beirut is then annexed to a new State, the Greater-Lebanon, and becomes its capital.

## 2.4. The capital of the Republic

The independence of Lebanon at the end of the Second World War resulted in the emergence of a new order. The beginning of the Glorious thirties is reflected by the integration of the oil producing states assets in the financial channels of the North. The intermediary role of Beirut is reinforced by its airport and its financial and banking channels. Despite the dynamic districts neighbouring the port, downtown Beirut started to lose its position of hegemony, while in the western part, especially in the regions of Hamra and Ras Beirut, a new modern centre was developing.

## 2.5. The city of war

The beginning of the civil war, in 1975, resulted in the fall of the urban centrality system around which evolved the whole city of Beirut. The centre of Beirut that was home not only to the political authorities (Parliament, key ministries, municipality) but also to the economic authorities (the port, headquarters of major banks, shops), was seriously affected and became a vast no-man's land.

Firstly, the shops and services withdrew to the outlying areas, without being able to recreate real alternative centres. Secondly, new areas started taking shape away from the military front lines. However, they were strongly marked by confessional or political identities. In the outskirts of the city, beyond the municipal limits, emerged multiple micro-centralities, especially on the coastline.

Beirut was, therefore, divided into two parts. A dividing line that is called the “green line” separated East Beirut (Christian majority) from West Beirut (Muslim majority). From Martyr’s square and along the Damascus road, a neutral zone was established, sometimes as wide as 500m and which people could cross only through some checkpoints.

### **3. Reconstruction of Downtown Beirut**

Following the political “Taef Agreement” that put an end to the war in 1990, the dynamics of reconstruction could finally start. The reconstruction of downtown Beirut is its major project that has been entrusted to a private property company, SOLIDERE (Lebanese Society for the Development and the Reconstruction of Downtown Beirut). Its assets consist of: property contributions (about 1650 plots), owners of real estate in downtown and the assets of investors. This project covers an area of about 250 hectares. The town-planning scheme specifies the construction capacity of the whole project at about 4.69 million m<sup>2</sup> of land area and takes into consideration the market demand concerning the distribution of land uses.

The emphasis is put on the mixed nature of use to ensure that the downtown would attract inhabitants, jobs, and clients. The town planning is conceived for 40,000 inhabitants and about 100,000 employees.

The city planning proposals adopt drastic solutions in three main directions:

- Establish new infrastructures to modernize the centre and resolve transportation and functioning problems.
- Rebuild the downtown by replacing the old buildings deemed beyond repair.
- Finally, to reclaim an area by the sea, equalling 220 hectares, to build a district of towers dedicated to offices and hotels.

Simultaneously, archaeological excavations were carried out to reveal the old history of the city.

The primitive nucleus of the Canaanite city dating back to the third millennium BC was discovered on the Tell at the north of Martyr’s square.

Once the central axis of the souks was excavated, seven layers of sewage pipes situated one on top of the other were discovered; they date back to the Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman period until the modern era, showing the remaining city plans. Some sites dating back to the Canaanite, Phoenician, Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman periods are partially preserved in accordance with the locations that are compatible with the planning project.

A number of public buildings are rehabilitated and made fully operational again, such as the Parliament on Parliament square, the Grand Serail, seat of the Prime Minister, the old Court of Justice, home today of the Development and Reconstruction Council, and the Beirut Municipality building. The districts of the French Mandate era, the Foch-Allenby square and the Parliament Square are preserved and restored at great expense. In the same time, what is left of the old souks, the Minet El Hosn district, Zeitouné district and that of Ghalghoul are demolished. Finally, 85% of the buildings of the old centre have disappeared.

In Wadi Abou Jmil, the old Jewish district, in Saifi and Mar Maroun, only some isolated islets were preserved in which new residential buildings were erected. In addition to the restoration and renovation of urban projects, a number of new programs are launched in the strategic points of the centre around the Martyr’s square, in the grand hotels district on the coast, in the old souks area and in Ghalghoul district, not far from Riad el Solh square.

### **4. The Ghalghoul District, where the Project is Located**

Located at the foothill of the Serail, As-Sour square (the wall square), currently Riad el Solh square, marked till the middle of the 19th century the north-eastern limit of the Ottoman city. The development of Beirut towards the south along the major communication roads (Damascus and Sidon roads) would gradually turn these into an urban landscape of suburbs. Starting from 1880, As Sour square was developed and endowed with a central fountain; the Ghalghoul district built right up against the Bachoura cemetery quickly became denser and constituted the natural extension of the historical centre, close to the new markets developed in 1916.

The image of this district will not be fundamentally modified by substantial works of town planning carried out under the French Mandate around the Parliament Square and the construction of the “Grand Theatre” in 1927. The old infrastructure resisted the development operations taking place in the neighbouring areas during the 1950’s: development of the “Banks street” to the north of Riad el Solh square and to the east of the Grand Theatre, construction of the first commercial centre in Beirut, the “Azarieh complex”. Not being subject to urban modernization operations, the Ghalghoul district became a shelter for the destitute and was given the negative image of a district of ill repute.

Further to the opening of the « Ring » road, the high speed road raised above the ground level that connects the eastern districts of Beirut to the new modern centre of Hamra, the Lebanese government launched, in 1964, a project of urban renovation that proposed the demolition of the whole area of Ghalghoul in order to build a monumental link with the Martyr's square and the Saifi area a little more to the east. Following the urban conceptions of that time, the project plans the construction of a group of 33-storey towers, with terrace gardens. However, because the owners and the tenants objected to this project, it never saw the light.

Starting from the mid seventies, the Ghalghoul district was severely affected by the battles that have brought bloodshed to the Lebanese capital and was gradually abandoned by its occupants. It was entirely demolished in 1994 as a part of the reconstruction project of downtown Beirut launched by SOLIDERE, except for one unique building, on lot number 128-4, which was preserved and that dates back to the French Mandate.

#### **5. Plot No 128-4**

The plot 128-4, of an area of 3,785m<sup>2</sup>, is situated in Zone 2 of SOLIDERE, Sector J. The height of the façades adjoining the main streets on the three sides of the building is of 32 metres. The total height of the building could reach 40 metres. Standing at an angle, the exploitation factor of the plot is of 5+20%. The authorized total built up area above floor level is then 22,710m<sup>2</sup>. The authorized foot print area at ground level is 2,712m<sup>2</sup> being 70% of the total area of the plot.

The site of the project is located in a full expansion district, in what is left of the old Ghalghoul situated on the heights of the reconstructed downtown.

In the north, towards the sea, are situated the business districts, the banks street, the Parliament and the Municipality of Beirut. A little lower, the commercial area around the new souks of Beirut: a project run by Rafael Moneo. To the east, there is the axis of the Martyr's square sloping towards the sea along the archaeological zones between the Damascus Road and Bechara el Khoury Street.

Located right up against the "Ring", the high-speed road that surrounds downtown Beirut, the plot is adjacent to an intermediary road that separates it from the high-speed road and enables its access. Bordered in the north by Ghalghoul Street and Riad el Solh Square, the centre is encircled by several projects under construction or planned for as well as many existing outstanding buildings.

Along Emir Amine Street and facing the site of the project, from the other side of the square, the « Landmark » project by Jean Nouvel is under study: the complex comprises commercial spaces, cinemas, a hotel with luxury apartments and consists of 2 buildings. A "campanile" and a residential monolith constitute an internal street in the urban layout of downtown Beirut.

On its right side, the Grand Theatre of Beirut facing Emir Amine Street and located between Syria Street and Emir Bechir Street is under rehabilitation and transformation by Architecture Studio. A luxury hotel accommodating 90 rooms is planned on the 11,000 m<sup>2</sup> area of the building.

A group of towers of 80 to 140m high will emerge behind the Grand Theatre, on three independent plots facing the Azarieh Building (office building dating back to the 50's). In an area of 86,900m<sup>2</sup>, Christian de Portzamparc will build a high rising tower of residences, offices and shops overlooking small towers laid on hanging gardens including 70 % of apartments.

On the west, still on Emir Amine Street, there is a building designed by the reputed Lebanese architect Pierre el Khoury, which houses the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). This building is situated at the beginning of the banks street and on the axis of one of the main exits roads towards the south and the airport.



Lot 128-04