

URBANROOM

the House of Arts and Culture: the Lebanese-Omani Centre, Beirut, Lebanon

CONCEPTS

HOUSE

Among many, three descriptions of a house seem to be unequivocally relevant. A house is a container for activity. A house is free of borders to its occupants. A house reflects the traits of its owner. In this sense, the title 'House of Arts & Culture' provides the impetus to create the building itself. One that serves its function well as it provides shelter for many activities, is unrestrictive in the manner in which the public moves through the building, and that provides a unique image as a reflection of Beirut's arts and culture atmosphere.

PROGRAM DISTRIBUTION

Buildings that house many exclusive programs, such as the House of Arts & Culture, often tend to distinguish between the users. The exhibition viewer, the artist, the opera fan, and the 8 year old eating pizza in the cafe are held separate; this the result of both their lack of interest in the other's activity but often also due to the organization of the building. Rather than creating a spatial organization where the central hall acts as a strainer through which the users flow to their respective programs and only their respective programs, we propose a Spatial Organigram of the Centre (fig. 02) which creates the opportunity to make all of the program accessible throughout the space of the Hall. This approach provides an opportunity for one to wander about, frequently coming into contact with the actual space of multiple programs. When this contact is achieved, the choice is then given to explore that program further or to continue on to another. This uniquely allows users to observe not only unfamiliar activities, but also to observe how other people actually engage in those activities. The Hall is a relaxed environment where multiple possibilities await; it is a place to come together and celebrate the Arts and Culture of Beirut.

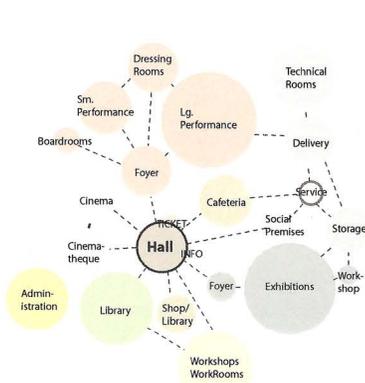


fig. 01
provided spatial organigram of the centre

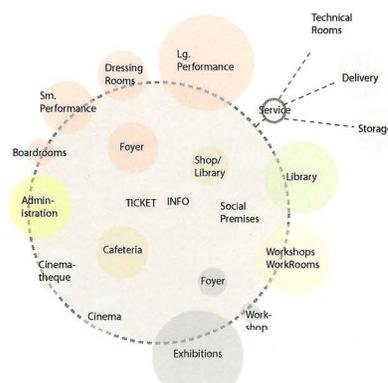


fig. 02
proposed spatial organigram of the centre

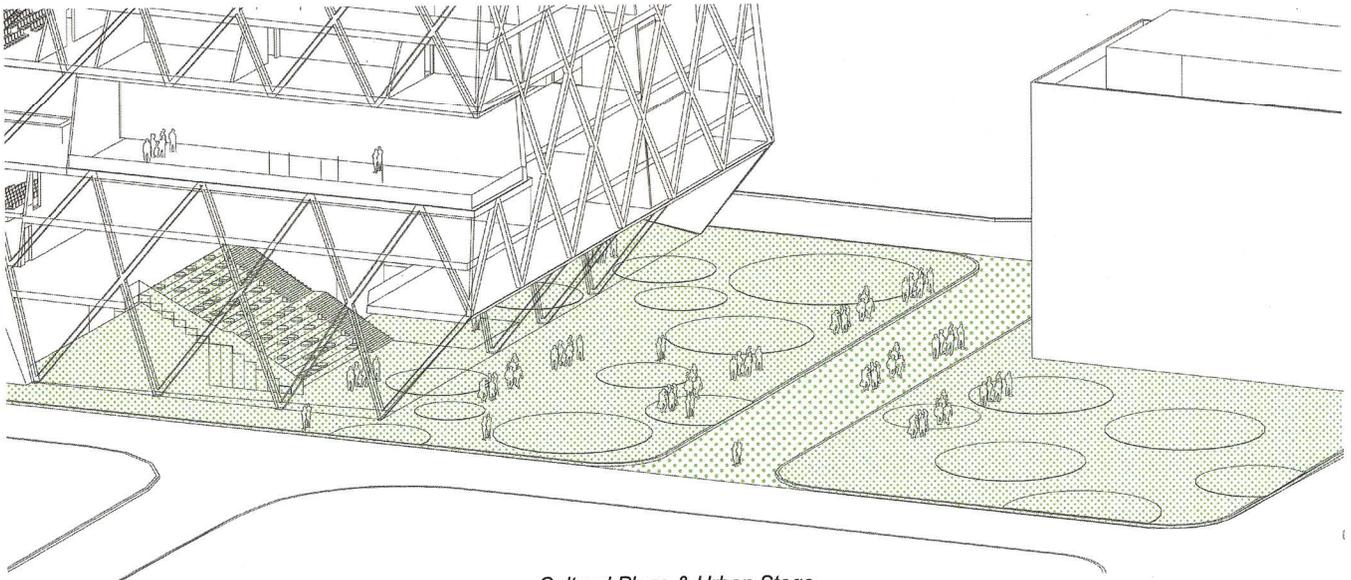
CULTURAL PLAZA & URBAN STAGE

As important as any room in any house, the front porch, yard, and/or plaza acts as the welcome mat. A large and welcoming cultural plaza is strategically situated on the north of the site merging with the existing green space/park across the street, creating the potential for an even larger cultural plaza informally inhabited by street cafes, workers on lunch breaks, artists, and the general public.

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The plaza then moves from this park and into the ground floor of the building where the ground surface is treated the same inside and out, blurring any boundaries between outdoor and indoor. Acting as the extension of the cultural plaza, the entry hall houses an Urban Stage which provides not only spontaneous and casual displays of arts and culture, but also a unique experience of an informal "hang-out" space. Here people gather, surf the internet and converse, their presence establishing a vital connection to every person outside on the cultural plaza with the building. Besides the Urban Stage, this space also contains the ticket and information booths, a temporary exhibition space, and a gift/book shop .



*Cultural Plaza & Urban Stage
fig.02*

URBAN ROOMS

Situated at the corners of the building on different levels, each urban room creates a unique outdoor experience from which one can not only reflect back onto the city but can understand that this building is an integral part of the cultural fabric of Beirut, and not simply a museum detached from its context. These spaces are the continuation of the Hall in the Spatial Organigram (fig.2) as they are meant to be inclusive though they take on their own identity as they assume roles consistent with the program they are adjacent too. The URBAN ROOM on the third floor assumes an incredibly informal resting place and extension of the Bar/Cafe, but may also be used for activities such as an outdoor theater. The dynamic movement resulting from such an activity would be easily read from the street, thus sparking interest and drawing people in. The URBAN WORKSHOP on the sixth floor provides a very large open space for activities that require many people or expansive surfaces. Painting, musical performance, and dance are again visible as activities from the street. The URBAN READING ROOM on the seventh floor opens to the sky providing a semi-protected environment to enjoy the climate of Beirut and the sky while not being distracted by the pressures of the everyday. This very intimate space is quite different from its neighboring URBAN GREEN ROOM on the seventh floor, whose dynamic location at the center of the restaurant provides a stage for dancing and performance.

PUBLIC RAMP

The Public Ramp in the building is the specific realization of the Hall idea in the Spatial Organigram of the Centre (fig.02.) The ramp and its generous landings provide opportunities for up-close interaction with unfamiliar and exclusive programs. Specifically, the landings at the south allow access into the multiple programs and the landings at the north provide spaces for relaxation and gathering. Each north landing

may be used by widely varied visitors at any given time, providing for the exchange of ideas and experiences through the interaction of the users. The ramps spiral form creates a void at its center across which people may observe and be drawn to compelling activities.

FLEXIBLE SPACE

The promotion of creativity often calls for spaces whose character and function can be adjusted according to the event taking place. The House of Arts & Culture provides three primary performance rooms, the Large Performance Hall whose main level seating can be removed and rearranged; the Small Performance Hall with retractable and reorganizing seating; and the Movie Theater whose stadium seating can be retracted in order to become a disco room, a dining room, or a conference room, etc., with large projections on one wall. As was previously mentioned the landings of the Public Ramp, the Urban Rooms, the Urban Stage, and the Cultural plaza are all flexible spaces, changing according to the desires of the moment.

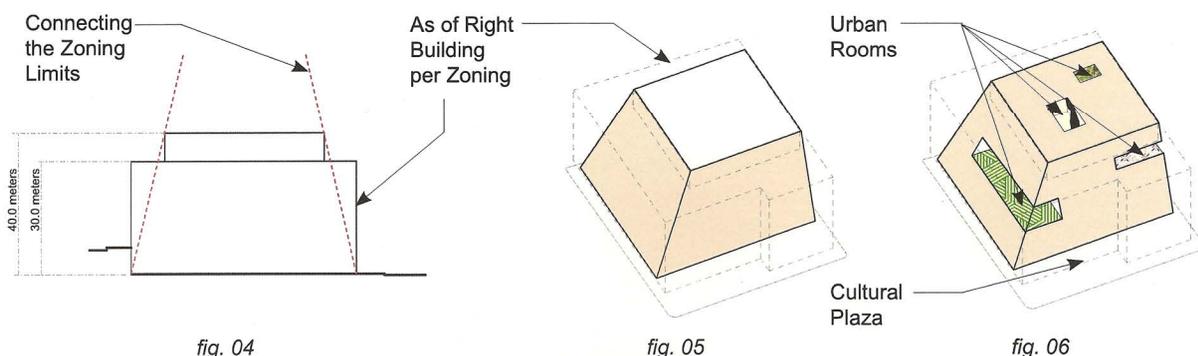
TRANSPARENCY & INTIMATE SPACE

Freedom of borders in the House of Arts & Culture is visual as much as it is physical. The exterior skin of the building provides a screened yet transparent surface which defines the extents of the building but also shows movement to the person on the street. The ground floor glazing at the division between the exterior plaza and the interior reception hall is meant to enclose the space without differentiating between inside and out. The Large and Small Performance Hall as well as the Movie Theater have thick curtains inside of the exterior skin, so that when darkness is needed for the control of light the curtains may be closed, but when the curtains are opened the performance is on display to the public.

DIVERSITY

The House of Arts & Culture is an incredible opportunity to bring together uniquely diverse users and activities under a single roof. And in this space of multiplicities the project spurs the historically inhibited to explore, to interact, and to learn. Its form is not only its physical manifestation. More so it is the image created when so many small individual efforts to keep alive theatres, poetry, music, painting, and sculpture through difficult times come together to celebrate the achievements of a city.

TECHNICAL



FORM

The simple iconic nature of the House's form is a direct response to the zoning limits that have been imposed on the site. A line is drawn from the perimeter of the site at the ground floor to the top of the allowable height. This action produces a tapering form that leans toward the historic city away from the

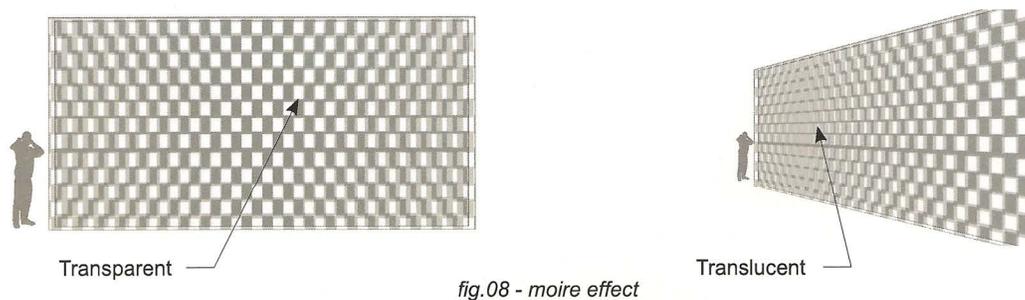
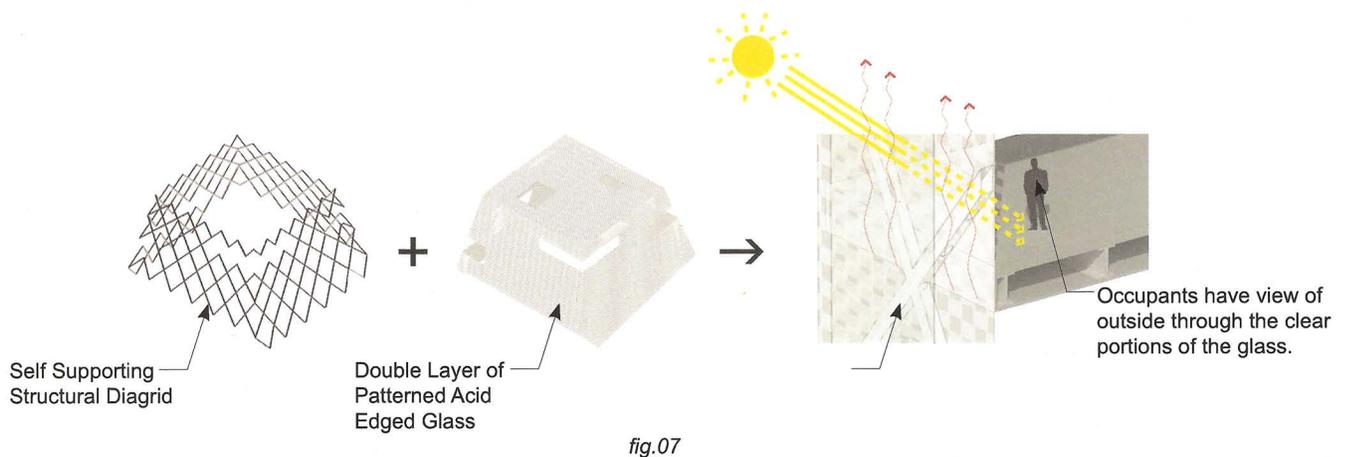
existing green space/park, thus opening the parks perceived spacial limits. The Urban Rooms are then applied as volumetric extractions, allowing for the interaction of the inside and outside at multiple levels.

STRUCTURE

The basic structure of the building shall be a standard concrete frame. The orthoganol grid provides point locations for continuous columns that support the floor plates. The skin structure is a self supporting diagrid that has moment attachments to the floor plates where the diagrid crosses.

SKIN

The exterior skin of the building is a double layer glass system, sandwiching the structural diagrid in between. The double facade system acts as an insulator throughout the building as the air space between the layers of glass provides energy efficient insulation against temperature extremes, as well as functioning as a noise barrier for ambient sound generated by the highway adjacent to the building. The sandwiched structural beams are penetrated to allow the mechanically controlled flow of hot/cold air, depending on the weather. The glazing is a self shading system with the acid edged pattern chemically applied on the clear surface of the glass. The acid edged pattern is used on both facades, inner and outer glazing, thus creating even more shading while providing controlled exposure to the direct sun without eliminating daylight. The layering of the pattern glass creates a vibrant and unique artistic visual effect as one moves around the building, catching ever changing moments of transparency, opacity, and moire effects.



PARKING

The underground parking is accessed by a ramp at the southern end of 'Rue Alexi Boutros' on the east of the building. The continuously ramping surface spirals around the northern circulation core providing access to the elevators and stair at multiple points per level. At the fourth Basement, the spirial loops back on itself providing an exit. The artist's entrance on the first floor at the south of the building is accompanied by a curb cut where there is currently parallel parking. The three spaces that are lost due to this are added to the 278 required spaces, for a total of 281 underground parking spaces.