

## The living square of Beirut

Lebanon, who had throughout its history, undergone many invasions (Roman and Byzantine), occupations (Mameluks and Ottoman), mandate (French), consequently witnessed a sudden development on the urban and architectural level, while being confronted with its particular geographical problem, since the capital, Beirut is wedged between the sea and the surrounding mountains.

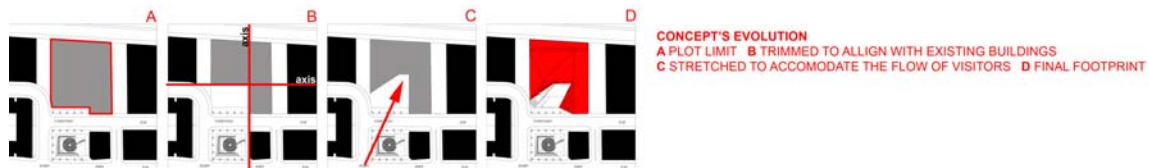
Of these successive influences, one does not see many tangible things left, all having been hidden under rubble of the successive wars, fires, earthquakes and/or inopportune constructions. And it is about this architectural tradition that has almost vanished that this project hopes to make reappear, while basing itself on examples of emblematic places, such as souks, "Hammams" ....



It is thus by keeping in mind the non-typical history of this country that the project of "House of Arts and Culture" started to take form, initially from a city planning point of view. In fact, the site of the project is at the limit of the zone of Solidere, a private company of building and land's management within the City Center. Located at the edge of "Fouad Chehab" expressway which links the eastern and the western neighborhoods of the city, the site is surrounded by plots of land which will accommodate high rise buildings and towers. It opens from its southern side towards the City Center and its many pedestrian streets. This geographical position can be translated by the simple façades on the main expressway, the secondary side streets (car parks and delivery accesses), and towards the City Center by the broad opening welcoming the visitor.

The project tries to be integrated as best as possible in the plot and its neighborhood, while respecting the applicable bylaws and regulations. Its aligned with the surrounding

plots and open to the existing square garden there for by creating a bigger piazza where people can meet and enjoy outdoor exhibition and plays. In other words, the building presents a blind facade toward the expressway and the high buildings and is opened towards the City Square and pedestrian streets, without the appearance of a simple box that accommodates functions; since it reflects the image of the country, the past, as well as the future.



With the image of traditional “souks and hammams”, which existed at one time in Beirut, this project, by its multi-functional, will cater for a large mixture of public of all kinds: amateurs of dance, of theatre, researchers, students, tourists, walkers, visitors of exposure, Lebanese or foreigners, professionals or simple amateurs, alone or with their family,... It is the reason for which the project also makes a point of offering spaces of specific artistic functions, such as spectacle or exposition spaces, as well as spaces where the idler can simply come to buy a gift at the museum’s shop or grab a lemonade on the Square’s stairs. The building offers an oasis within the centre of the particularly active and noisy rhythm of the Beirut life.

In the spirit of the Eastern traditional plan, the visitor will be able to saunter in the project at his rate/rhythm, to go from different surprises and many functions present within the center and opened to everyone, from places of relaxation like the bookshop or the coffee shop,... and this, accompanied by filtered natural light effects, floor pavement and water channels. In this same logic of the will to stick to the place, the building will use local materials pertaining to the traditional architecture of the area, such yellow stones for facades cladding, “Moucharabieh” style carved wood, and white paint, typical of the Mediterranean basin buildings. The first approach of the project, the frontage, tries to express the tumultuous history of the country by means of hard lines, acute angles and slits of light. The entry is in fact concealed, to surprise the visitor as soon as he crosses the access door, whereas he will reach the main spaces by crossing many smaller rooms. All the project revolves around a large hall open on all levels, in order to have quickly an overall picture and to locate the place to reach and the manner of going there. It is particularly true for the two principal functions: initially, the rooms of spectacle, the

large one and the small one, are conceived vertically and one sees them from the outside through the “Moucharabieh” frontage. This option also avoids important costs in the excavation if one had chosen the option of designing such spaces in the basements. The small performance hall separates the ground floor level from the large one with its light material it creates an animated façade of light shadows and silhouette. On the other hand, the exhibition spaces are located at the first basement, and there is a visual relation from the outside thanks to courtyard, bringing in the same manner the natural light to the showrooms. This same square, has the scale of the city, and is also used as a public place it defines the actual them of the exhibition. This play of transparency of the materials and simplified localization of the functions leads to a system of fluid circulation which allows to an easier appropriation of the place. All that, added to the various types of circulation (slopes, staircases, escalator, and elevator), creates a game of discoveries and surprises progressively with the approaches of different spaces in the project. Moreover, if one does not come with a precise aim, the place also makes it possible to digress inside, with walks, patterns on the ground and walls achieved by the lights and shading effects. The monumental “Moucharabieh” at the front northern façade brings a soft and filtered light and is used as filters, physically as well as mentally. It will prepare the visitor to transcend from an external world into an internal world, from noise to calm, from pollution to a serene environment. This front facade, influenced by oriental patterns, is a wink to the craft industry of the wicker chairs which one found in all the coffee shops of the East. In the same way, the water channels will bring a pleasant noise, and will guide the visitor towards the principal functions and will generate a feeling of freshness throughout the project.

The living square of Beirut will be the continuity of the martyrs square. With its extension and program it will bring the artistic living touch to the historical , patrimonial, religious and archeological squares of Beirut.

