

1430 ON

House of Art and Culture

When seeing Beirut through the eyes of a stranger a great disparity between the expectations and the actual reality comes to the fore: the two entirely contrary yet equally strong images stored in collective memory – the romantic idea of the city as the Paris of the Middle East and the most brutal pictures of the civil war and recent attacks – both do not quite correspond to the actual scene. Here in Beirut's center, the most striking impression is one of a massive, intransigently pushed town development process: glass and steel skyscrapers are being built in great numbers, commercial and shopping centers are rapidly emerging leaving little leeway for non-commercial activities or experimental spatial and cultural practices.

The new "House of Arts and Culture" that aims at supporting this very movement of free creativity has to both integrate into and distinguish itself from its neighborhood to virtually hold its ground in this powerful environment. With regard to form it cannot successfully strive to resemble its tall adjacent office buildings, with regard to accessibility it does not want to. Thus, the design question was how to establish a building and institution in this surrounding that is dedicated to cultural activities and experiments in arts and culture and is able to represent both in a suitable way.

Our goal was to design a self-confident and welcoming edifice that facilitates an open cultural space inviting all local citizens as well as visitors and guests. The building, an upside-down pyramid, takes shape piling up the different sizes of the program required. It can be accessed by a circulating ramp that connects all public levels and ends in a top level public garden.

Level 0: Visitors entering the "House of Arts and Culture" on the north side find a restaurant and café to their right and a variety of small shops to their left hand. Straight on, there is the library neighbored by the audio visual services. The building's entrance platform provides also the basis of the public ramp that winds through the entire building.

Level 1: The first level, with still the same footprint as the ground one, comprises of a movie theater and small multimedia performance hall with flexible seating and landings that can be adapted to different scenes and requirements.

Level 2: A large performance and conference hall with back as well as side stages and an orchestra pit that can be covered with stage elements, if necessary, is located on the next level that for the first time starts to expand in size. Here, the winding ramp enters the building and becomes part of a generous, partly two-storied foyer.

Level 3: The next level can be either reached by a large flanking stairs or a smaller one in the middle of the foyer and provides access to the theater's gallery as well as to its neighboring meeting rooms.

Level 4: One level above, the hall's headroom, drawing loft and control rooms are located. Due to another four meter expansion in footprint size, there is enough space to house the offices for administrative purposes as well as workshops for dancing, music and the like.

Level 5: On the top level there is a public roof garden with an exhibition space and additional workshops located in its center. The exhibition space is intended to be flexible in size; it is composed of a fixed permanent construction that can be expanded into the leisure garden by means of a temporary additional pavilion structure according to the exhibition's requirements. The roof garden as well as the ramp are intended to be publicly accessible all day.

Level -1 to -4:

In the basement all technical rooms are situated as well as the storage rooms of the cinematheque to guarantee best climatic conditions.

Façade: The building's envelope picks up the inside-outside theme of the winding ramp. It consists of a concrete frame construction with different surface areas. As required by the interior space and program, the respective façade segments can be fully closed, filled with open-worked masonry and glass or can be even left completely open.