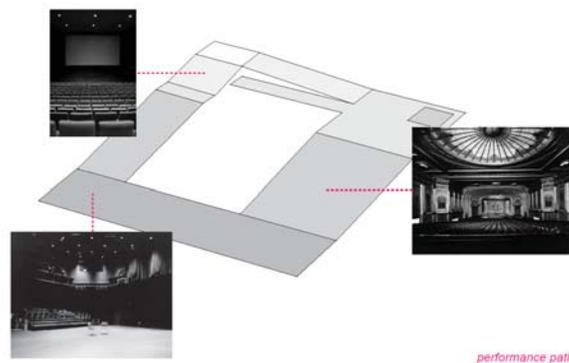


BEIRUT HOUSE OF ARTS AND CULTURE

The primary goal of The House of Arts and Culture (the Lebanese-Omani Centre) is to articulate and maximize Beirut's unique position within the Arab world as an epicenter for artistic expression and cultural diversity. The Centre will be a thoroughly independent space where elements of PUBLIC, PERFORMANCE, PRODUCTION and PRESERVATION thrive in a design where the individual necessities of each function exist while adding to the cohesion of space dedicated to exchange.

CONCEPT

The program for the Centre offers a rich variety of activities and functions. A place for multiple but equilibrated actions, it was critical to evaluate the core values of each space while maintaining necessary structures for effective use. In an attempt to push the concept of "openness" to its maximum potential, some of the largest and most programmatically rigid elements were rethought. While theater spaces are typically regenerated by past precedents, this scheme links each space into a new idea of a "performance path."



While the path is a continuous circuit, it is activated by the vertical circulation core which emerges into the main hall. From that reception space, the floor slopes downward and forms the seating rake in the large performance hall. The path then flattens to become the stage and continues across the south edge of the site housing all the backstage needs linked to the main stage. This flat surface then transforms to become the black-box style multi-media performance space. The floor slopes back up to create the necessary raking for the movie theater before finally sloping back down to the hall.

What is achieved in this reconceptualization of theatrical space is a new attitude towards the relationship between performance and production. The difference between the two can be as

subtle as a dress rehearsal versus opening night, as seamless as a film festival versus a cinematography symposium. The “performance path” exploits these nuances to make a thoroughly original compilation of spaces. It also establishes an attitude and pattern which generated the programmatic and spatial organizations of the Centre.

PUBLIC SPACE

The conceptual strategy lends itself to the exploration of relationships between artist, public and institution. Furthermore, preconceived notions of private production and public performance become blurred as an effort for intellectual openness and cultural diversity is pursued. What the “performance path” sets up is a construct of surface – it is as if the only division between the Centre and Beirut and even within the Centre as an institution is surface upon which programs are set. Multiple and varied sloping surfaces are composed upon each other making infinite possibilities for exchange and interaction in between.



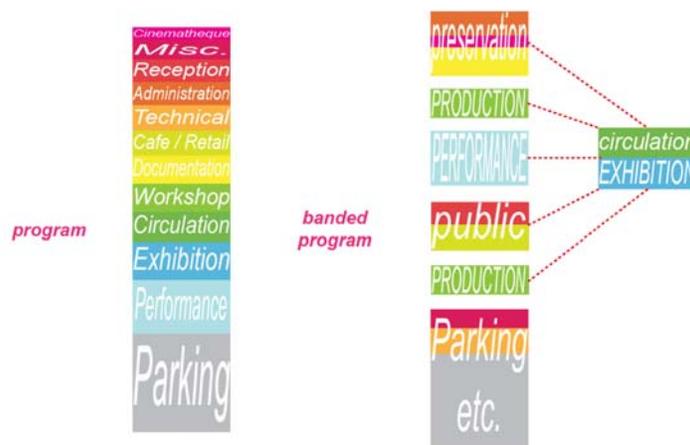
Sited just south of the historic urban center of Beirut, the Centre will anchor cultural life in the city not just intellectually but physically. As the ring road borders the Southern edge about 8 meters up from the ground level at the Northern site edge, a connection is needed. This sloping surface makes a continuous link between the two very different natures of urbanity where to the North is the pristine Solidere development and to the South, a vast and non-gentrified city. An urban surface is generated, inhabiting the space below the mass of the Centre which is lifted off the site to free itself from any typical notion of institutional formality.

The public plaza surface wraps upward to make the entrance ramp into the Centre making a seamless transition. From the public surface one has a visual connection to the interior courtyard which is sunken down and accessed from the lower levels of the building. The complexity of visual links is again blurring the institutional and urban boundaries. The center core as a void, dictated by the generation of the “performance path,” creates a visual cross-section to the interior life of the building. Layers of program stack one upon the next give a richness that is both visible from miles away and the immediate view of the plaza.

PROGRAMMATIC ACTIVATION

While the parti of stacked surfaces may impart a simplistic notion of the interior experience, the intention of programmatic layering is anything but. In understanding the subtle division between art forms, spaces and activities, the scheme promotes free and independent movement throughout the Centre. A vertical circulation core of multiple elevators frees up any extraneous links from floor to floor so that the scope of each circuit can be comprehended visually and the feeling of openness and freedom is maintained.

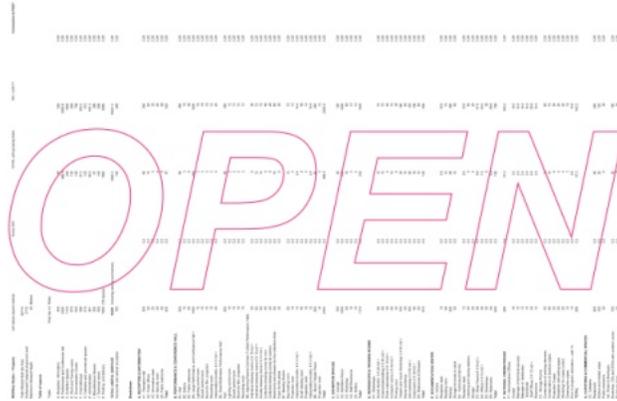
What decided the nature of each surface or path was the process used to form the “performance path.” The program expresses great variety which was then restructured into categories of PUBLIC, PERFORMANCE, PRODUCTION and PRESERVATION. In order to fulfill the idea of the Centre being a self-sustaining entity, the production component was expanded to house more rentable studio and event spaces which generates income while fostering a true artistic community.



Mixed into these categories is another reconceptualized notion of program. Detaching itself from a museum typology and ushering in a new understanding of arts and culture, the EXHIBITION spaces run throughout the building. Inhabiting the vast circulation spaces between the other functions, the idea of exhibition becomes an integrated happening opposed to a highly formalized notion of institutional display. An embedded strategy for display, a visitor will now interact seamlessly between all of the programmatic elements.

What occurs within the Centre will adopt a multi-discipline approach to the world of art and align itself with other contemporary notions of avant-garde cultural facilities. Though each floor circuit

is divided by its program, the openness of each surface and the experience of moving through the building (up and down, around a path) encourages exploration and creates a sense of freedom.



BLURRED BOUNDARIES

The artist and public each have vital and varied roles in the experience. And while those relationships to the institution are different, they are equal. These two parties will now inhabit the same space and in doing so illustrate the process of artistic production. Where in traditional notions of cultural centers may use a museum typology or orchestrate interaction, the Centre will literally eliminate boundaries.

For instance, the two separate types of production methods called for consideration. The result was a separation of the arts which need vast space and ample light (dance, painting, sculpture, theater, etc.) from those which thrive in more intimate, light-controlled areas (photography, sound, film, multimedia). What occurs is the layer above the performance path is dedicated to the former, while the layer below ground and ringing the courtyard facilitates the latter. The programs which occur between (public and performance) are vastly different. Striation of program makes the surface between even more vital – it is not just the ceiling, but the floor, an exercise in good continuation where the boundary is again blurred.

The role of surface between programs is not just visual. It contains the needs of all that occurs below it. The movie theater screen is the only spatial division for the discrete notion of “theater,” activated when it emerges from the ceiling above to show a film. The absence of floor surface on the production level above the stage makes a void which defines the fly space – around which the dance and theater studios are arranged.