

## Italian architect to design Beirut's Arts and Culture House

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BEIRUT: Italian architect Alberto Catalano has won the international competition to design Lebanon's new Arts and Culture House, Culture Minister Tammam Salam announced Monday.

Catalano beat a large and competitive field of international firms, ateliers and individual architects with his design, earning a \$75,000 prize and a commission for the project.

Funded by a \$20 million gift from the Sultanate of Oman, the House of Arts and Culture will be the first of its kind in Beirut. The expected completion date is early 2013.

The House has long been envisioned as an essential public space for the cultivation of Lebanon's vibrant artistic community, which has, for over a century, been at the vanguard of regional artistic and cultural movements. And Wednesday's announcement was an important step toward the realization of the ambitious goal to revitalize Lebanon's public endowment in the artistic sphere.

The project site for the House sits on the limit of the "old town," in the shadow of the Jean Nouvel Tower between the Emir Amine and Galghoul streets.

"We have been in need of this for a long time," Salam told *The Daily Star* after the ceremony. "The most important part is that this is a public entity not re-

served for elitist parties," he said, adding that the cultural center will serve a number of purposes and communities.

The center, Salam said, was to be a "nonpolitical and nonsectarian space that will help promote national unity and awareness ... to enrich our culture."

The competition to design the center was announced last July during the General Assembly meeting of the International Union of Architects in Torino, Italy. The competition and the broader project was conceived by the Gaia-Heritage for the Culture Ministry.

A panel of international jurors, charged with judging the competition, received 753 initial entries from 63 countries, and 388 official project submissions.

According to Georges Zouain, principal of Gaia-Heritage, the enthusiasm surrounding the contest "made this competition one of the largest architectural competitions of the year."

"We want to provide Lebanese and Beirutis with cultural amenities ... without competing with the private sector," he told *The Daily Star*. "It's amazing how the idea has materialized."

Indeed, Zouain called the plan for the center "the first component for an urban strategy [that] could propel Beirut back into the group of important cultural ports," whose function, he added, is to "exchange and trade not only goods but ideas."

All designs for the Arts and

Culture House were to include a large auditorium, a small performance hall, a cinema, exhibition spaces, rehearsal and production studios, a multimedia library and office space.

In a mission statement highlighting the cultural significance of the public center, Gaia-Heritage outlined the multipurpose nature of the facility. "The House is not conceived as a museum ... rather it will host temporary national, regional and international exhibitions," the statement said.

**|| 'The most important part is that this is a public entity, not reserved for elitists'**

"Interactivity between the house, its visitors and the population at large is an essential process. Professionals, scientists [and] artists will be invited to organize and lead workshops, conferences, visits of exhibitions and other activities. The House will act as an incubator," it added.

Catalano's winning design includes all of the required spaces and offers an openness and versatility that impressed the competition's jurors. According to his architectural plan, the House will exhibit a low-rise and decidedly post modern exterior, composed of conjoining angles and levels, a

sidelong tower [much lower than surrounding buildings] designed for workshops and offices and significant subterranean space for, among other things, the grand auditorium.

"The first proposal is an urban proposal," said Suha Ozkan, a Turkish architect, historian and theorist, and the president of the competition's jury. "It converses with the city."

The Culture Ministry and Gaia-Heritage described Catalano's design as modestly urban and human in scale, one invested with "Arabesque" and Mediterranean spirits and a modern functionality "contribut[ing] to the emerging new identity."

In describing his architectural plan, Catalano chose a post-conflict lexicon, using words like "cuts," "boundary" and "scars."

After the ceremony another one of the contest's jurors, Angus Gavin of Solidere, spoke with *The Daily Star* about the jury's selection.

"The first time around it's the iconic schemes that catch the eye," he said. Gavin then pointed at the winning design, adding: "This is much more serious."

The competition's second- and third-place prizes went to Beatriz Ramo Lopez de Angulo of The Netherlands and the Architectural bureau of "Project Meganom" from Russia.

An exhibition of all of the competition's submissions will open to the public at the Beirut Forum until April 5.

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WORK 'BOLSTERS' GROUP'S POPULARITY

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Agence France Presse

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construction are on a US list of "terrorist" organizations.

Oil-rich Gulf countries pledged millions of dollars for

