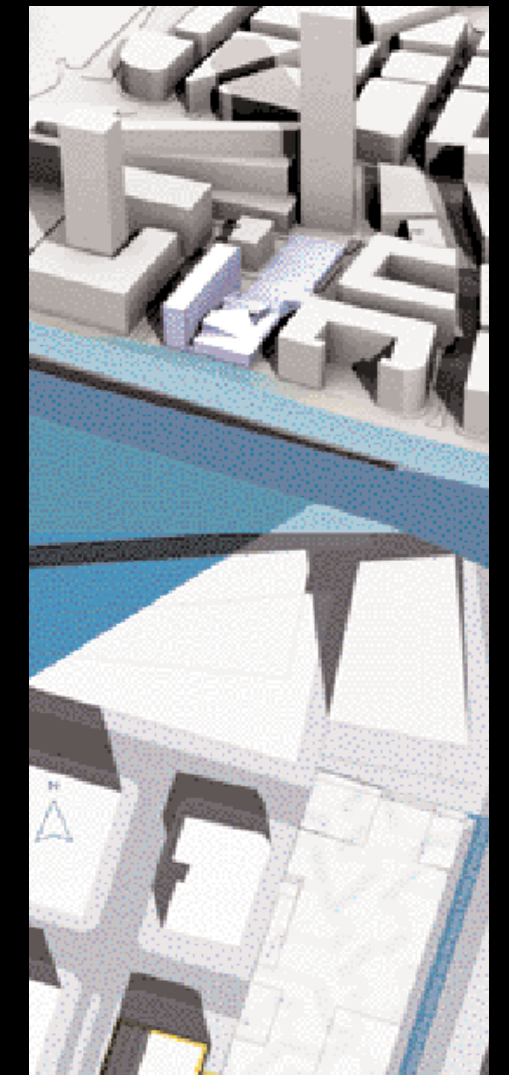
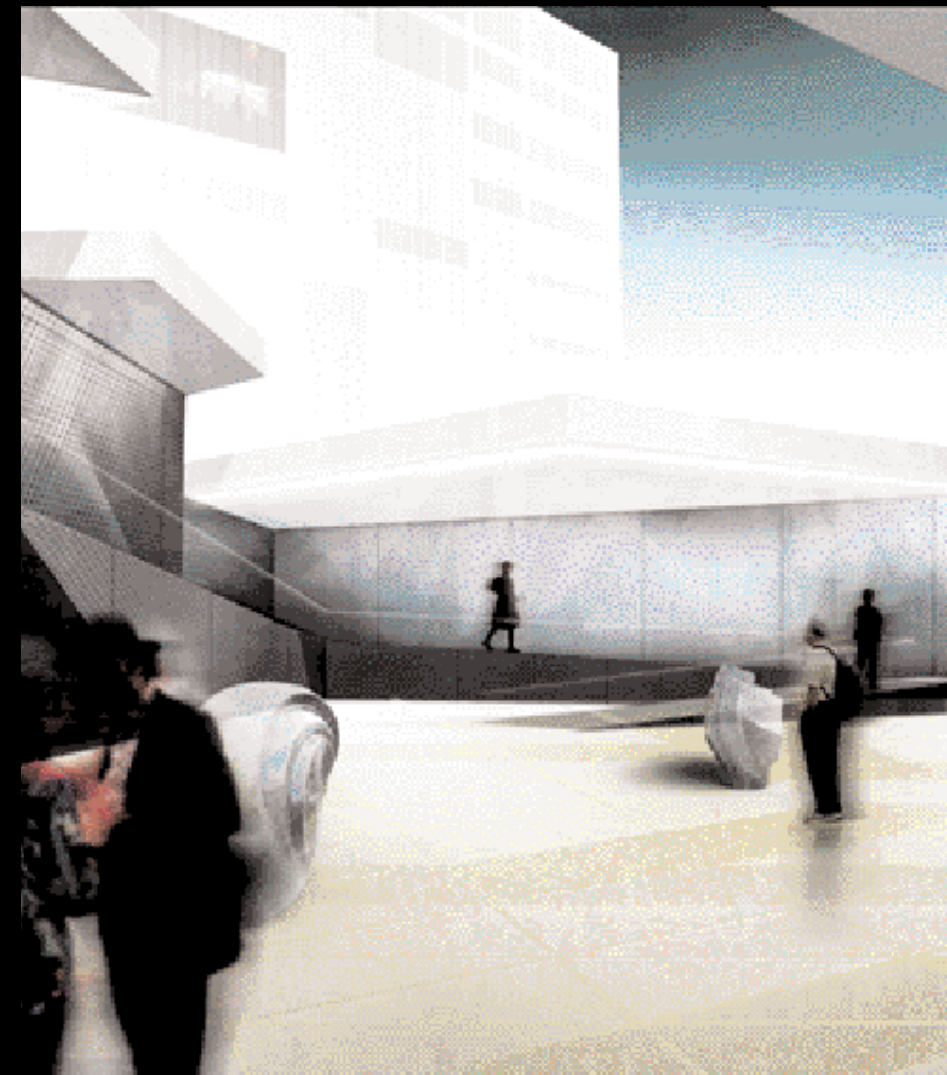




Dream house

WHAT WILL A NATIONAL CENTER FOR ARTS AND CULTURE DO FOR LEBANON?



There is no time in Lebanon's troubled history when the arts have not thrived, even if the nation's artists have often suffered.

Now in a time of gathering peace, abundant artistic projects are staking claim to private and public spaces across the country and firing the collective imagination in exciting new ways. Easily the most prominent among them, if not yet the most well known, is the national House of Arts and Culture planned for Downtown Beirut.

Proposed by Solidere in 2006, funded by the Sultanate of Oman's \$20 million grant and conceived for the ministry of culture by the cultural engineering firm GAIA-Heritage, the place will take a visible stand on the edge of the ring road and face Jean Nouvel's much-anticipated Landmark tower.

In March, an international jury sorted through nearly 400 competing submissions and selected a sleekly understated yet innovative design from Italian architect Alberto Catalano and his firm, Teknoarch.

The house will aim to "fill the gaps" in an already robust artistic and cultural landscape that merits recognition, says Georges Zouain, GAIA-Heritage's founder and director. "We want to work

with them," he says, meaning smaller, existing artistic projects. "The idea is that the art center eventually will enable the mushrooming of other art centers."

At the same time, Zouain says, the house will enter into a dialogue with its counterparts around the world, inviting artists to discover Lebanon and sending Lebanese artists abroad. "It's a two-way relationship," he says.

A lot of fervent debate has already gone into a project that won't open its doors until sometime after 2013. Solidere persuaded the ministry to locate the house in Downtown, despite others' objections.

"We feel the site was very appropriate, because it was facing that square - I call it the 'theater district square,'" since it also includes the Grand Theatre, says Angus Gavin, Solidere's urban development division head and a member of the jury.

The Italian team's design for the house purposely evokes a public square, the ultimate democratic space, and it stays low to the ground, in part to contrast with the ascending tower. "We decided to create a void, and to make the project an urban project," Catalano says.

Performance spaces are located underground, insulating them from the chorus of traffic that emanates from the ring.

The winning project acts as an "arena, a meeting place, especially one that would appeal to the younger generation," Gavin says.

Leading Lebanese architect Assem Salam, another jury member, says placing the House of Arts and Culture outside the city center might have made it more broadly accessible, but he also stressed the role it must play in the development of Lebanon's youth.

The house "should be an inventive part of creating a new generation in Lebanon that is aware of all the issues that we are suffering from," Salam says. As an arts and cultural center, it should act as a spearhead for national reform and a platform for dialogue that "reflects Lebanon, not in its polarization, but more in its openness and its humanness." Culture, Salam points out, is much more than music and poetry.

The organizers' focus on the house's social purpose particularly impressed the architecture contest's second-prize winner, Beatriz Ramo's STAR Strategies + Architecture. "They really wanted

something for the program, not just for the picture...a building that really works from the inside," says Ramo.

Whether or not the house lives up to the hopes it inspires, however, will hang on the artistic direction, says Lamia Joreige, co-founder of the Beirut Art Center (BAC), one of Lebanon's few spaces for contemporary art. Gavin agrees, and Solidere has offered to oversee the project's completion.

"I'm hoping that they will do large exhibitions that we can't afford to bring," Joreige says. Zouair says smaller organizations like BAC will be able to make use of the house's auditoriums, exhibition halls and workshops.

Space alone makes the planned building an essential addition to the Lebanese art scene, says Nino Azzi, founder-director of Art Lounge. "Art requires space, and no matter how much space we get, we always want more," Azzi says. Art Lounge moved around Beirut for five years before settling permanently in Karantina in 2004.

"The flourishing of Lebanon - that's what everyone dreams about," Azzi adds. "Art will definitely follow, I'm very confident about this."

Sophie Marzano