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THE GRAND THEATRE QUARTER

EXPERIENCING PUBLIC SPACE, BEING INSPIRED BY CULTURE

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HERITAGE
IDENTITY
THEATRE QUARTER
CULTURE 3.0
PUBLIC SPACE

The massive blast of August 2020 severely damaged Beirut's architectural heritage. It is in the very city centre that most of this asset is concentrated, but since the end of the 1975-1990 Civil War citizens have been denied access to this area.

Here stands the former Grand Theatre, which will be the epicentre of a new artistic quarter that will allow all Beirutis to re-establish a cultural presence in their city centre.

Two layers are analysed during this process. First, the Lebanese theatrical scene, which must rely on the flourishing film industry and tourism to recover. Second, the globalised mainstream of Culture 3.0, that has broadened the basin of culture producers and made casual public space act as a proper theatrical stage.

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RESEARCH PLAN

01

1.1 INTRODUCTION

It took only few seconds to destroy 40% of the city of Beirut on August 4, 2020. That mere few seconds was enough to determine the near fate of the Lebanese capital's urban and social framework and its architectural asset. Years and years of accumulated cultural heritage fell again into total disrepair. A heritage that in the last century alone saw an accelerated series of events and changes, from the Ottomans to the French, from the Green Line to the Construction Boom. A few seconds erased a portion of this past, badly compromised the present, and brought future aspirations back to their knees. The current scenario is still a frighten reminiscent of the disgraceful 1975-1990 Civil War.

Looking at Beirut today, the romantic notion of resilience appears very forced. Facing a tormented population, that is preparing to challenge an unknown and unimaginable future, it is natural to ask how much these people and their culture could resist before reaching a no-return breaking point. The destruction of a city is not just a physical question: the Civil War and the explosion shattered the heart of Lebanese ideology and culture, undermining the very reasons for which the nation itself lived. It is true that Beirut has always been the embodiment of optimism and the coveted destination of all those Lebanese who over time have, despite themselves, given birth to a diaspora. However, the Beirut of today is not the Beirut of yesterday and its collective memory is in serious danger.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Beirut has been settled for almost 5,000 years. As the Lebanese capital city has kept evolving, it has continued to leave traces. It is not hard at all to be aware of the beauty of

Ottoman and French rule-era architecture looking at some old postcards. However, in the wake of the blast on August 4, 2020, many concerns have been growing about how to safeguard what remains of that architectural heritage.

85% of ancient valuable buildings have already been lost in the three decades since the Civil War ended, as remiss state protection allowed developers to tear them down and replace them with modern skyscrapers. This was the answer to what Beirut demanded after years of clashes. Now, many fear that structural damage done by the explosion may be used as an excuse to destroy the few that *were lucky enough to have survived both the Civil War and the subsequent real-estate frenzy* (Stoughton, 2020).

Often these buildings are isolated amid new high-rise apartment blocks, however, *they represent a complete urban fabric that is flawless and coherent* (Stoughton, 2020). Their glamour is faded by the mark of time, from broken shutters and windows to the scars left by bullets and shelling, but their spatial and symbolic potential is still safe. How can we make this potential to perform again? The National Library is a great example of how a restoration-plus-enlargement intervention can make this happen. The recent protests show how people are willing to re-inhabit public heritage buildings like the former Grand Theatre. These are *buildings that represent the possibilities of what the city can still be. They give it hope, and remind of a thriving Beirut* (Stoughton, 2020). Connected to these spontaneous manifestations there is the wider popular need to have back a political and cultural centrality.

Little was left of the glittering Paris of the East before the explosion and even less has remained following the catastrophic blast. However, the main part of the architectural evidence of Beirut's history is still concen-

trated in the centre, where the soul of the whole city should express itself to the maximum power. Is it possible to affirm this even in front of a deserted city centre? Let's consider this: a historical centre is defined as *an active human settlement strongly conditioned by a physical structure originating from the past and recognisable as representing the evolution of its people* (Mutal, 2012, p. 1). A necessary condition for it to happen is that *the historical centre is inhabited and forms a living cultural nucleus* (Mutal, 2012, p. 1). According to this, *all abandoned area and monumental or archaeological complexes are excluded, because they lack an organised and continuous sociality* (Mutal, 2012, p. 1). Hence, Beirut Central District is the expression of the current status quo in Leba-

non. However, it is not possible to say that it expresses the cultural presence of the inhabitants as well, as they do not set foot there. The cultural rebirth of Beirut must start from its very centre, hence the conservation of its formal identity is of vital importance.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTION

Dealing with buildings such as the Grand Theatre is not just something poetic, emotional, or nostalgic. They have a purely spatial potential. In a 1990 study by the American University, a sample of people younger than twenty-five years old showed a faded knowledge of how the city centre of Beirut used to look before the Lebanese Civil War. There is a kind of amnesia regarding the city



Figure 01.1: interior of the Grand Theatre in Beirut. <https://www.jameskerwinphotographic.com>

identity: there are no monuments or museums to warn of those atrocious years and the objects on display at the National Museum are all more than five centuries old. Actually, after the war ended in 1990, *Solidere destroyed a contrasting environment in favour of a picture-perfect site. Instead of being the gathering place of all Beirutis from all backgrounds, this is now an exclusive space for appropriate people only* (Makarem, 2012).

Only the built heritage retain the memory of the Paris of the East, thanks to it, it is possible to re-establish an artistic occupancy in a depressed area. How a new architectural development centred on the Grand Theatre can perform a role in re-establishing a cultural presence in Central Beirut? What is the history and appearance of this object and its surroundings? What restoration theory to implement and what form to give to the relationship between the Old and the New?

It must be considered as well that the new theatre will be part of both the Lebanese and global cultural scene. What are the current cultural issues, the mainstream, the emerging ideas, and how could the theatre become home to such a cultural network? The demands and production of visual culture have been rapidly increasing: the personal computing revolution made professional skills relatively cheap and accessible. *Culture 3.0 is characterised by the explosion of the pool of producers, so that it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between cultural producers and users* (Sacco, 2011, p. 7). People interact on the basis of non market-mediated exchanges; regarding the theatre, the scene have been moved from the theatre edifice itself to the public space.

1.4 CURRENT STATE OF THE ART

The research contemplates the analysis of layers. At first, there is an investigation

of the heritage layer in Beirut and specifically in its historical nucleus. After documenting the history and the appearance of the Grand Theatre, one can move on to sources that help designing in a complex context like this one. For instance, let's consider 'Planning in the face of deep divisions: a view from Beirut, Lebanon' by Angelique Chettiparamb and Christine Mady.

The historical layer goes hand in hand with the cultural one. The divisive conflicts that have been the fil rouge of the modern history of Lebanon have made basic notions such as 'nation' and 'national' meaningless. However, if we compare the current situation of Lebanese culture to the one of the 1990s, the first one appears much more vibrant. There has been a proliferation of new productions, groups, and theatrical spaces, but this constant progress comes from civil society, which has little or no support from government bodies.

There are some factors pointed out in Mona Mehri's 'Theatre and performance landscapes in Lebanon' that enhance this state of the art. There is no national theatre and there is only one venue made publicly available, the UNESCO Palace; the employees of the cultural sector owe 45% of their revenues in taxes; funds come almost entirely from abroad. This lack of funds actually means that small self-sufficient private theatres simply rent their spaces to guest companies, without having any contribution in the creation of plays and the structuring of a unified and/or shared programme. Hence, since 2014, individual productions and performances have represented the predominant component. This includes monodrama, storytelling, lecture performances, and comedy. Although the theatre scene in Lebanon is quite vivid and dynamic, there is very little documentation that critically reflects on its productions and aesthetics favouring

the creation of a debate and the recognition of collective development of certain artistic trends. Furthermore, there is a drastic lack of the central figure of the 'playwrighter'.

However, on the other hand, this circumstance has led to an abundance of shows based on the translation of foreign texts, making the Lebanese scene very international. Another positive impact is the large possibility of experimentation allowed by the absence of this sort of overall system. For instance, there is a tendency to relocate: *we often see productions that have had several tours outside the city of Beirut. They have been touring all over Lebanon presenting their work in peripheral cities, provinces, and rural areas* (Salloukh, 2019). The Lebanese theatre is therefore extremely democratic, as well demonstrated by the work of an ensemble such as Zoukak. This collective uses the theatrical space as a social and psychological support tool, thus directing its production towards an educational perspective. The analysis of the contemporary and global theatrical architecture layer deals with all these tendencies.

1.5 PROJECT AMBITIONS

The benchmarking of significant precedents is the main source of knowledge for what concerns the building in itself. Similar projects could provide inspiration or could give useful suggestions to the speculation needed in a design process. Evidently, the creation of a new Grand Theatre has many facets, which correspond to the integrated approach the Complex Projects Studio has.

First of all, it is about the preservation of a historical object. The main necessary condition for an integrated approach is the recognition that built heritage recovery must incorporate both replacement and conservation practices. *When planners and con-*

servationists approach rebuilding war-damaged cities, there is commonly perceived clash of interest between conservation and replacement: whether to restore a pre-war built environment to the extent possible or clear urban space for improvement (Barakat, 2021, p. 428). This dilemma has been debated in every case of urban post-war reconstruction since World War II. How far it is appropriate to push conservation? Therefore, how much, what parts, and how is it appropriate to preserve an object such as the Grand Theatre?

Although considered as a very ancient city, Beirut's original reconstruction plan aimed to establish a modern metropolis, with massive disregard to historical significance (Barakat, 2021, p. 438). Perhaps, it is good to keep the appearance of the edifice and readjust its interior to the modern needs of a theatrical building; this has been Solidere's approach here. The ambition might also be the opposite one, because it is fundamental to take note of the fact that a contemporary theatre is not a simple performative habitat.

When dealing with the design of a theatre, it is necessary to know everything about the cultures that are relevant to it, the network it could create, and the spaces and expressions necessary to achieve its ambitions, as a theatre is an institution and an exceptional public space. In the Western World especially, theatres have played a fundamental role in the growth and cultural development of the cities where they were located. Institutions that were often directly linked to the upper class, but still able to shape the cultural landscape of all social groups, mobilising their instincts, fascinations, and values. This is the primary condition of culture and theatre in the cityscape: as mentioned, to stimulate thoughts, relationships, and debates. Thinking about Ancient Greek theatres, it is clear how this cultural expression has a



Figure 01.2: Culture 3.0 has been making theatre more democratic. <https://www.inyourpocket.com>

public role and a primary urban assignment.

Within an over-privatised city like Beirut, having back the Grand Theatre could mean re-establishing some of its faltering public vitality. The nearby example of the National Library is a significant precedent in the same scenario. Hence, could the reopening alone be considered as a success? Yes, but the reopening is the end of a first phase in a still active process. The next phase will be complicated, but it will involve for sure *an institution with its own new flagship building* (Stoughton, 2020).

1.6 EXPECTED RESULTS

During the process, it will be possible to invent relying on design argumentations taken from facts and existing knowledge. These expected result are information spendable in the proper design phase: programme benchmarking and function definition, space organisations and material visualisation.

As a first step, the design hypothesis requires a decision on the restoration policy of the existing Grand Theatre. It is a representative building of the evolution of Beirut and Lebanon over the last hundred years, but to be considered as a historical palace it must be inhabited again. However, this restoration is not sufficient to give it greater visibility if not accompanied by interventions aimed at making it an appropriate stage for the theatrical and cultural movement of Beirut and Lebanon. To become an institution, the Grand Theatre needs a substantial expansion that includes spaces to accommodate a possibly growing number of specialists in the sector as well as ordinary citizens.

At this point, we compare a catalogue of theatrical spaces with the specific situation of the Lebanese cultural scene, and to this, we apply the modern global trends of theatrical design, found for example in 'Some

contemporary trends in theatre architecture', by Wendell Cole. Cinema and filmmaking are a vigorous industry in the nation: they are privileged as they are taxed as touristic activities (17%). The project leans on these sectors and then provides flexibility to accommodate theatrical shows as well.

1.7 CONCLUSIONS

The ambition of the research corresponds to an impellent urgency and need of the city of Beirut. We understood that its collective memory is embedded in the historical artifacts of its very city centre. However, this must return to being inhabited. *The disappearance of the city centre from the lives of the Beirut people for over twenty-four years was one of the main factor that encouraged the growth of independent secondary centres in the suburbs* (Alameddine, 2004). It is not only about recovering the heritage, it is also a narrative of the cultural presence in Central Beirut, of what contemporary cultural space could do for this tortured city and its citizens. The choice of the Grand Theatre as an assignment is also a way to engage in this challenge, in direct relationship with the reconstruction of the city and its parts.

The Grand Theatre is located in an area entrusted to Solidere, but still underdeveloped. This was intended to be the cultural hub of the plan, with the shining House of Arts and Culture to be built there. Nowadays, the entire area appears as a void in the city centre. In a decentralised city where only 0.5% of the land is public, this large space could prove to be an unmissable opportunity for the creation of a Grand Theatre Quarter that will contribute to the refurbishing of Beirut Central District and its opening to the Lebanese cultural scene and urban transformation from a secluded and uninhabited space to a theatrical public platform.

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In spite of the multiplication of successful examples of culture-led local and regional development, there is a widespread perception that the role and potential of culture is still seriously under-recognised. Why the share of structural funds devoted to culture fails to match the share of cultural and creative sectors?

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In what way counter-hegemony is expressed in performance art, dealing with notions of public space and the publics? This piece interrogates public space and citizenship in Beirut in very different ways to express dissent and perform resistance.

DESIGN BRIEF

02

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The following chapter is a summary of the research done about the topic of the thesis. Then, the project area is analysed and, basing ourselves on the conclusions resulted from these first two phases, the guidelines that will lead the actual spatial and formal implementation and development of the project are presented. Let's remember what we are talking about when we mention The Grand Theatre Quarter: it is a project dealing with a symbolic building of Beirut's heritage - the Grand Theatre - which will be restored, enlarged, and put at the centre of a new public, cultural, and theatrical district to re-establish a strong identity and a cultural presence in Beirut city centre.

2.1 THESIS TOPIC RESEARCH

What is the statement that triggered the ambition of the thesis and therefore the previous research? It is an alarming fact: 85% of Beirut's historical architectural heritage has been lost following the 1975-1990 Civil War. If this was due to the damage brought by the conflict itself, another main component of this silent disaster has been the subsequent construction boom that filled the city with tall and profitable residential towers. Faced with this situation, in February 1996, the national government drew up a list of 1.016 buildings to be protected. Not so many, considering for instance a town like Amsterdam has over 9.000. Moreover, just five months later following a further evaluation, this number was reduced to a quarter. Nowadays, after the explosion dated August 2020, more than half of the buildings contained in the original list are damaged and their existence is severely in danger. Once again, the blast turned the spotlight on a problem that has been present in the city for a long time now.

But why is this a problem? Because the architectural heritage is not only a trace of the past of a city, but it is also the representation of what it may be in the future. In Beirut, this future needs more buildings such as the National Library: restored, reopened, and now housing an institution representative of a large community of citizens. And this future also requires the city centre to be re-inhabited, because most of this heritage is concentrated there, including our theatre.

So what are the ambitions of this project and what has been sought in the attempt to satisfy them? In order to dialogue with the theatre, it was necessary to learn about the state of the art of the entire Lebanese entertainment industry: if theatre plays a marginal role - as the cultural sector in toto - the same cannot be said for cinema, that, considered as a touristic activity, on the other hand, enjoys great popularity. To exemplify, Lebanon and the Netherlands have the same number of cinemas per person.

In order to dialogue with the building of the Grand Theatre itself, it was necessary to inquire about the possibilities of contemporary theatrical architecture, both in terms of typology and in terms of functional and spatial trends. To sum up, we are heading towards a more sustainable theatre edifice which, for this same reason, is often difficult to identify as a proper individual building.

Finally, in order to deal with the collective identity of a city and an entire nation, it was necessary to know the cultural manifestations of the time in which we operate, those that P. L. Sacco contains in the concept of Culture 3.0. It is a process that has made the production of culture affordable and accessible, fading (and often erasing) the distinction between producers and users of culture. Concerning the theatre, this has meant the detachment from the old rigid time and space barriers.

Finally, what is the research question? How a new architectural development centred around the Grand Theatre building can help re-establishing a cultural presence in Central Beirut? Research has allowed us to learn the first ingredients of the formula. The Grand Theatre Quarter will have a touristic mindset by relying on film industry. It will provide an adequate platform for the bustling Lebanese theatrical scene, therefore, with more than one venue and function. Finally, it will concern not only the Grand Theatre itself, but the surrounding cityscape as well.

2.3 SITE APPROACH

Next step, what is this surrounding urban cityscape? Let's start with the group stra-

tegy. We called our circle Bidhara'l Beirut, (*Figure 02.1*) the Seed of Beirut, as the city was born within it millennia ago and has then extended its roots from it. We noticed a problem there: the area entrusted to the private company Solidere following the Civil War, within which the Grand Theatre also stands, appears empty and devoid of vitality. If at first glance this seems to be due to the road structure that surrounds its profile, analysing in depth we instead discovered many empty spaces and buildings; on the other hand, a very worrying scarcity of open public spaces and facilities. The collective strategy aims to counter these two causes, rehabilitating the precious existing fabric of the city centre and offering people a public activity that serves as a reason to enjoy Solidere, brea-



Figure 02.1: Bidhara'l Beirut within the central urban area of the Lebanese capital city.



Figure 02.2: project area definition.



Figure 02.3: surrounding functions.



Figure 02.4: surrounding circulation.

gical area, also abandoned (Figure 02.2); nearby, beyond some religious buildings, there are only offices (Figure 02.3); the financial district, after recent anti-government revolts, is closed and protected, therefore, the site of the Grand Theatre remains accessible only in correspondence with a small monumental park at its North-West corner (Figure 02.4). It is important to note that those arriving at the site from the North come across the main facade of the theatre, as it was conceived at the time of its construction, while those arriving from the South are faced with the large underground void of the excavations. From the sections (Figures 02.5-6) you can see how large this area is and how the height of the neighboring edifices is uniform, as they were all built in the same period, during the French occupation of the Lebanese nation.

So what are the site leading assets? First of all, the theatre, with its long history that began in 1929, when it still housed a hotel and commercial activities. It was common in Lebanon for a theatre building to work as a commercial building: the reasons for this already emerged in the research. Then, there are the archaeological excavations, which are visible only on a small portion of the site. Finally, two projects that were supposed to be built there, but failed. The first one, The Landmark, was a luxurious shopping centre designed by the star architect Jean Nouvel, the ideal object for Solidere (Figure 02.7). However the construction was stopped as soon as, during the excavations for the foundations, what appeared to be the remains of the Roman Gate of Beirut re-emerged. The second king a spell that has lasted for a quarter of a century and which sees a population used to survive and conceive itself without a centre.

The Grand Theatre is located halfway between the aforementioned highway, to the South, and the financial district, to the North; in front of it there is a huge archaeolo-



Figure 02.5: East-West section of the existing situation.

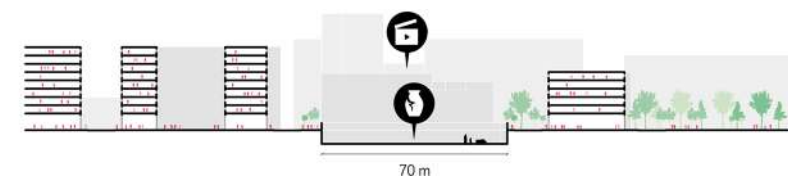


Figure 02.6: North-South section of the existing situation.



Figure 02.7: hypothetical appearance of The Landmark.



Figure 02.8: Kennedy Centre for the Performing Arts.



Figure 02.9: Green Square Library.

is the House of Arts and Culture, a sort of plan B of The Landmark: not being able to build next to the Grand Theatre, the focus was shifted to one of the vacant lots a little to the South, closer to the highway. This project also failed, this time due to lack of funds created by the recent economical and political crisis. However, we are aware that both of these projects ignored Beirut's desperate need for public space.

2.4 DESIGN BRIEF

So how can The Grand Theatre Quarter differentiate itself from these two previous failures? This is equivalent to asking: how public space can call the shots within the project? To understand this, let's analyse two case-studies. The first one is the Kennedy Centre for the Performing Arts, in the USA. (Figure 02.8). This is a complex of performative spaces too, yet it appears as a public green square. This is because the building only emerges on the surface through entrance volumes, which then lead to a network of basement and underground spaces or functions. Although these functions are public by definition, 30% of the programme of this complex is represented by the green square on the level zero (Figure 02.10). The second example is the Green Square Library, in Sidney (Figure 02.9). Again, it appears through simple prisms in an equipped square. The library itself is entirely in the basement and draws light through voids that open into the urban terrain. Similarly, 30% of the programme being the library corresponds to 30% being the square on the ground level (Figure 02.11).

We then assume that 30% of The Grand Theatre Quarter programme consists of publicly and freely accessible space. What is the rest of the programme? Three venues and three complementary activities. What do these three venue types have in common?

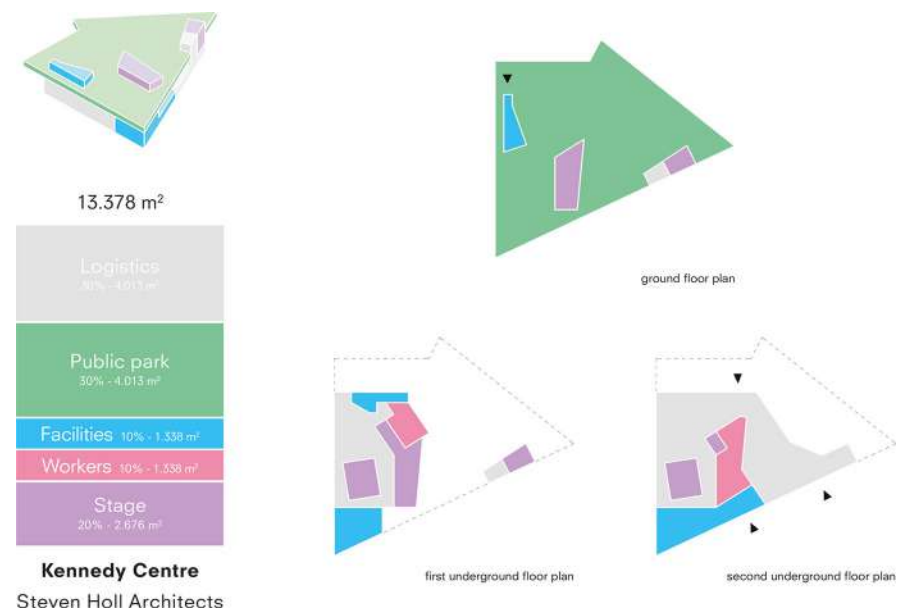


Figure 02.10: analysis of Kennedy Centre for the Performing Arts.

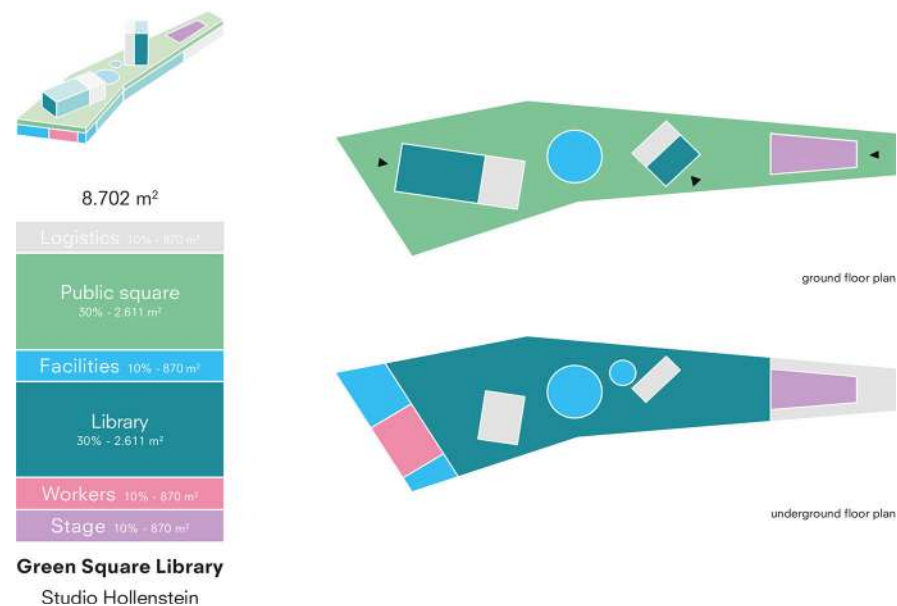


Figure 02.11: analysis of Green Square Library.

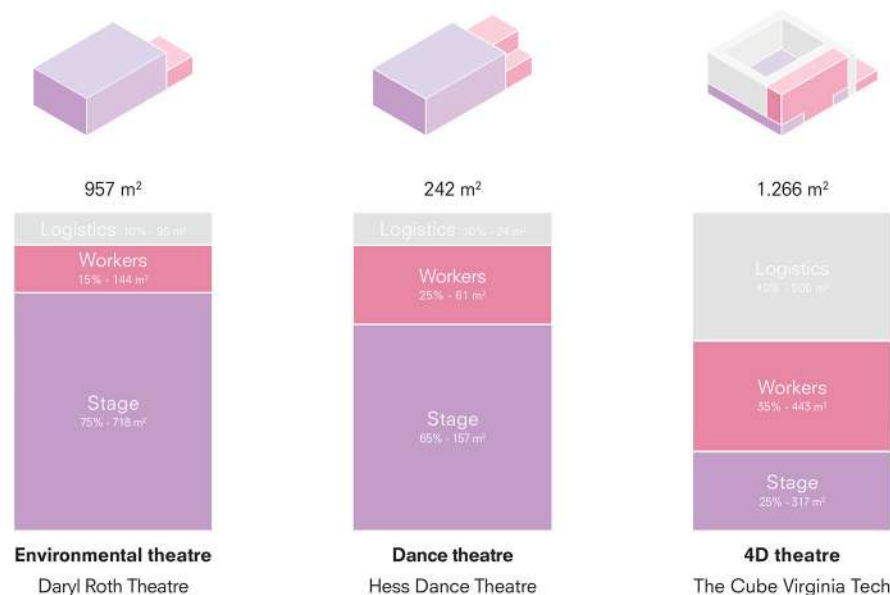


Figure 02.12: benchmarking for the three venues.

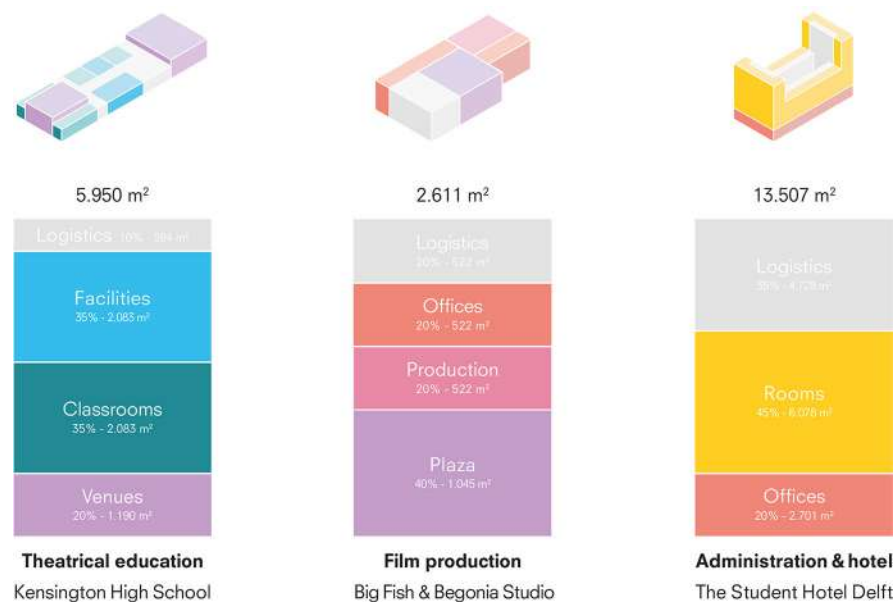


Figure 02.13: benchmarking for the three complementary activities.

They are types of theatre that presuppose the movement within the stage space of both the actors and the public. Therefore, they resemble a casual public space, have no fixed seats, and can thus be used as cinemas. This backup plan protects them from an otherwise certain economical collapse. In support there are also a theatre school, a production studio, administrative offices, and a hotel.

A benchmarking made it possible to determine the percentages and sizes of this 70% of the programme. Note how the three types of theatre, although they have many aspects in common, also have substantial differences: the 4D theatre has in fact a lot of space reserved for operators and machinery (Figure 02.12). Be aware of how some of the other activities include performance spaces

and can take advantage of those offered by the three venues (Figure 02.13). These activities are composed of the respective functions. From the sum, the final programme bar was derived, for a total of 26.246 m² (Figure 02.14).

Now that the elements of the programme are known, let's move on to analyse their mutual relationship. There are three options. First, the public space in the centre gives access to all the different activities. Second, an evolution of the historical and typical layout of the theatrical building: linear, from the public space to the foyer, from the stage to the backstage. Third and last option is a combination of these previous two approaches.

Let's be site-specific: what is the best massing layout for the chosen site? These three possible programme relationship approaches



Figure 02.14: programme bar of The Grand Theatre Quarter.

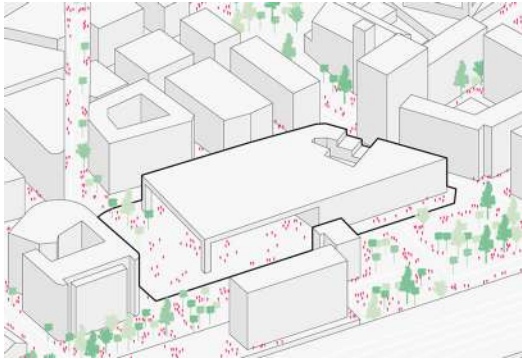


Figure 02.15: 'The covered plaza' massing option.



Figure 02.16: 'The enlargement' massing option.

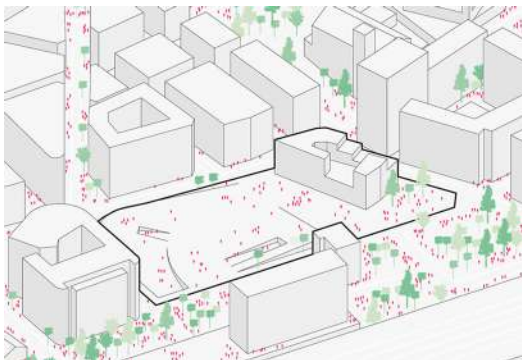


Figure 02.17: 'Basement and more' massing option.

ches corresponds to three massing options. 'The covered plaza', a roof with pavilions underneath. 'The enlargement', one single building containing the whole programme. 'Basement & more', an underground building emerging through punctual volumes (Figure 16).

We already know what are the criteria on which we can base our choice. The research, the site analysis, and the programme definition all revealed which assets are fundamental for The Grand Theatre Quarter. These assets ask for both the efficiency provided by a potentially independent building and the flexibility which an open unfurnished square donates to the city. Consequently, the chosen approach combines an expansion of the existing Grand Theatre with a quite artificial landscape spreading in the adjacent square.

2.5 CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, we want to create a future-proof square. We want the historical icon of the Grand Theatre to stand out on this public space. Part of the building will then be underground: indeed, only a few simple volumes will emerge on the surface, be they geometric independent bodies or a more widespread system of soft ramps, thus creating an urban landscape on site of the now abandoned archaeological ruins. These archaeological ruins will mark the entrance to the theatre complex, just as they were once the gateway to the Roman settlement. Finally, the very layout of the building will allow the user to be able to move freely and actively within an open-air network of performative stages.

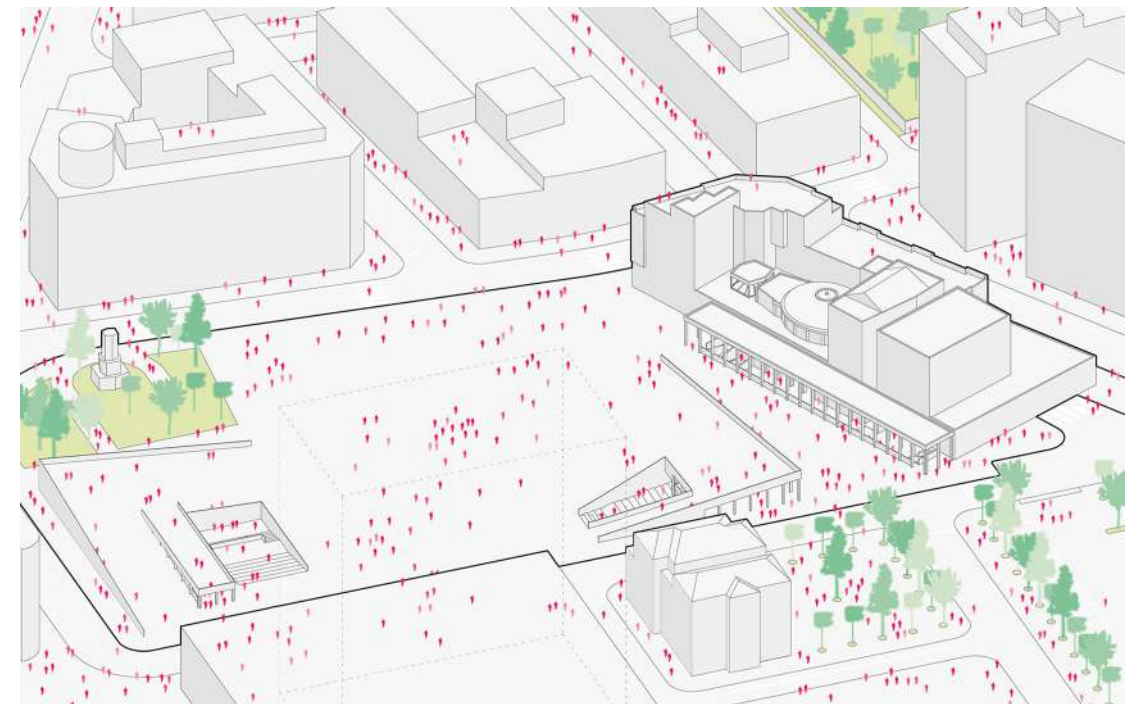


Figure 02.18: chosen approach for The Grand Theatre Quarter.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

03

3.1 CONCEPT IMPLEMENTATION

Let's eventually see how this concept is implemented and the actual design developed. What cannot miss here? Summing-up, what are the non-negotiable assets of The Grand Theatre Quarter? Heritage, public space, and the multiform and casual movement of future users. These are leading the composition of the whole complex and are linking its different elements one to the other.

We start from the Grand Theatre, a recognisable and recognised icon of Beirut's cracked heritage. Its main hall is turning on its lights again and the adjacent shops, offices, and hotel rooms will have new life. We move to the second theatrical venue, the 4D theatre. This is a tower-like building, replying the

shape and dimensions of the scenic tower of the historical building, but taking a physical distance from it. A lower wing allocates serving spaces: logistics and storage, and changing and rehearsal rooms. These first two venues share the scenic tower and a long underground foyer. This element is the focus of the entire composition because it keeps together old and new - being a diaphragm towards the square - and it is continued where the square rises creating two more slope-like pavilions. The closer one highlights a spacious entrance ramp to the foyer and hosts more functions connected to the performative spaces. The further one makes the square an actual amphitheatre, incorporates a wide covered passage, and slopes towards an open-air dance theatre,

whose stage works as the entrance to the educational and film production rooms. The vision (Figure 03.1) shows how public space - the second asset - penetrates the buildings. This allows passers-by to freely enter and cross them, without being trapped inside. Along these casual flows, theatrical spaces act as magnets to inspire the user. This is how public space is intended here, an hybrid network in-between intertwined buildings and the public domain.

3.2 PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

This was the overall concept. How is it physically implemented? Let's take a look at the roof floor plan (Figure 05.1). We can see how the square relates to the Metro Station, pro-

viding a large un-planned space towards the city centre. A huge green area is part of the station's design as well: this is why the square is mostly hardscaped. Indeed, shadow is given by the always accessible network of spaces revealed by the ground floor plan (Figure 05.2). Even more of this is exposed when looking at the basement level (Figure 05.3). To the left, you can see how the covered passage at the upper level corresponds to a wide inhabitable corridor belonging to the theatrical school. To the right, four different ramps give access to the common foyer.

Moreover, in the basement, there are two large water collectors. Why are they here? Because in the square above similar casual flows are obtained using water. Water has a temporary nature and this way it can cre-



Figure 03.1: inspiration vision of The Grand Theatre Quarter.



Figure 03.2: historical picture of Central Beirut with the Grand Theatre and the disappeared slums to the top-right corner.

ate ever-changing landscapes. We already talked about why there are almost no trees upstairs: water also offers a playful solution to refresh people. Let's move on to the square design. You probably will notice the unusual pattern of its paving. On the previous page, you saw an historical picture of the area (Figure 03.2). Why is this old state of the art 's frame there? Because if you look up to the top right corner, you see how the urban void is a recent stuff. History comes back. From the top to the bottom: we take a satellite picture of that previous situation, invert it, make it pixelated, and give pixels a material before placing it on the square (Figure 03.3). Now the leopard-print on the paving should be clear. The four materials chosen for the tiles are:

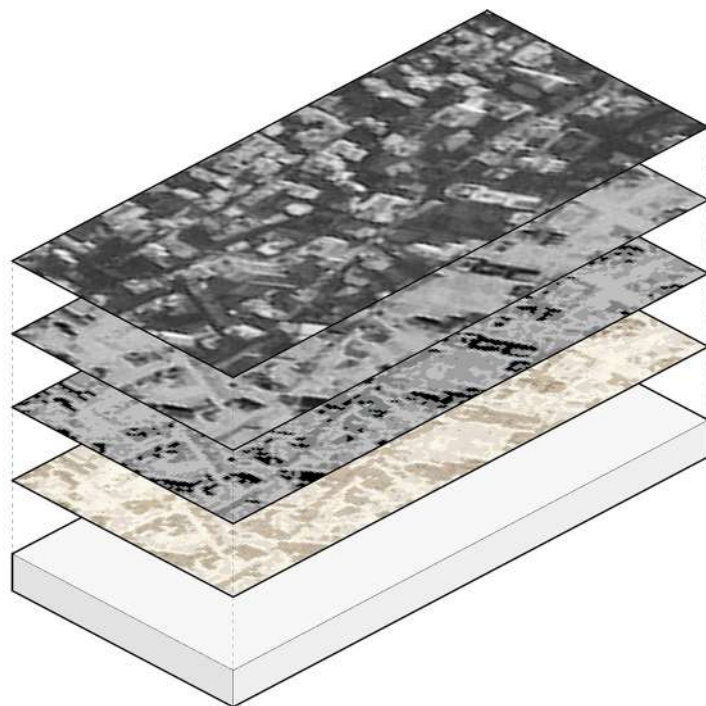


Figure 03.3: the pixelated carpet of the square makes history part of the future public space.

repel water), two shades of limestone and yellow-veins artificial marble. What do happen when we pour water onto the tiles? The first one does not get wet due to its rough and three-dimensional texture. On the other hand, the latest three do get wet, revealing their true shade, free from dust. Looking at a fragment, the paving is an integrated system with water springs, lighting, and drainage. We can imagine passers-by trying to avoid water. On my way to work, maybe I will be able to cross the square in a straight line, being inspired by an artist here taking advantage of the morning breeze. On my way back from work, maybe water will block me that same way, encouraging me to explore part of that rich network of underground theatrical spaces (Figure 03.4). In the meantime,

some children are playing out there after school, colouring the tiles with chalk, and later running around in a maze of funny water geysers (Figure 03.5). When it comes the night, the spotlights create the platform for a dance performance and the pools of water reflect a fire-eater heating the plaza (Figure 03.6).

Let's now take a closer look at the main actor - the Grand Theatre - with its son-in-law. The two halls are facing the square, while the other functions form a U-shaped body towards the city centre (Figure 05.5). There are also two more already-existing levels underground, which will be used as a storage and technical space shared by the venues (Figure 05.4). A section shows how this main building - what was 'The enlargement' - is working, also in terms of climate (Figure 05.8): the outdated rooms are modernised with floor heating and ceiling cooling; natural ventilation comes from the open-air foyer, while warm dirty air goes out through the old foyer skylight and the hall top oculus; the 4D theatre requires an additional mechanical ventilation. The traditional facade of the theatre now shares the stage with a modern geometrically-shaped counterpart (Figure 05.9). Let's move on. We are at floor three and four (Figure 05.6). Here it is evident the main architectural intervention on the existing building. A narrow wing - which was a later addition by the way - is being removed, clearing the view of the skylight and the dome. This way the theatrical core of the building is shown-off again. This hidden gem - no more hidden - is painted in gold: we all know that gold is quite arabic. The two last floors (Figure 05.7). it should be mentioned at this point that the 4D theatre works as a series of galleries around a central space. These galleries are accessible only by the workers and are connected to the scenic tower by a series of suspended walkways. They are visible in the next section (Figure 05.10) enhancing the gap between old and new.

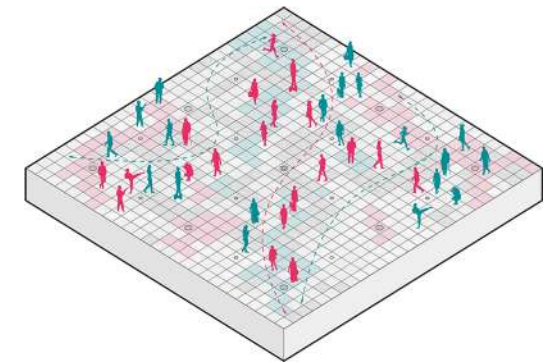


Figure 03.4: commute in an ever-changing hardscape.

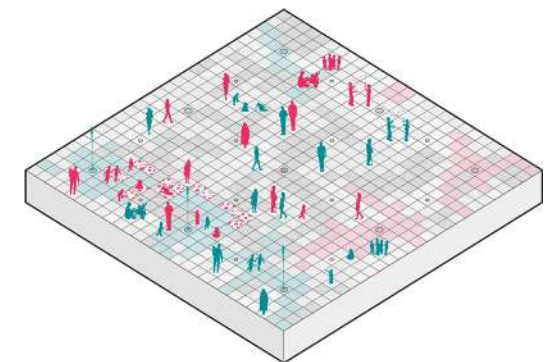


Figure 03.5: have fun in an ever-changing hardscape.

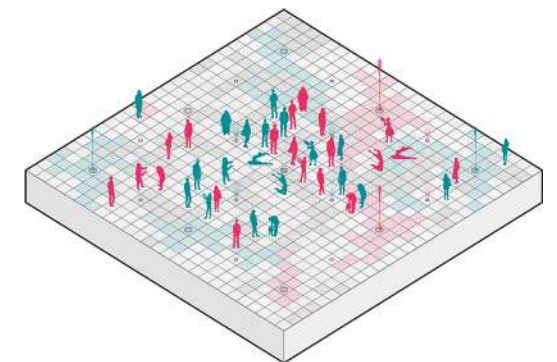


Figure 03.6: perform art in an ever-changing landscape.

Finally, we are at the foyer (Figure 05.11). Its rhythm of pillars allows a glimpse of the whole building in the back: the old facade, the monolithic tower, the gap, the translucent screen of the 4D theatre, and the more closed-off contiguous volume. That's how the foyer keeps everything together, with all the different materials: the limestone tiles of the theatre, that we mentioned before, the ruder appearance of its damaged parts, the golden dome and skylight, the perforated aluminum cladding, which makes the 4D theatre facade a vertical billboard, and the aluminum foam panels of the other three facades, which are also present in the foyer itself - together with thin metal profiles - and where the square rises up. The elevations (Figures 05.13-14) show how the two slopes are framed

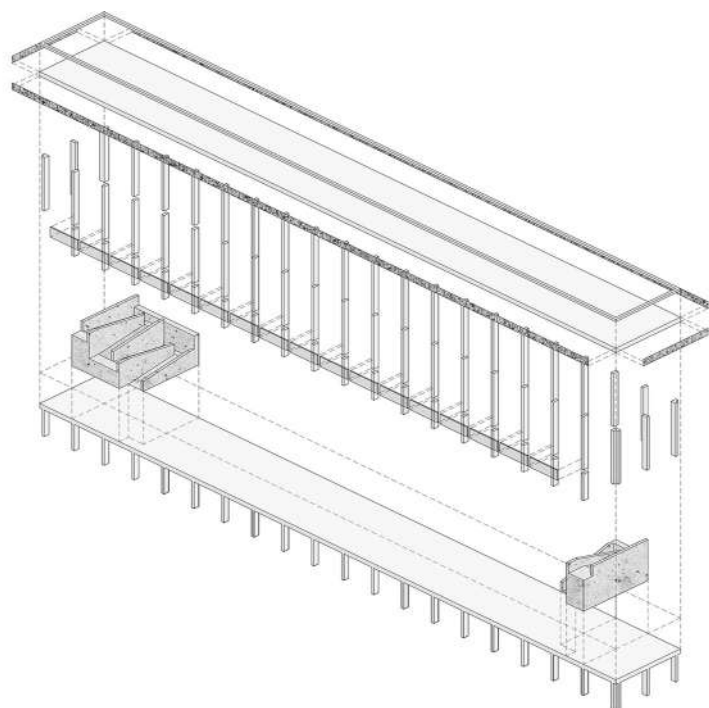


Figure 03.7: functioning of the structure of the new foyer.

in the foyer outline, thus being its natural continuous all around the large square. To the left of the West-East section (Figure 05.15), you can see the two ramps converging to the archaeological excavations marking the gate to the low and shady reception and the high and light foyer.

3.3 HINGE ELEMENT

As we understood, the new foyer is the main element within the whole project, as it functions as a hinge between all its elements (Figure 03.8). Let's go into detail about how it is built. Its structure is actually a canopy (Figure 03.7): a rectangular concrete slab resting on top of slim steel pillars three and a half meters far from each other. At the ed-

ges, we find the two entrance ramps. Looking closer at the elevation (Figure 05.12), we have this clear straight horizontal line continuing the volume of the old theatre towards the added one. The same happens underneath, with both the walls extending to the basement (Figure 03.9). Now the section and specifically a defined fragment (Figure 05.16). There are some significant construction details at this point (Figures 05.17-21). First, the roof, which is a simple concrete slab clad by panels and supported by a full-steel load-bearing structure. This grid can also allocate double-glazed windows. Second, the foundations, so how the pillar touches the ground and how it is possible to have more rooms underneath. Third and last, the edge of the slope, here this is made thicker with foam. This solution is adopted for instance at the Parc del Fòrum, in Barcelona. People seem to walk on the slabs without any protection, while the balustrade is actually built inside the slabs' thickness itself. Let's take a final look at this modular scheme making this rather classical space look prolonged (Figure 05.10).

In conclusion. Let's try to answer the research question. We can re-establish a cultural presence in Central Beirut through our same three fundamental assets. First, heritage. Dealing with built heritage is rising as a tangible hope where war and catastrophes have been happening and as a growing challenge for Sustainable Architecture. The project not only decides to preserve this asset, but gives it the meaning of a landmark. Public domain is reclaimed by Beirutis. Hence, public space should be intertwined with specific buildings which act as hive for collective functions. This type of public space is the perfect ground for casual flows to happen. They are expression of a contemporary lifestyle that does not contemplate anymore an elitarian fruition and production of art and culture.



Figure 03.8: rendered view of the foyer.



Figure 03.9: rendered view of the foyer.



Figure 03.10: rendered view of the foyer.

REFLECTION PAPER

04

4.1 RESEARCH AND DESIGN

Once the actual graduation project design is completed, it is useful to look back and reflect on the relationship between research and design, if the evolution of the one into the other was effective and profitable. There are two sections of this research, which were applied respectively in two aspects of the project. There is a factual research, accompanied by a substantial amount of data. In this case, this regarded the state of art of theatre and entertainment industry in Lebanon and the history and current conditions of the main element, the Grand Theatre. This first piece was displayed as a major part of the design brief: it made it possible to determine how many and which spaces were needed in the

project area and how to develop a building from the existing artifacts. The second part is instead more theoretical, relating to the cultural and social situation of the Lebanese nation and the contemporary global lifestyle. This second type leaves more room for interpretation and can therefore create divergences of views in the actual architectural design. For example, which restoration theory should be implemented on a building like the Grand Theatre, testimony of a glorious past in Beirut, but today reduced to a state of ruin? Or again, how to create a space where contemporary artistic and cultural manifestations can flourish? How is it possible to welcome the energies of this city?

In this sense, The Grand Theatre Quarter addresses what Complex Projects Gradua-



Figure 04.1: current appearance of a neighbouring street.

tion Studio intends to deal with: a project is not a mere aesthetic or functional fact, but it is the result of a much larger multitude of layers deriving from diverse inputs. For instance, there are urban conditions. Hence, the situation in Beirut - which has had no city centre for a quarter of a century - is really exemplary. There are then social conditions: think of how these people are struggling to express themselves and to integrate as one united people. In the context of Beirut, the political component is very relevant too: how to shelter from a tax system that harasses theatre and cultural activities in general? What virtuous examples can one look to in order not to be crushed by this unfavorable situation? Complex Projects Graduation Studio also intends to deal with buildings that are 'complex' in terms of function and size. The Grand Theatre Quarter suits this requisite: all these external features become concrete elements (flows, views, consequentality of- and relationships between spaces).

The theory of restoration and the case-studies relating to the expansion of the Grand Theatre are independent of the function and geographical context. It is all about positioning oneself within a line of thought or contemporary architectural current. Again, how can research help predict what will happen in this space, which today is nothing more than an urban void? Case-studies can help to a certain extent. Therefore, a method and comprehensive research of the more abstract and intangible social and cultural structure also comes into play.

4.2 FIELD RELEVANCE

Based on these assumptions, the graduation project assumes a wider social, professional, and scientific relevance. First of all, Beirut represents a paradigmatic case of a city whose urban and social fabric is the re-

sult of multiple catastrophic events. Not only the blast of August 2020, but also the previous Civil War. Situations like these can be transposed more generally into contexts superficially labeled as 'difficult', where there is an attempt to necessarily carry out a reconstruction and to return to a decent urban life. In a scenario of destruction and war, the main theme of this project - culture - takes on particular relevance. Culture has always been what has allowed cities and peoples to save themselves, not by forgetting the past, but by metabolising and assuming the awareness of what was in order to gain a strong future momentum. The Grand Theatre Quarter also assumes relevance as it is proposed as an almost pioneering case of an architectural complex capable of accommodating the contemporary cultural form. If until now theatres have been switched on only for a couple of hours a week, what form will they take in a present and future where each of us is eager and able to absorb art and culture twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week? Finally, dealing with the Grand Theatre is particularly relevant for the architectural profession, which will increasingly face restoration and reuse rather than a construction from scratch. Then, what does the identity of a historical artifact consist of? That is: what is essential to keep and adapt to modernity?

However, this path was not completely linear and problem-free. In particular, given the difficulty in traveling during this last period, it was not possible to test directly on the site what was being produced miles away. It was not a problem of finding appropriate sources, but rather of the possibility of perceiving first-hand the troubled situation in Beirut and its city centre. On the other hand, the profession of architect nowadays presents - and perhaps requires - the ability to capture and work with the 'spirit of a place' without actually experimenting it.

DRAWING SET

05

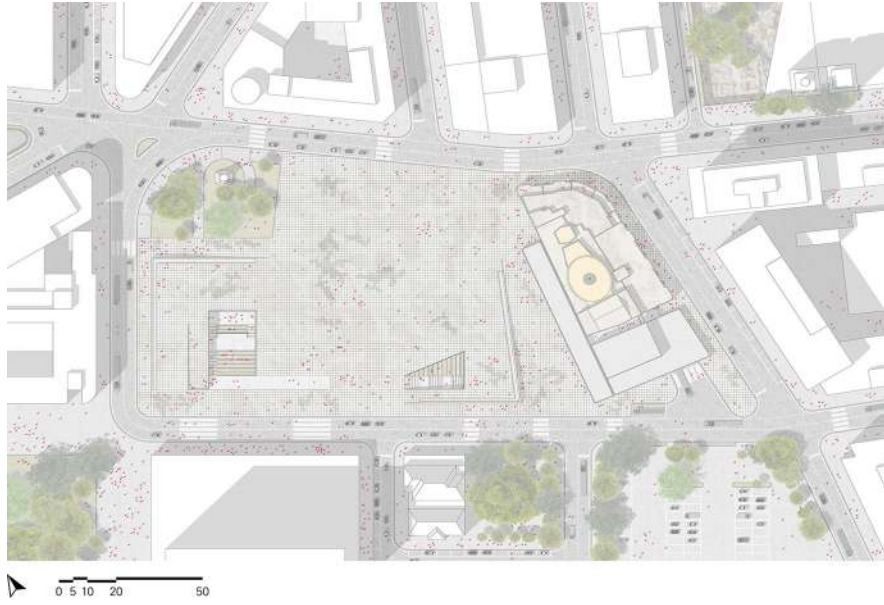


Figure 05.1: roof floor plan.

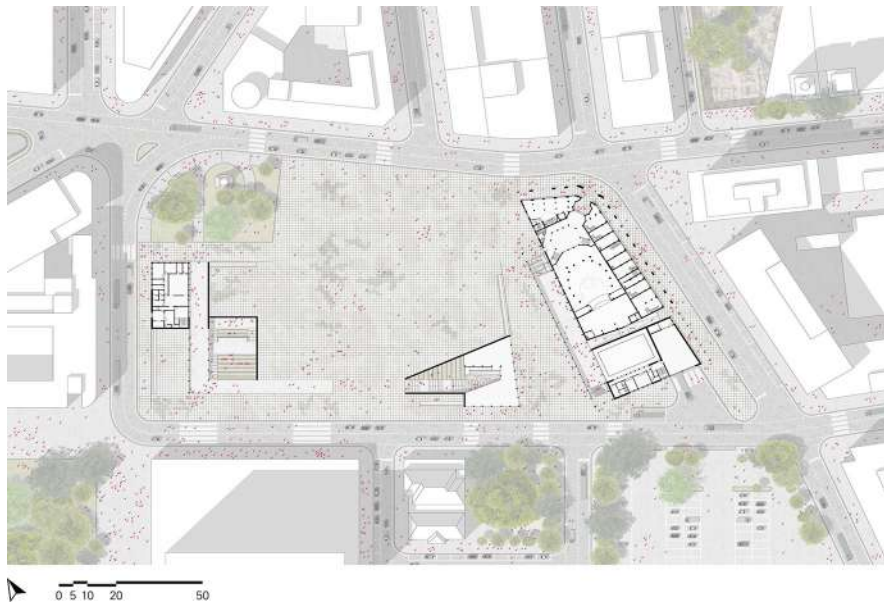


Figure 05.2: ground floor plan.



Figure 05.3: first underground floor plan and first underground floor plan.

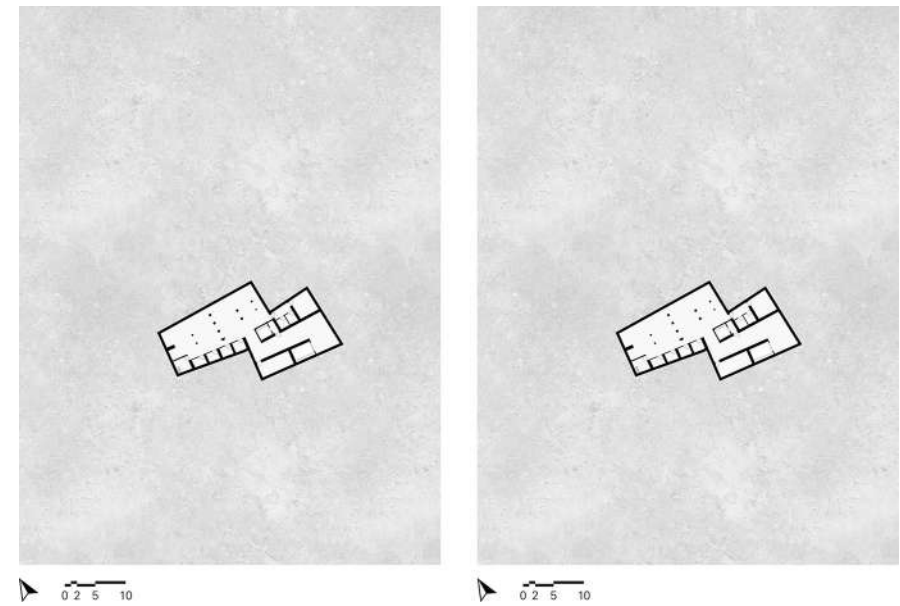


Figure 05.4: second underground floor plan and third underground floor plan.



Figure 05.5: first floor plan and second floor plan.

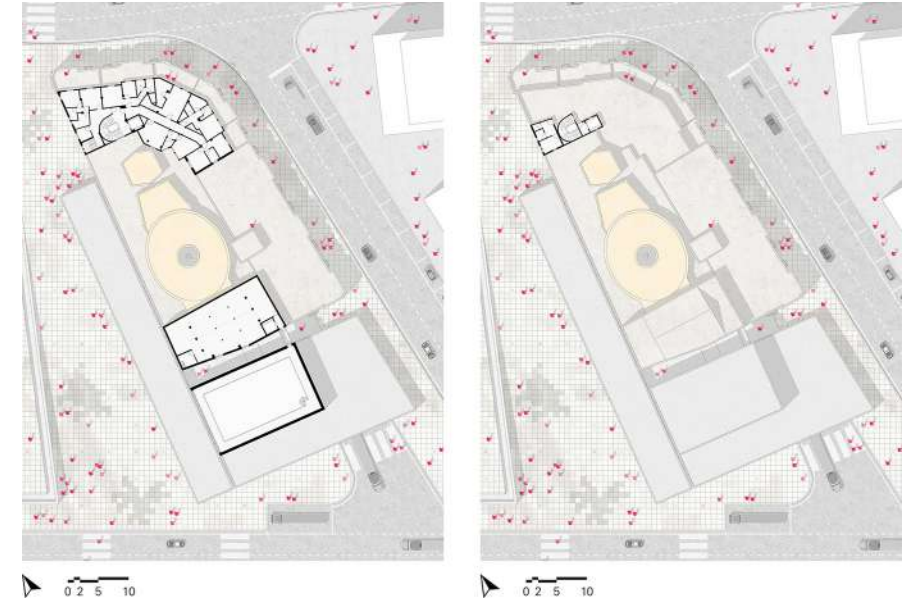


Figure 05.7: fifth floor plan and sixth floor plan.

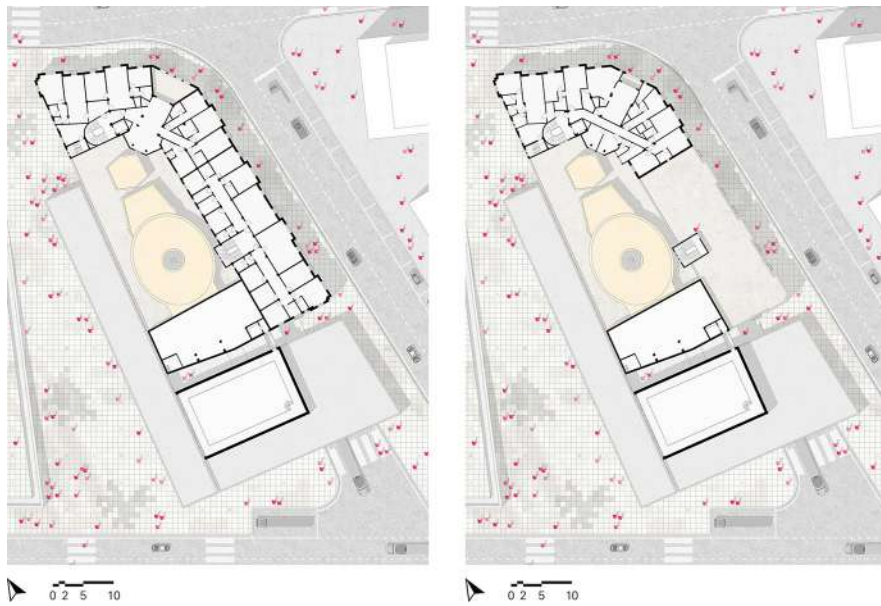


Figure 05.6: third floor plan and fourth floor plan.

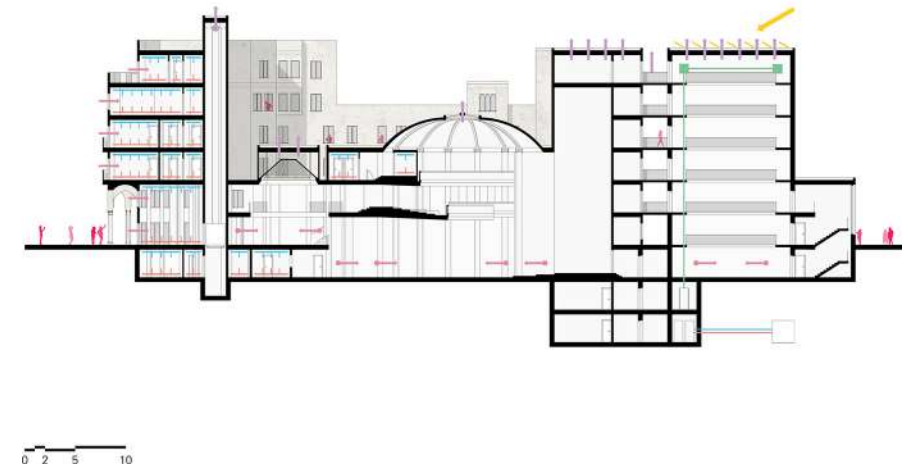


Figure 05.8: North-South section.

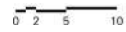
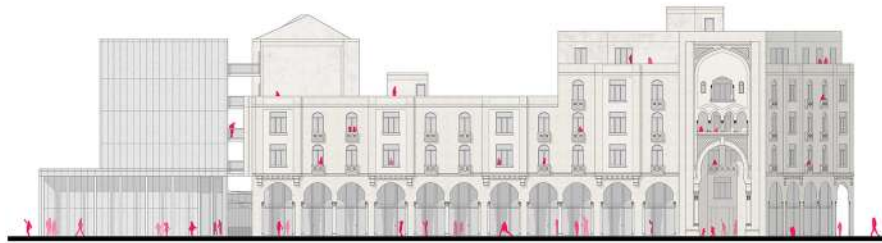


Figure 05.9: South-North section.

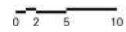
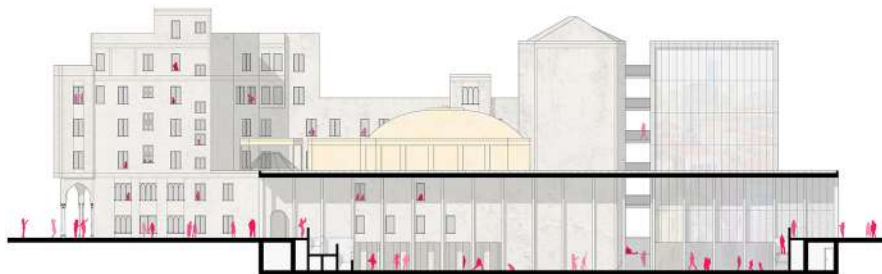


Figure 05.10: North-South section.

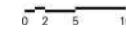
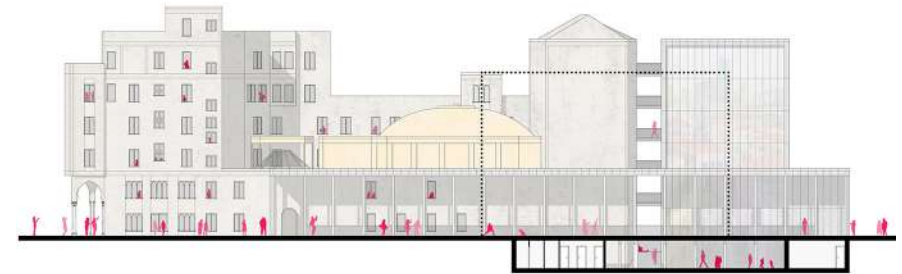


Figure 05.11: North-South section.

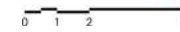


Figure 05.12: North-South section zoom-in.

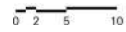
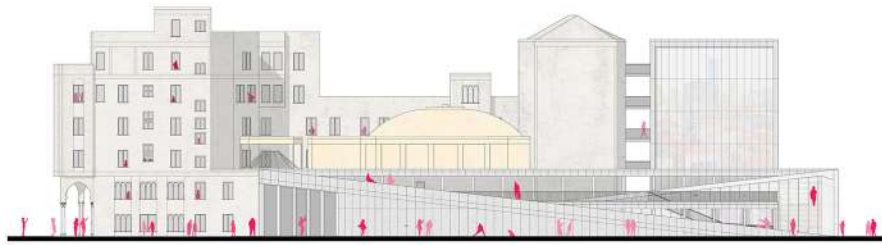


Figure 05.13: North-South section.

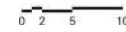
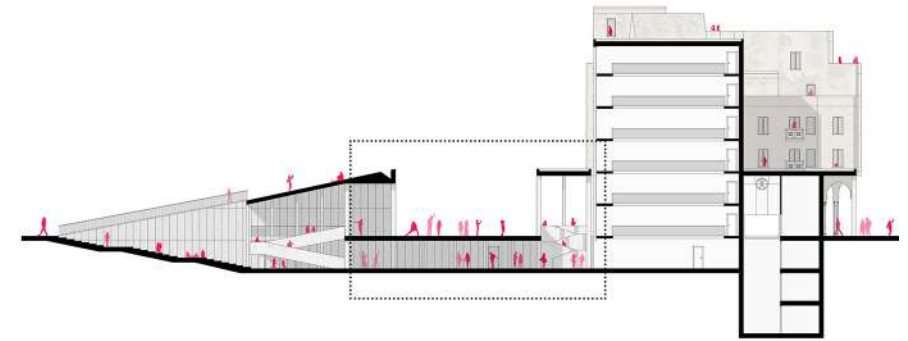


Figure 05.14: West-East section.

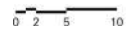
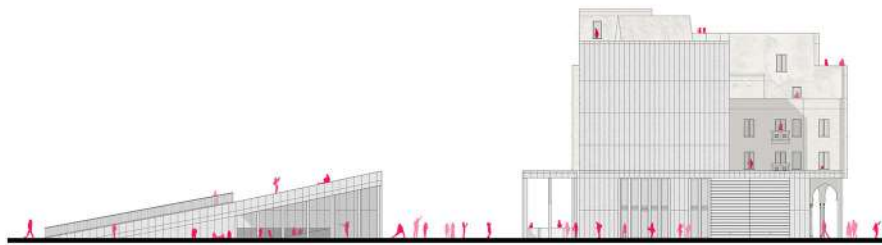


Figure 05.14: West-East section.

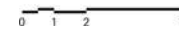
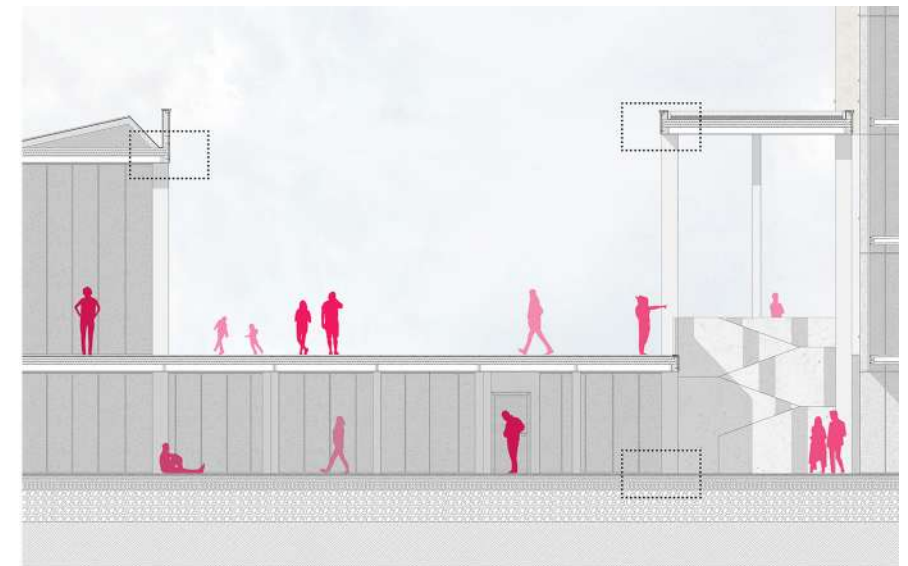


Figure 05.16: West-East section zoom-in.

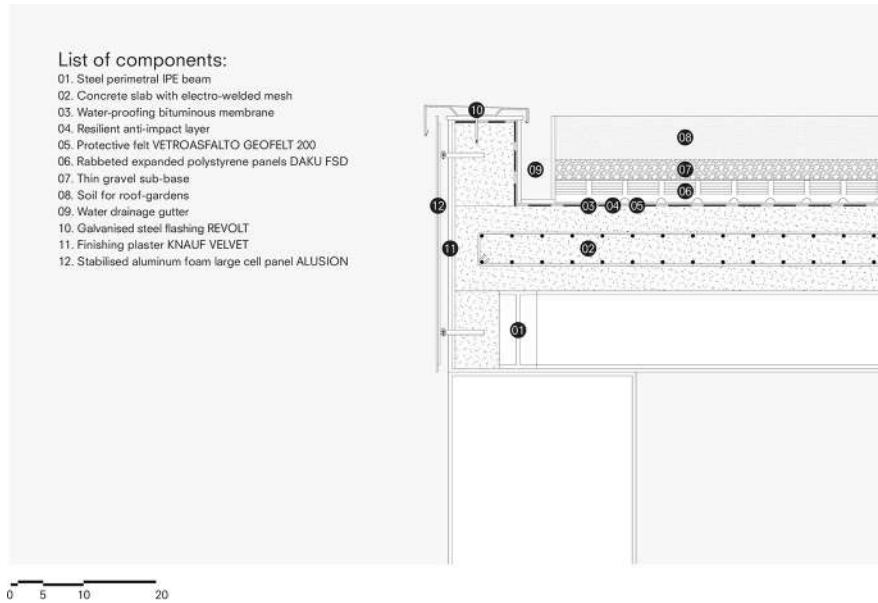


Figure 05.17: significant detail.

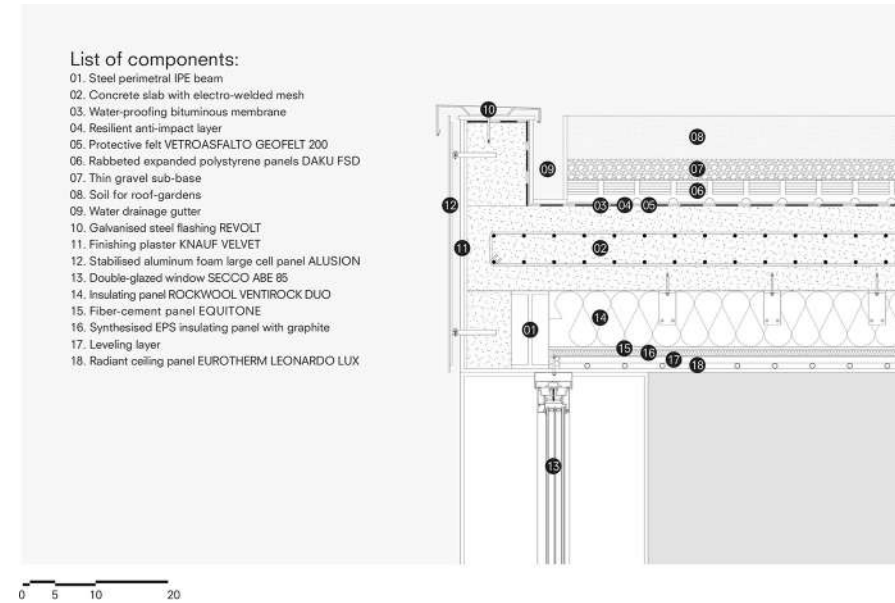


Figure 05.19: significant detail.

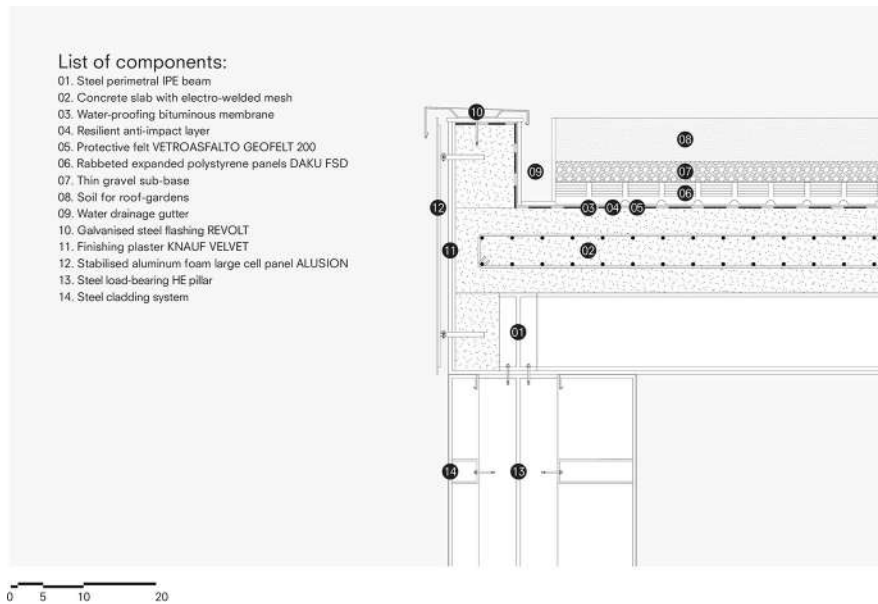


Figure 05.18: significant detail.

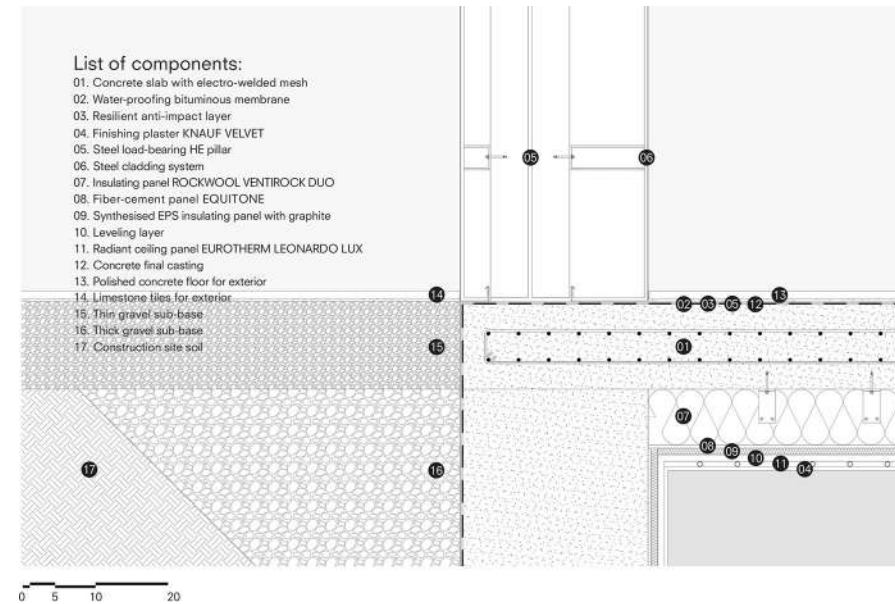


Figure 05.20: significant detail.

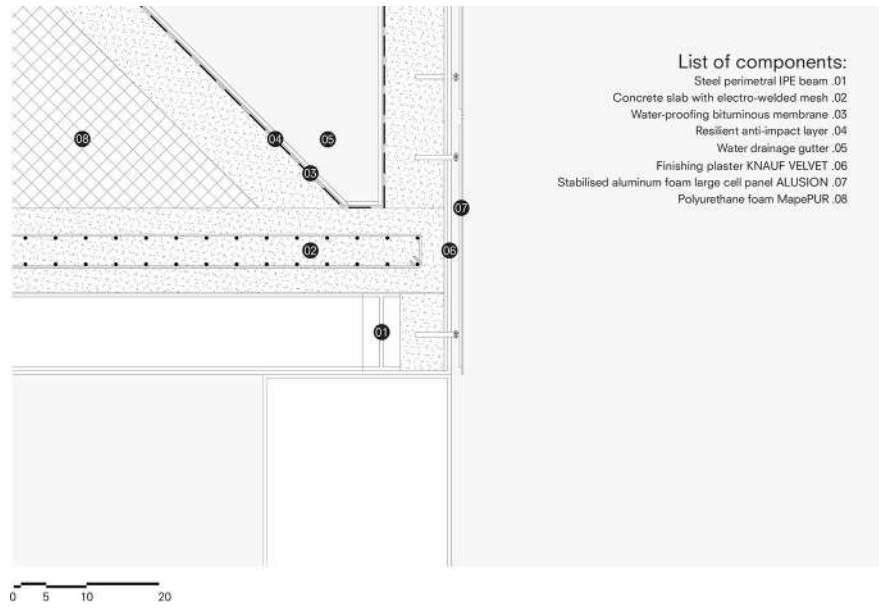


Figure 05.21: significant detail.



