

Electricité du Liban

A landmark from Beirut's 'golden age' of modern architecture

Beirut's Electricité du Liban (EDL) building, built in 1972, is the base of the state-owned electricity company's operations. One of its most striking features is its raised form on pre-stressed concrete columns, allowing for a flexible floor plan and an unobstructed view of the nearby Mediterranean from the street.



The Electricité du Liban (EDL) building is a formidable work of architecture, standing 14 storeys tall in the heart of Mar Mikhaël in Beirut, overlooking the sea and the coastal highway. The building, situated on Nahr Street, holds the administration offices and different divisions of the government's electricity company. Designed in 1965 by local architecture firm Centre d'Etudes Techniques et Architecturales (CETA) following an architecture competition, EDL bears to this day a trace of Beirut's 'golden age' for planning, architectural visions and local trajectories.

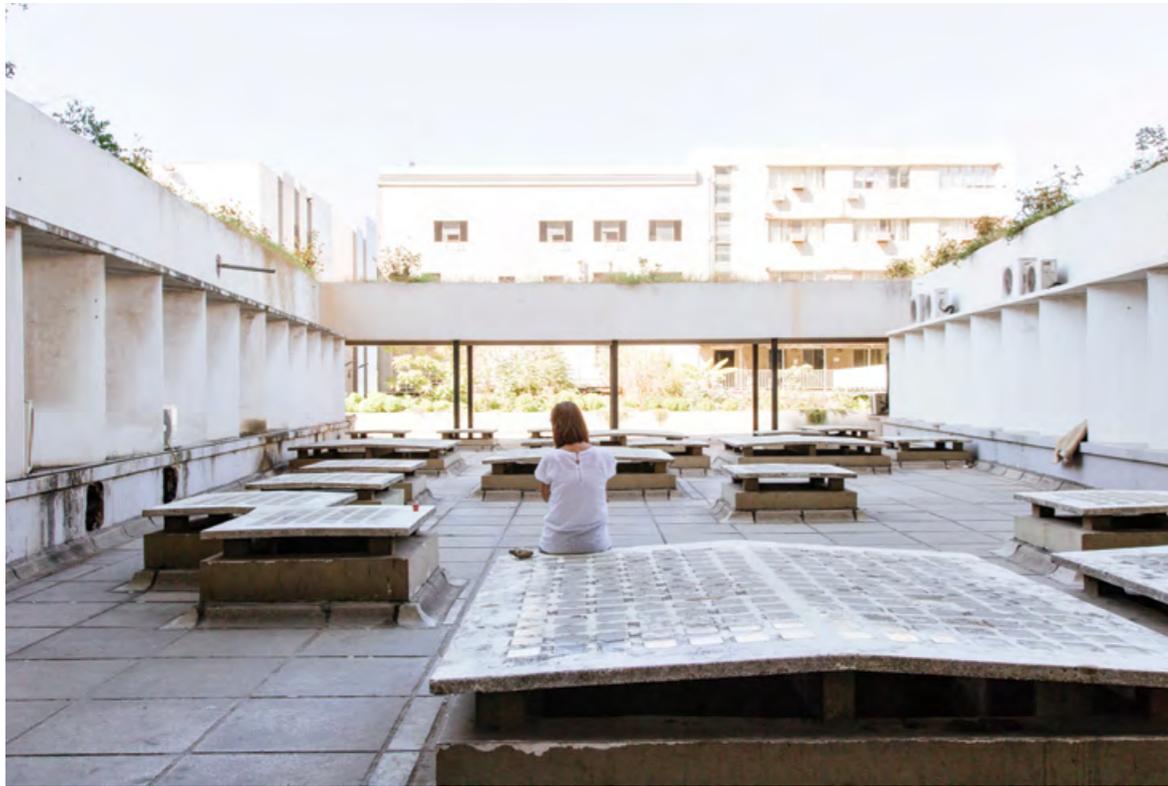
During the 1960s, a period of modernisation and reform under President Fouad Chehab, the Lebanese government initiated several architecture competitions for its public structures, actively engaging local architects. This period, according to sociologist Samir Khalaf, displayed a will by an upcoming generation of architects to be modern yet local. He has written that architects of the time 'displayed a healthy affinity for experimentation and inventiveness without any

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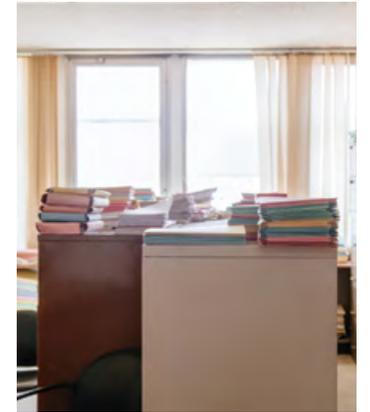
جورج عربيد

inflexible or rigid disregard for local traditions'.^A The design of EDL is one of the most prominent and standing testaments to this statement.

The competition, which was launched between 1964 and 1965 by the EDL company^B, was intended to establish a modern central building for its operation and growth. The competition brief advocated for a building that corresponded to and ameliorated its urban context, established green public spaces and reconnected the inner street fabric to the sea. It called for a design that not only organised the inner functioning of its different entities, but also provided an architectural achievement that would symbolise the modernity of Lebanon.^B Renowned architect Pierre Neema and his colleagues Jacques Aractingi, Joseph Nassar and Jean-Noël Conan, who made up CETA, designed the winning scheme. Neema, a graduate of the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, was a firm believer in the role of architects as humble and environmentally responsible agents.^C His impact on the local architecture scene was tremendous, not only through his architectural achievements, but also through his role as an academic and later as a member of the Higher Council of Urban Planning.

The winning proposal by Neema and his associates was ingenious – at the time an innovation in its design approach and connection to its surroundings. It created a modern image for the EDL company while simultaneously integrating a more local understanding of context, materials and aesthetics.

Since 1990, power outages in Beirut are commonplace, occurring daily for three hours between 6am and 6pm. Residents often jokingly observe that only a few letters of the sign on the building's façade bearing the company's name light up



01 EDL overlooks the Mar Mikhaël neighbourhood, including the distinctive Skyline residential tower designed by Bernard Khoury



Pierre Neema's design of EDL was the winning proposal of an architecture competition launched by the EDL company a few months after its founding in 1964. Other contenders in the contest, for which Gio Ponti was part of the jury, included famed Lebanese architect Pierre El Khoury



The entry's intricate drawings convey an ambition for subtlety and strength, and a socially and environmentally conscious structure that caters to its end users and the city at large.

The architects envisaged a simple hovering volume that assembled the different programmes of the growing electricity company vertically within a modular system. It detaches from the ground plane, to create an exposed lower floor for end-user services that leads to an outdoor urban piazza. The piazza connects upwards to Nahr Street by stairs.

According to George Arbid, director of the Arab Centre for Architecture in Beirut, this winning scheme was specifically favoured because of the way it 'engaged public space and maintained a strong visual connection to the sea'. This was achieved by lifting the entire building on large-span pilotis – a strategy often employed by Le Corbusier, which he proposed in his 'Five Points for a New Architecture' to free the ground level for outdoor public use. The building involved a sustainable discourse, integrating passive design strategies with efficient construction methods and locally manufactured materials.^D Its orientation maximised sun exposure on its northern side, while allowing a view to the city on its southern side. This southern façade is comprised of four main assemblies of prefabricated sun shaders that start in a playful geometric arrangement on the first lifted level to become standardised on the upper floors. Between this first level and the upper repetitive floor plates, the architects created a garden terrace as an outdoor private space for employees.

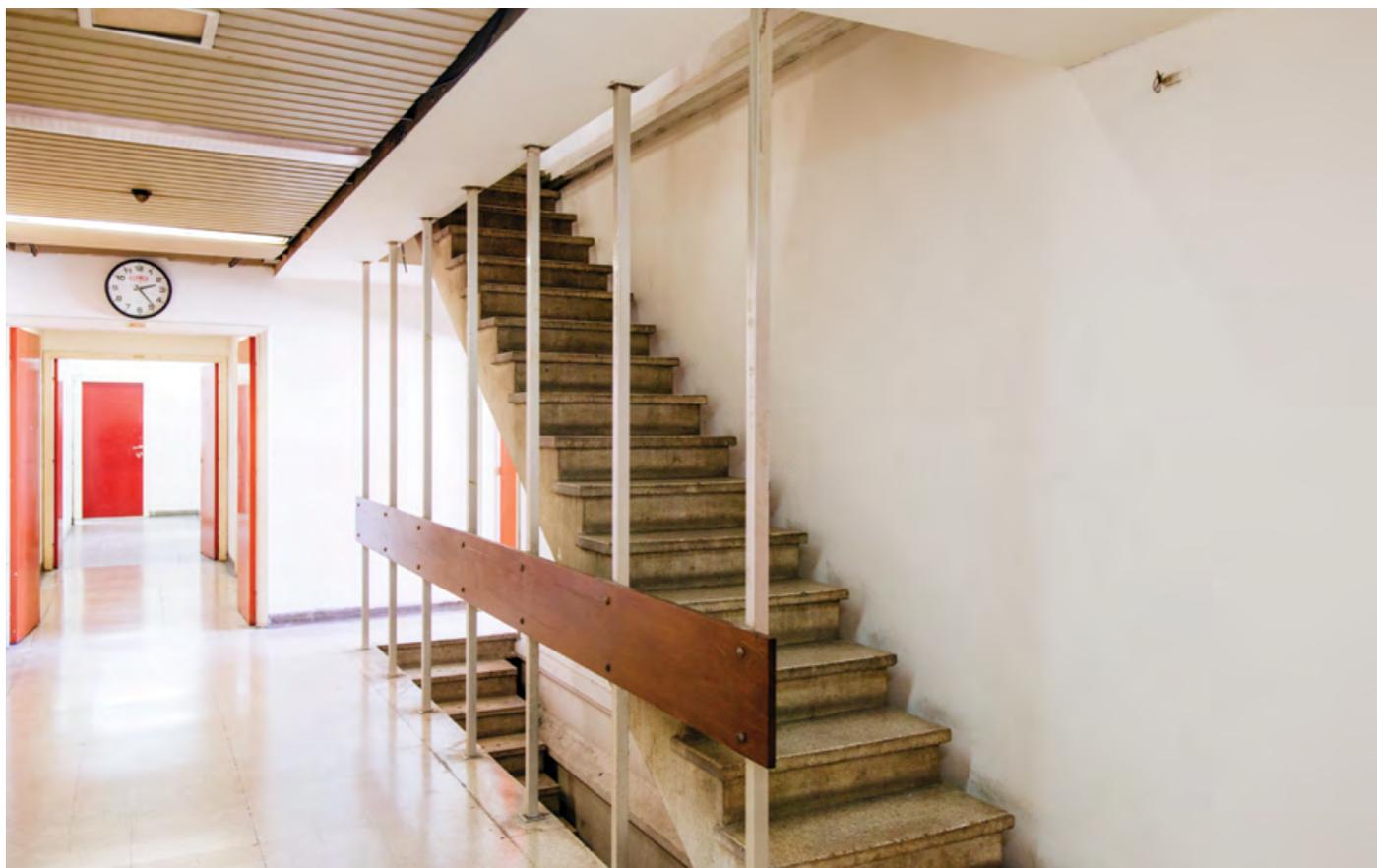
One can consider EDL as an attempt to rethink the relation between public service buildings and the local community and city at large. In their design, CETA carried this out by forming an active

02 A staircase leads up from the exposed basement level to the main entrance, accessible through the gate of a bright yellow fence – added long after the building was completed to cordon it off from the surrounding street



03 Potted plants are found throughout EDL's interior – including species commonly found in Beirut homes such as inch plants and coleus







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- A 'Heart of Beirut, Reclaiming the Bourj' by Samir Khalaf. Published in 2006
- B 'Electricité du Liban, Statistiques et Resultats Techniques'. Report by Electricité du Liban. Published in 1969
- C 'Parcours d'un Architecte' by Pierre Neema. Published in 2014
- D 'Heritage of Urban and Architectural Modernities in the Arab World'. Published by UNESCO World Heritage and Arab Centre for Architecture in 2015

public space in the heart of the building, smoothly connecting to the adjacent urban fabric, the coastal highway and the sea ahead. By proposing the piazza, the architects allowed an institution like EDL to promote its public role. Unfortunately, this relation between building, piazza and city is currently compromised due to security regulations. Instead this creates an island disconnected from its context, according to architect and urbanist Sandra Rishani. For Rishani, the potential in this space can be reinstated if boundaries are reconsidered, stitching 'the detailed beautiful object back into the city'.

To this day, EDL has a strong presence in its neighbourhood. In an era when architects played a decisive role in the building of local public institutions, the various competitions and commissioned projects enabled a rich modern architectural heritage in Lebanon. Today, it's essential that a contemporary vision for local architecture is again championed by authorities, engaging the current generation of architects and urban thinkers in the design of public institutions.

According to urban planner and American University of Beirut professor Mona Fawaz, one shouldn't look however 'at this era with nostalgia and project the future through a reminiscing of what that fantastic past may have been. Yet there is something to be learned from the ability for architecture to project a sense of the collective, to become the embodiment of some kind of a "we", a shared space around which people can coalesce to affirm a collective identity'. The EDL building, and the legacy of Neema, Aractingi, Nassar and Conan, remain a solid reminder of that, projecting a hope for a possible future of the built environment.



04 The basement, where the public settle their electricity bills, is entered through an outdoor urban piazza