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INTRODUCTION

Beirut has a population of about 300,000; It is the capital and center of the most educated, with the highest standard of living and highest literacy of all the Arab Countries in the Near East. It is the location of the American University, the oldest institution of its kind in the locality.

It is natural that all surrounding states should look up to Beirut as an intellectual leader. This is the theory- what it should be, but what are the facts?

For a city of 300,000 we have one "Bibliotheque National" and a few small libraries attached to Universities - containing mostly foreign books. There are no serious intellectual clubs, there are no public lecture halls. Where is the "Arab Awakening"? The Renaissance?

Why does one call himself an Arab? Is it because it says so on the Identity card? Or because of the mere accident that one is born to Arab Parents. No - you can lose your carte d'Identité, your parents may have died when you were too young to remember. No, definitely No, it is not that that makes you an Arab, a real Arab. It is the pride for your nation, a pride for its traditions, its history, a love for its literature. When you read a famous poem you feel you are part of it. That it is your own poem, a poem of your people an Arab poem. This is what makes you an Arab.

Beirut is the meeting center between the Orient and European culture. We have learnt enough English Literature, we know American History by heart, we can count the rivers of France on our fingers. We have learnt enough about and from them, enough of the bad sides, at least. It is time we should turn to our own.

We are fighting for our independence. We want to take the reins in our hands. Alright we will get it, and then what? Shall we relapse into barbarism? shall we go back to our history of Europe? or shall we progress, open public libraries, give lectures on Arab

CHOICE OF PROBLEM

I have often noticed how unharmonious, how out of place a modern simply functional house looks among a group of stately old style arab buildings. This is especially noticeable in Damascus, some dirty square apartment house next to the slender minaret of some mosque. It is a pity.

We have in these countries a beautiful school or "Saracenic" architecture. Why should it be necessary to throw it overboard and adopt a modern architecture which does not harmonize with the surrounding?

I do not believe in importing modern architecture in and using it unconditionally, I believe we should take the local architecture and make it suit the new conditions - to modernize it.

There are many pitiful attempts to combine the two architectures, nearly every house in Beirut has the inevitable and ridiculous three arched-windows above the doors. All bathrooms have the rosette windows. This is not a solution, this is sacrilege.

Before the war an appreciable amount of our National Budget was (^{SUS} sustained) by foreign tourists. Thus if it is only the pecuniary side of things that interests us we should encourage the setting up of "local color" and not showing the tourists a repetition of something they have at home.

I believe that a new school of "Modern arabic architecture" should be worked out by some gifted architect or group of architects. This new style, if well initiated and somewhat standardized, will, I am sure, prove fascinating enough to be copied, or to inspire other achievements.

If this can ever be accomplished it would help straighten out the dismal architectural chaos of our Near-Eastern cities.

I chose the design of the "Arabic Cultural Center" as it would give me a chance to try to find one solution to the above

problem. It is a difficult problem; it is like making ^{to} opposites meet. Arabic architecture consists of multitudes of curved arches, spiralled columns, slender minarets, extreme use of surface decoration, often causing restlessness from its exaggeration. Vaults with domes are used for roofing. In Modern Architecture we have the exact opposite. There is great simplicity of design. The general layout is rectangular and low. The beauty of the building is achieved by good balancing of the components of the building and not by surface decoration, all roofs are flat; any towers that may occur are placed only to break the flatness of the building by vertical lines, and are usually comparatively short and thick.

Brief History of Saracenic Architecture

The Saracenic or Arab Architecture starts with the advent of the Mohammedan Religion in 622 A.D., and, as in most ancient styles, religion has a dominating influence over its development.

The prohibition of the use in decoration and sculpture human and animal forms led to the use of intricate geometrical surface decoration known as "arabesques," largely derived from Byzantine art.

As Mohammedans were fatalists - to whom the present was everything, the buildings were not of a permanent character. They were often satisfied with poor and flimsy material, such as plaster, provided it had ample surface decorations.

Mosques, tombs, and dwelling houses are the chief buildings. Mosques, as Egyptian temples are of greater architectural importance internally than externally. The disposition of the essential parts of the mosque is governed by ritual requirement.

Interiors of early mosques are characterized by forests of columns supporting arches under flat low roofs. Richly decorated walls and domes appeared afterwards.

The pointed arch, which came from its original home in Assyria, was used both externally and internally as a symbol of the faith. Horse shoe, multifoil and ogive arches were abundant.

The characteristic Dome is formed by revolving the pointed arch about a vertical axis. Pear shaped domes were in great demand and together with minarets characterized the exteriors.

Stalactite vaulting was substituted for the Byzantine pendentive, and was a device to bring a square plan to a circular base to carry a dome. It consisted of rows of upright pointed niches rising in ranges one above the other.

Stalactite vaulting was probably derived from Persia as shown from the Tomb of Zebeide, Baghdad. It was very popular and afterwards developed and used as decoration, as in bracketing of minaret galleries, niches, the capitals of columns and the crowning of cornices of walls.

A great variation in the style is noticeable due to local conditions, as well as due to different caliphs, on who's knowledge and artistic sense much depended.

The climatic conditions, a prevailing warm climate, have encouraged the use of sheltering archades and small doorways and windows.

Charateristics of Moslem Architecture:

The mosque consisted of a large rectangular enclosure with the formation in the middle for ablution and surrounded by a roofed arcade for protection from the sun. The side toward Mecca formed the mosque proper containing the mihrab, kibleh and the Mimbar.

The dwelling house, as the mosque, consisted of rooms surrounding an open, arcaded court. All rooms opened on this court and windows to the outside were scarce especially in the lower storey.

In arcades the arches rested on columns or piers, the voussoirs were often banded and sometimes of interlocking pattern. (as in the Mosque of Kait-Bey; Cairo) The columns were mostly ready-made taken from old Roman Byzantine buildings and were often of different sizes producing a haphazard effect.

Walls were constructed of local material and covered with minute surface decorations in plaster precious stones and glazed tiles. Horizontal banding of walls is often used.

Molding was little used except the plain cavette and torus. Around doors the "billet" form was used.

The prohibition of copying natural objects forced the use of geometric designs. These were treated with gorgeous coloring of red,

white, blue, silver and gold, thus producing a most brilliant fatted surface or carpet-like effect called "arabesque"

Memoronic ornament or inscriptions from the Koran, was worked into decorative panels, the lettering being in the Kufic or in the Italic style.

Stalactite ornament, derived from the vaulting was used in many occasions. All these ornaments were often superimposed to form the intricacy of detail associated with Saracenic ornament.

The minarets are usually square at the bottom changing to polygonal or circular toward the top, marked by projected balconies with pierced balustrading, and supported by corbelled or stalactite brackets.

Windows are usually small and often grouped together, being scarce in the lower stories, while overhanging and plentiful in the upper stories. Some windows are filled with elaborate lacery of marble and plaster of geometric designs and filled with colored glass. In the upper stories they were inclosed in elaborate wooden lattices or Mushrabeyehs.

Doors have intricate surface decoration of carved wood and are surmounted by stalactite heads.

Roofs were either flat with decorated wooden ceiling or consisting of pointed, oval or bulbous (sekiom spherical) vaulting. They were edged with a solid pierced parapet.

EXPLANATION AND DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

Location

It has been suggested that a club of Arab History and Literature be placed in the American University of Beirut. There are points for and against it.

For

1. The American University represents undisputably the center of culture in the Near East. It is well known to all surrounding countries.
2. Its Campus is the most beautiful spot of all Beirut. It has a marvelous view over the sea and toward the mountains.
3. The contact between students and professors of the University with Literary men from the outside world would benefit both parties immensely.

Against

1. If ever built the cultural center would be subsidized by the government or possibly by private funds, and in either case there would be an objection of placing the building on property belonging to the A.U.B.
2. The American University would probably, due to its non-partisan policy not agree to have a building on its territory that does not belong to it.
3. If it is placed outside, persons would feel free to visit it at all times
4. Outside it would have a more unprejudiced position. And would disturb less the general life of the University.
5. The University would prefer not to have persons having nothing to do with living on the Campus.

Considering all these arguments I think the latter solution, or placing the Cultural center outside as more favorable.

A good location for it would be in Ras Beirut to the West of

the A.U.B. or at the other end of the city next to the Museum.

The plot of land should be at least 70 x 70 meters thus giving a wide open belt around the building and permitting a good viewing distance from all sides. The slope of ground is assumed arbitrary to be toward the north.

As the actual location of the building is not known the plan is made to fulfill assumed conditions, but it can just as easily be turned around.

The best view is assumed to the north east on which the terraces of the Lounge and Bar-cafeteria. ^{open} The entrance to the building is to the south.

General Scheme of the Plan

The "Cultural Center" is to be used by two groups of people.

1) The club Members that come to the library, lounge etc. And 2) The Visitors who come to see an exhibition or hear a lecture in the Auditorium. Thus the building has two distinct entrances. One to the Auditorium and Exhibition hall, forming with the bathrooms, cigarette stand, ticket office and cloak room a separate unit.

The rest of the building served by another entrance is more or less isolated to prevent as much as possible the visitors from wandering about aimlessly and causing disturbances.

A free space of 5 meters is left in front. This may be used by an orchestra or may be filled with water plants.

The walls as well as the ceiling of the Hall is covered by stalactite - type decorations consisting of small protruding spheres one above the other. These spheres become smaller the higher they are and terminate in a large oval in the middle of the ceiling. The monotony of repetition is broken by narrow horizontal bands and much wider vertical plain portions. All corners are to be rounded and cancelled in decorations.

Detailed Explanation

FIRST FLOOR

I. Lobby, Auditorium and Stage. , 16

The entrance to the lobby consists of four 18 x 40 steps leading through a recessed doorway. The entrance is in the form of two flat pointed arches devoid of any decoration on the outside, but inlaid on the inner under surface with decorative blue glazed tiles, lighted indirectly at night to show the design and produce a pleasing bluish glow to the whole arch.

The entrance door is to be wrought iron and glass. The lobby is relatively small considering that most of the guests to a lecture would either procure tickets before hand or be invited, it would not be necessary to provide much waiting space. For the same reason only one small ticket office is provided.

There are 3 W.C. and 4 urinals for men and 3 W.C. seats for ladies. The proportion of ladies coming to the club is considered to be small. To the left is a large cloak room and to the right a small cigarette and candy shop.

The Auditorium below seats 400 persons, each chair occupying a space of 60 90 cms. Seats are to be placed staggered by 20 cms. The slope of the floor so as to provide a good view is 1:14; this causes a raise of 20cms. every three chairs.

A free space of 5 meters is left in front, this may be used by an orchestra or may be filled with extra chairs.

The walls as well as the ceiling of the hall is covered by stalactite - type decorations consisting of small protruding arches one above the other. These arches become smaller the higher they are and terminate in a large oval in the middle of the ceiling. The monotony of repetition is broken by narrow horizontal bands and much wider vertical plain portions. All corners are to be rounded and concealed in decorations.

Lighting is to be achieved from below, giving an interesting play of shadows due to the arches of the decoration. Lighting should be colored.

The stage is raised 80 cms. above the floor level and is closed by an ordinary laterally-moving curtains. Communications with the hall is provided by two narrow doors, concealed on the outside by the surface decoration. As elaborate plays will probably not be given not much provision has been made for this purpose.

II. Exhibition & Banquet Halls:

The entrance to the exhibition hall is from two sides permitting an easy flow of sight-seers. A large room is provided for the storage of materials, such as supports for paintings etc.

The exhibition hall is connected to the banquet hall by a large glass partition which can be opened completely so as to permit the use of both halls for either purpose. An exit is also provided from the banquet hall to the bar and to the open court. The banquet hall can also be used as a discussion room.

III. Second Entrance and Management:

The entrance to the club proper is through a long, narrow and high corridor leading to an Vestibule enclosed on two sides by glass doors. The entrance is made narrow especially to give the visitor an idea of seclusion from the noisy outside world. The entrance opens to the inner court, the exhibition hall and through a corridor to the Library. The portion of the building contains the door keeper's den, the librarian's room and the management.

IV Library and Lounge

The Library is divided into two parts one the reading room, which contains a corner fire place and a decorative built-in seat. The book stands are separated from the rest by a fire-proof wall with a window for the librarian. The stands are made 220 cms high and contain seven shelves on each side. Taking an average of 25 books /m we have

a capacity of 8,750 books, with a maximum possible of 10,000

The Lounge is one of the most attractive corners of the building. It is made especially in a narrow and winding shape so that several groups who can be discussing or reading feel as much isolated and from the other groups. The semi-circular portion contains an open fire place in the middle in the room of a brass "mangal", the chimney being concealed in a decorative double arch. The ceiling is made in the form of vaults to give more of an impression of a living room in an old-style Arab place.

V. Bar, Kitchinet, Etc.

The Bar of Cafeteria is meant for the use of club members only and not for the general public, that is why it is placed away from the entrance. It is designed to serve refreshment as well as light repasts. Attached to it is a large verandah with an archade to which a covering may be attached.

The Kitchinet, which has a separate entrance is small as it is not expected that much cooking would be done in it. It would serve only for heating and serving.

The rest of the rooms on the lower floor consist of 4 offices of professors or research workers, a telephone room, two W.C.s and an ablution room. The latter was considered necessary as most of the visitors to the club would be Moslems.

Vl.

The inner court is 16 x 16 meters with a 2.40 m. covered walk all around and a garden in the center. The covering consists of an archade with a roof which is intermittently pierced by groups of openings containing green glass bottle-like tiles (as used for the ceiling in the National Museum)

The fountain is 5.20 m in diameter and ³⁰80 cms. deep. The side wall is made of polished basalt or black artificial stone in the form of a spiral. The center is also black, while the bottom is inlayed with

SECOND FLOOR

VII. Lobby and Balcony.

The Lobby upstairs is large and contains two w.c.s and the projection room. The w.c. for men has two seats and 2 urinals, and the ladies two seats.

The balcony has the same seats and below, 180 in number making a total of 580 seats.

VI VIII. Living Quarter

10 rooms are provided for guests. Each room containing a closet and wash basin. 1 room is for the janitor. Two bathrooms and an extra W.C. are ample to provide for everybody. A small Lounge with two verandas is provided for the benefit of the guests.

LX. General Explanation

Lighting is to be achieved in all the rooms by indirect lighting consisting of concealed fluorescent tubes around the room just above the window. The fountain and garden in general is to be flood lighted.

The building material for the building may be either ashlar with inconspicuous joints or tyralean plaster. The heights of the floors varying from the 4.00 m. upstairs to the 10.00 of the Auditorium gives a very advantageous composition to the perspective.

CONCLUSION

The success of the project can be only judged if the building is everconstructed. The only drawback that I have is that I don't have time to develop the plans to the minute detail.

Andrew J. Rubinsky

May 25, 1945

American University of Beirut

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andrew J. Rubinsky', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

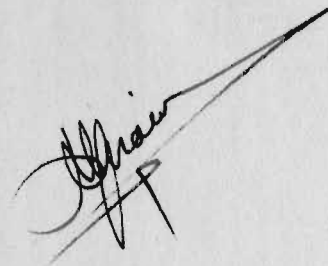
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A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Andrew J. Rubinsky', written in a cursive style. The signature is positioned below the typed name and date.

