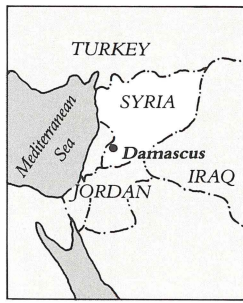
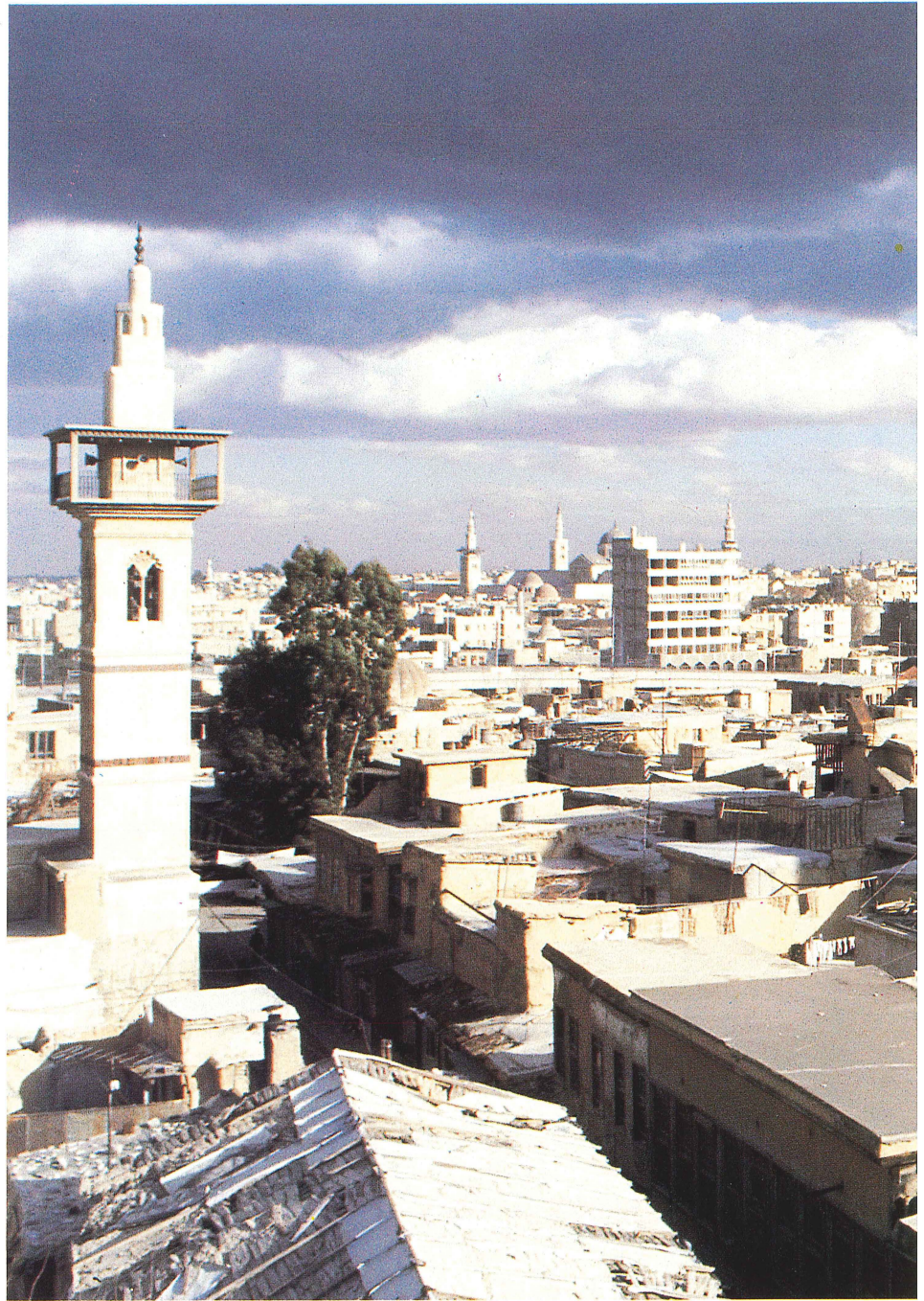


French Cultural Centre, Damascus



Project Data

Client: Ministry of Exterior
Relations of France
Architect: Jose Oubrierie, with
Kirkor Kalayciyan
Engineer: J.J. Couvert
Contractor: A. Sayegh,
Damascus
Date of Conception: 1981
Completion: 1986
Surface: 2,450 square metres
Cost: 18 million French Francs



The site of the French Cultural Centre is located in a sector undergoing urban renewal, the particular constraints of which dictated the building's shape. It is contiguous with the buildings of 5 and 6 storeys on either side. The main facade on the south opens onto a narrow street, whereas the north facade faces a small square.

A variety of activities were included in the programme: reception hall, exhibition area, a cinema with seating for 200 persons, library, video and record librar-

ies, classrooms, cafeteria, administrative offices and utility rooms. The design solution, which provides for a rather inward-looking building, was determined in part by the surrounding urban environment. Because of this introverted character, the architects introduced a kind of interior public square inside of and at the scale of the building itself. Creation of such a space accounts for the trelliswork on the south facade, which filters the natural light. The cinema theatre, located on the first floor and occupying a volume of space between the interior court and the western wall of the building (and

*Photographs and plans
courtesy of the
architects.*



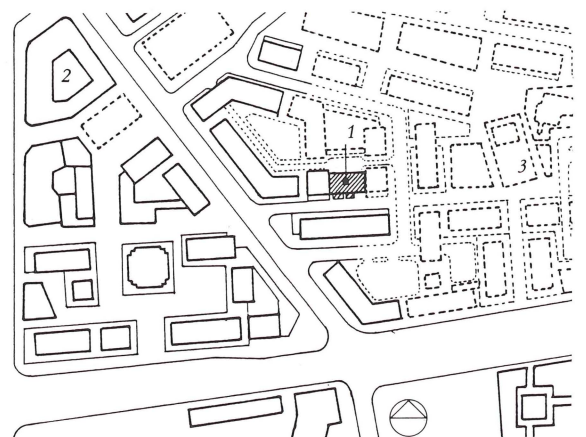
running vertically through several levels), can be isolated from other areas of the centre, and hence used outside of normal office hours. Moreover, the ground level is left available beneath the cinema, adjacent to the reception hall and fountain, for putting up exhibitions. The library has been placed above these spaces.

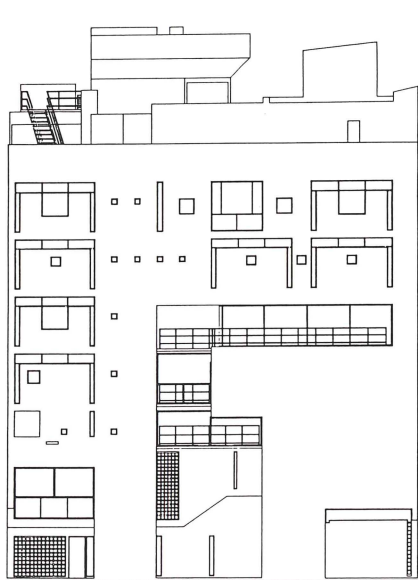
Stairs overlook the central open space from the east, and include landings with balconies from which to view the interior. Both the cinema and the library are linked to these landings by bridges along the north and south facades. Between the stairwell and the party wall on

Above: North facade of the cultural centre facing onto a small square and bordered by ancient traditional housing — destined for demolition.

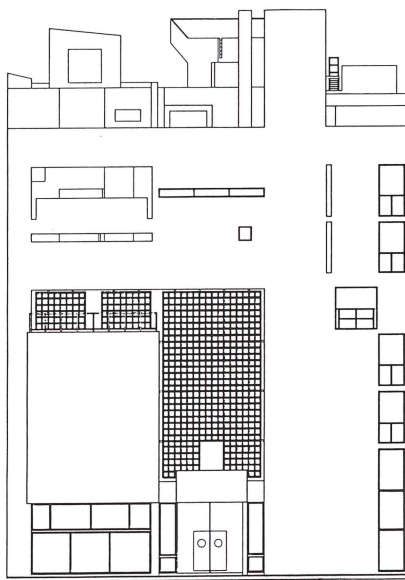
Right: Site plan of the French Cultural Centre (1) in the Bahsa neighbourhood, showing the urban renewal area (3) and the Damascus City Hall (2).

the east, are to be found the offices and activity rooms; the two upper floors are occupied primarily by classrooms. Exterior steps on the roof terrace provide an amphitheatre from which to enjoy magnificent views of Damascus, a fitting climax to the “architectural promenade” that begins at the ground-level entrance.





North elevation.



South elevation.

0 1 5m.

Above, left: North facade of the new Centre, which gives onto the urban renewal zone of old Damascus. The cinema theatre is behind the blank wall to the right, inner court at the centre, and offices to the left.

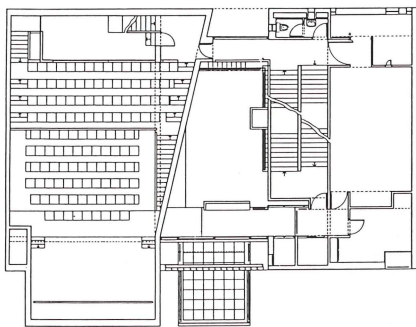
Above: Detail of the south facade, with upper-level terraces and observation deck.

Above, right: Dramatic panoramic views of the city are to be enjoyed from the upper-level terraces.

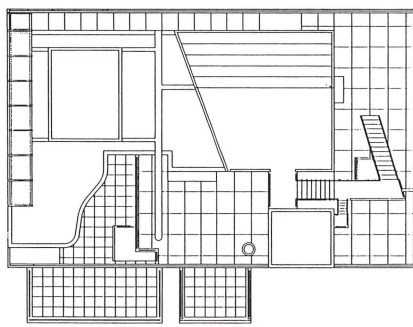
Above, far right: Damascus skyline and a portion of the Centre's roofline and terraces.

Right: The volume of the building has been cut into deeply on the south facade to create this court-terrace and to provide light to the activity rooms on these upper levels.

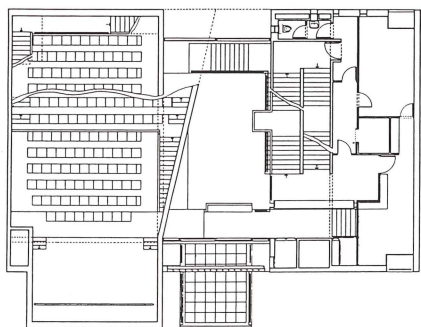




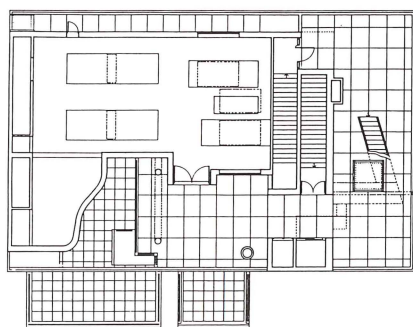
Third level plan.



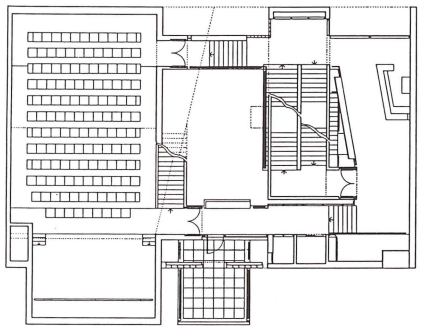
Roof terrace plan.



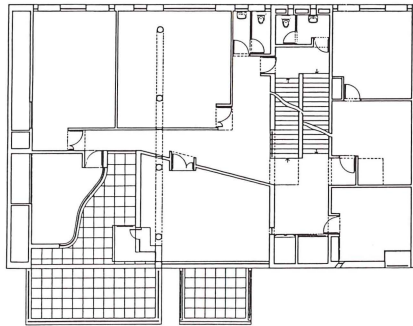
Second level plan.



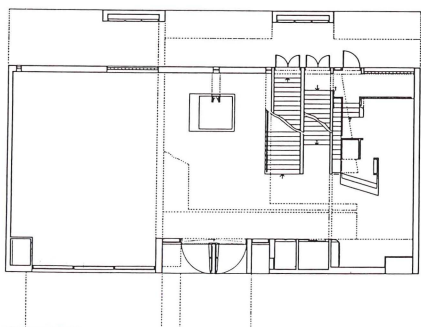
Seventh level plan.



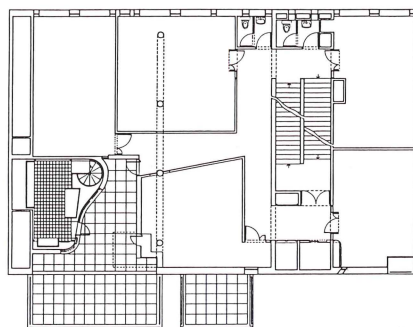
First level plan.



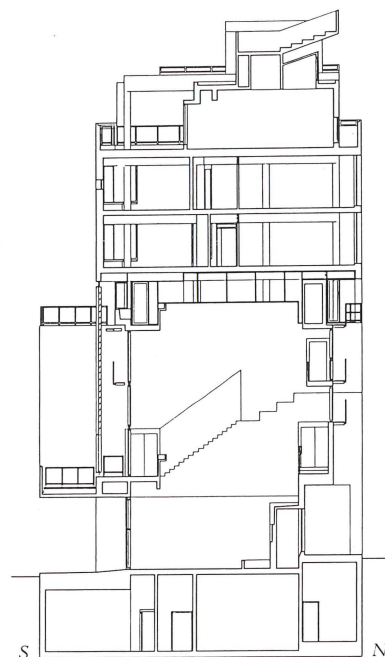
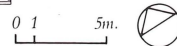
Sixth level plan.



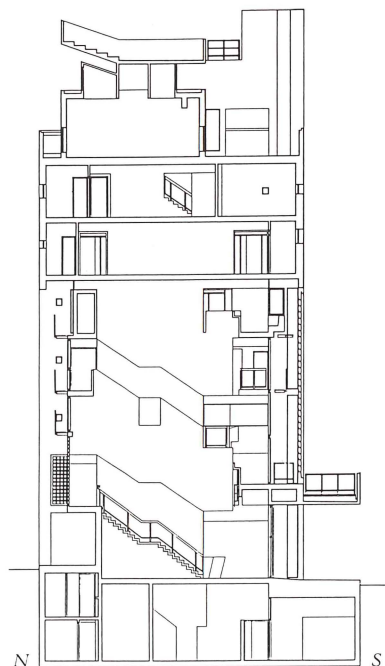
Entrance level plan.



Fifth level plan.



Transversal section through the inner court space and cinema.



Transversal section through the inner court showing stairs, landings and bridges.

Right: View upwards into the high interior court space with stairs and balconies overlooking it.



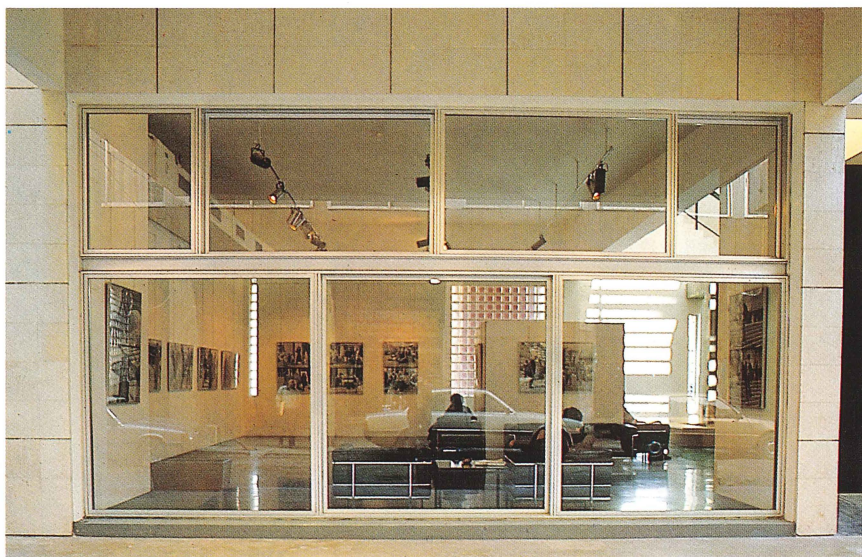


Top: The main entrance doors with the exhibition area beyond. The bridge above the doors is reminiscent of Le Corbusier's Villa La Roche in Paris.

Above: Ground-level reception and exhibition areas, showing the stairs to upper levels and projecting balcony.

Above, right: Principal entrance to the Centre, showing the high central space, with stairs and bridges that allow visitors to enjoy the openness of this court as they move upwards.

Right: The exhibition area at the ground level entry/reception seen from street; the cinema is located just above.





Light-filled interior court of the Centre. Opposite the main entrance, there is a fountain; to the right is the exhibition area below the cinema, the entry to which is at the bridge level.



Far left: Interior view of the cinema theatre of the Cultural Centre.

Left: The library is situated on two levels connected by this spiral stair.

The following appreciation of Mr. Oubrierie's Centre in Damascus was originally published in the Italian magazine Parametro n° 134 and is reproduced here in abbreviated form with the author's kind permission. Editors.

It is one of the paradoxes of the modern movement that its pioneering masters were often badly served by their followers, that is to say their disciples often distorted the essence of original sensibility ...

Among the exceptions to this degenerative principle, at least as far as Le Corbusier is concerned, is the work of — the Paris architect José Oubrierie whose largest commission to date the Centre Cultural Français for Damascus — demonstrates his stature as one of the last direct pupils of the master; Oubrierie having served as architect-in-charge, for the unfinished church at Firminy Vert.

As in the early works of ATBAT Afrique or Atelier 5, Oubrierie is able to apply and extend the fundamental lucidity of the Corbusian method; that is to say, the priority accorded to cubic-prismatic form, the use of classificatory systems in order to establish a clear hierarchy among different elements, the application of proportional control based on the golden section (Le Modulor) and finally an acute feeling for typological and cultural propriety. Oubrierie applies all these methods without succumbing to the empty rhetoric of a Neo-Corbusian style. Thus the Cultural Centre for Damascus illustrates in a refreshing way, the full meaning of Le Corbusier's aphorism that, «... only thought is transmissible».

This modest building, destined for the renewed part of Damascus, is organised according to a strict hierarchy. The generic volume and the basic floor plan are divided into four zones, which, from west to east, comprise the main lecture hall, the entry foyer, the vertical circulation and the office accommodation. This basic spatial subdivision is modified once the main public levels have been left behind. These are curtailed after the fourth floor which is given over to the library and the tek-video collection. The fifth and sixth floors of this seven story structure are divided into classrooms while the roof is arranged as an open-air, reception foyer, complete with an elevated raked seating platform for the accommodation of cinema audiences.

The disposition of volumes is faithfully reflected in the external treatment, first, through an elaborately trellised three story «curtain-wall» which both lights and represents the volume of the entry foyer and second, through an extension of this trellis across the south facade, so as to screen the glass wall to the roof terrace, above the projecting volume of the cinema. Other openings in the entry facade are subtly proportioned and discretely arranged in relation to this prime, asymmetrical figure and it is hard to imagine a more inevitable, elevation order.

Kenneth Frampton