

Shibam Cultural Center-
Sculpting Earth, Raising Skyscrapers

Concept
This architectural proposal aims to enhance Shibam's cultural center by integrating a new architectural vocabulary while respecting the city's historical context. The design draws inspiration from the city's iconic image, its natural surroundings, and its rich cultural heritage to create a new landmark that connects the past with the present, as a living organic continuation of the city.

Site Selection
The location has been carefully chosen for its strategic significance. Situated near the entrance of the walled city and in close proximity to main road axes, creates appropriate conditions for a building system that "invites" both visitors and local community into a space of development and growth.

The small square in front of the building remains hidden within the labyrinthine urban fabric, revealing itself only to those who choose to wander throughout the city. This discreet placement transforms it into a meaningful space – highlighting it as a meeting and interaction point, a place of passage and pause, reviving memories of everyday life.

Architectural Approach
To ensure organic continuity while respecting the city's morphological characteristics, the architectural solution balances both introversion through uniform - enclosed facades - that maintain harmony with the city's historic aesthetic and extroversion, by creating a dynamic hub where individual and communal life converge, fostering a seamless dialogue between tradition and modernity alternating activities foster interaction between individual and public life.

Another key design element is the creation of "empty" space (the atrium), as seen in the section. This interplay of light and shadow, combined with strategic sightlines toward various facilities and activities, allows the surrounding environment to seamlessly integrate into the communal areas - such as the market, foyer, cafeteria, kitchen, and seminar rooms - reinforcing their vital role in the building's ecosystem.

At the heart of the ground floor lies an open atrium, surrounded by the local market, enhancing natural light and ventilation while bringing up a vibrant public space.

On the 1st floor is located the administration offices and visitor reception for the cultural and educational activities that will be hosted on the floors above.

The seminar spaces on the 2nd and 3rd floors embody a modern design philosophy, which considers that spaces should not simply "entrap" human activities, but aim to create a multifaceted ecosystem, enriched with alternative uses, promoting creativity and social interaction.

Continuing to the 4th floor, the community kitchen serves not only as a space to meet basic needs but also as a catalyst for interaction and reciprocity, strengthening social bonds within small groups.

The 5th and 6th floors accommodate overnight stays and bathroom facilities, while the top floor features a terrace offering users an uninterrupted view of the urban and natural landscape.

Materials
The facades reinterpret the landscape's motifs through a modern approach to materiality and form. Brick was intentionally selected as the primary cladding material, honoring Yemen's architectural heritage while also serving as an ecological and sustainable solution for the region. Additionally, a latticed shell with cloisters enhances the design, promoting openness while optimizing lighting and shading within the interior spaces. The strong visual contrast between the base and upper structure creates a sense of lightness and elevation. This design approach symbolizes regeneration upon the solid foundations of the past to introduce a fresh architectural expression within Shibam's highly structured, brutalist environment.

The proposed construction outlined in this presentation, integrates modern structural solutions with traditional building techniques characteristic of Shibam city. Specifically, the proposal involves the construction of a new timber-structured building, utilizing wood as the main material, which has historically been used to reinforce the lower floors of Shibam's multi-story buildings. The new structure will incorporate timber columns, beams, and trusses, along with stiffening elements where required, in accordance with current standards for timber structures, ensuring resilience against both static and seismic loads.

The existing shell of the building, approximately 12 meters in height (4 stories), will be preserved. Restoration efforts will be undertaken as necessary, including material replacement and the application of traditional mortars both externally and internally.

The new timber framework will be introduced within the existing structure, with a gap of approximately 15-20 cm between the two. The design for the new building proposes a total height of around 21 meters, comprising 7 levels. At the 3rd floor ceiling of the new structure, a connection will be established between the two structures, existing and new. This will necessitate the completion of the existing wall to the desired height. Additional wooden cantilever beams from the new structure will be incorporated at the connection level, anchored to the external wall, and forming a recessed ceiling around the perimeter. This design element will clearly delineate the upper levels as an addition to the existing shell (refer to section detail).

On the upper floors, external walls will be constructed using traditional mud-brick techniques, consistent with the architectural practices of Shibam. Traditional mud and clay plaster will be applied to all external masonry, serving both as an insulating material and protection against the region's harsh climate.

Internally, a system of primary and secondary beams will be constructed at each level, upon which a new wooden plank floor will be installed, reflecting the typical flooring seen in Shibam's buildings.

This proposal follows a restoration and addition approach that respects the existing built environment of Shibam, maintaining the city's compact form. The approach was also designed with sustainability in mind, aiming to minimize environmental impact while ensuring the creation of a safe and healthy space for its occupants. Key decisions, such as preserving the existing shell, using mud bricks for the new building's walls, and sourcing materials as closely as possible from the region, reflect a commitment to these objectives.

