**PRELUDE**

Saint-Elie projectis located in Mtaile Brih, meaning panoramic in Arabic, between two villages, about 50 km from Beirut. The region is characterized by its terraced topography and vegetation abundance, that’s why it is called the valley of Gold. It is also a region with a heavy historical heritage, which led to violent clashes during the civil war between 1975 and 1990, resulting in the near-total destruction of houses, places of worship, of which the old St-Elie Church, and the displacement of all villagers. Saint-Elie project is the first project of the reconciliation in this region; it was financed by the ministry of the displaced, after an open competition.

The physical morphology of the church is directly inspired by Mar Mema church in the North of Lebanon, constructed in the year 749, and considered to be the first maronite church ever built; it is the archetype of the maronite church in its purest tradition, with the following characteristics: a pure volumetry, a flat roof, a bell tower right above the entrance for practical reasons, a total absence of ornamentation, and very few openings. Of course these characteristics are related to its epoch, nonetheless they became the architectural codes of the maronite church.

The podium of the church is inspired the terraces of culture present in the region; this colonization of topography with dry stonewalls to develop agriculture represents the landscape heritage per excellence of Mount-Lebanon. Mar Mema Church and the terraces of culture accompanied the conception of the Saint-Elie project from the very start.

**THE RENAISSANCE**

The project tends to create a new focal point in the landscape, inspiring renewal. By its strategic location, its contrast and the radiance of its material, it can be seen from afar. It is the most emblematic project in the region, on a socio-political level, and it writes a new page in the history of Mount Lebanon.

The project comprises the church and its square, all dressed in white, solemnly setting on a dry stone walled base. This base remodels the topography of the hillside to house the multipurpose hall and its annexes by deriving its language from the region’s cultivated terraces.

Since architecture should be the most honest and faithful witness of its time, St-Elie project settles in the respect and the continuity of its history. That’s why it adopts the characteristics of the maronite church, and it is anchored in the context by the base of which the stones were procured from the site by extraction, from the old Saint-Elie Church, but also from the remains of the demolished houses during the war. As a matter of fact, from the beginning of the construction works, I invited the villagers to bring what was left from their houses to help rebuild their church, they were numerous and proud to participate.

**A GATHERING PLACE**

First and foremost, the project stands as a gathering place, a public space, and a public space is per definition open to all. The project offers a platform for social interaction, a place to contemplate the landscape and the horizon on three levels.

The level of the church with its square devoid from all obstacles, that seems to float. An intermediate level that I will go through later on, and the lower square level, linked to the ground by mimicry and that allows the extension of the multipurpose hall during important ceremonies.

The project occupies the entire parcel even if it has an irregular shape. The extension of the exterior walls till the extremities of the parcel allows sewing the project in its environment. From the east, From Brih, it is possible to access the church by taking the same access passage of the old church. Also from the east, it is possible to access the multipurpose hall through a large staircase, or directly from the west.

The new church occupies the same location as the old church. It was built in 1770 and demolished in 1981 or 82, the altar remained intact for many decades and unfortunately has become the image of a wounded region for everybody. We decided to highlight this witness from the past in an open-air chapel, to commemorate the history of the place. It’s not about mourning the past, but celebrating the renewal. Of course we had to work with the local craftsmen to number, disassemble and then reassemble the stones as their original state.

The church sparkles with its white bush hammered stone cladding. The positioning of the stones ranging from 25 to 45cm in height and disposed in a random manner unifies the envelope. The bell tower was erected to create the entrance of the church; the thickness of this entrance filters the passage from the profane world to the sacred world.

The church has a square base of 17x17m, that can gather up to 250 people. The sacristy and the confessional are located at the back to clear as much as possible the altar, which is two steps higher than the nave of the church.

The secondary entrance from the east allows a discreet access at the rear of one of the lateral circulations.

The access from Brih opens up to the panorama through a small pathway. We can distinguish the changing effect of the stones, either warm or cold tones, depending on the position of the sun. The secondary entrance is projected into the void, such as the small light boxes that we will see further on, leaving exclusively the contact with the ground to the church.

We wanted absolutely to avoid any aesthetical consideration in the project, so we managed to define all spaces only with the structure. The project is the structure with an envelope. That allowed us incidentally to build the entirety of the project even if the construction would have been stopped after the concrete works, since it was financed by the government without a president at that time.

**NATURAL LIGHT, THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE**

A place of worship is a museum where the artwork is spiritual: the work on natural light in this project was determinant. From the entrance we are drawn to an imposing slit that draws a cross; oriented north, it avoids any unwanted backlighting effect during mass. In this natural light box, white walls seem to diffuse light, the Carrara marble flooring reflecting it in turn. Everything is done to amplify the setting of the interior geometry.

The golden ratio proportions were applied in the definition of the spaces: horizontally for the nave of the church, vertically for the lateral circulations, on the ground for the marble tiling, more globally for all the elevations and the openings of the multipurpose hall.

The rectangle defining the nave of the church is not only a golden rectangle, it is the exact silhouette of the old church, at it exact location. In other words, it’s the phantom of the old church, a volume of prayers that celebrate its memory during every mass.

The interior of the church is crafted and hierarchized by indirect lighting schemes that define its spiritual dimension: large zenithal openings above the altar, the sacristy and confessional, parietal at a human scale along the lateral circulations framinf distant landscape, and discreet at the back. The use of the Carrara marble for the tiling, with its milky, profound and living aspect, refers to the interior of antique churches, as if to ensure it a certain affiliation.

At the rear, the reverse side of the tower bell is positioned delicately on the back walls that separate the nave of the church from the sacristy and the confessional that bathe in an 11m high halo. The liturgical codes are ensured by the number of openings. Three light niches along the lateral circulations refer to the Trinity; disposed on both sides, with two openings each totalizing 12 openings, referring to the Stations of the Cross.

**THE BASE**

From the top it is possible to step into the multipurpose hall, called in by the light of a courtyard, which is an element traditionally present in the region’s architecture. The courtyard and the staircase illuminate the sunken part of the hall. The multipurpose hall, almost 400 sqm, is served by several annexes slipping in the interstices of the structure, like the kitchen and the priest’s office, naturally lit by a courtyard and are accessible from the lower square.

The multipurpose has five large bays opening to courtyards and landscape. 5m high, 4m under beam, and the beams are voluntarily apparent to reveal with tension the presence of the church above.

This is how the Renaissance of the Saint Elie church is expressed, by capturing the Chouf’s landscape on the exterior, and it’s light in the interior.