

# Sursock Museum

*A renaissance for the Sursock Museum, a jewel of neo-Moorish architecture.*

15\_10\_08

## Lebanon\_Beirut

*Contemporary museums often lean towards exuberance; with a formal architecture in competition with the masterworks exposed inside. Designed by French design practice Wilmotte & Associés and Lebanese architect Jacques Aboukhaled, the refurbishment and the extension of the Sursock Museum, on the contrary, have been conceived to be as discreet as possible.*

### Context

In the elegant and upscale district of Achrafieh in Beirut, only as recent as a few years ago, there were still many 18th and 19th century villas and mansions. Built in 1912, the neo-Moorish Sursock Museum is one of the last remaining examples, as towers and skyscrapers have begun to dominate the landscape. In this changing environment, it felt necessary to preserve a testimony of the past.

### Heritage and Contemporary Intervention

The request for a new cultural facility and for enhancing the existing building led Wilmotte & Associés to develop a discreet architectural design. The art of retraction prevailed, in order to highlight a remarkable architectural heritage. From the very first drawings in the early 2000s, a need for discretion seemed obvious, so that no trace of the future interventions would later be seen in the gardens. This led logically towards the development of an underground architecture.

### A long time project

When war broke out between Lebanon and Israel, the museum project, as achieved as it was, had to be put on hold. It came back to life ten years later, under more peaceful auspices. However, returning to a project conceived years before was not an easy exercise. If the spirit remained the same, the interventions had to be updated. The exhibition rooms, initially immersed in the same soft atmosphere as the Arabic lounge of the villa, carefully preserved and restored, gradually gained in luminosity.

### Underground architecture

Spaces, materials and colors nourish an underground architecture. The challenge was that visitors would never feel as if they were below the surface. The volumes were



| 20 meters deep excavation



| façade of the museum - day time



| façade of the museum - night time

conceived to be important, with the temporary exhibition hall ceiling reaching a height of 7 meters. To enhance the visitors' experience, an overhead natural lighting was incorporated. In the rooms in which this was not possible, LEDs create a sensation of natural daylight. Pathways have also been designed to minimize the sensation of descending underground; the route is divided into split-levels, each of them showcasing pieces of art. The choice of a sand color stone from Egypt defined a range of tints from white to beige also helping reduce this sensation.

#### A discreet garden

The garden's plan has been realigned with the building entrance. A line of trees interrupted by paths restores symmetry and welcomes a contemporary concrete, metal and glass building, which houses a library, a cafeteria and a car lift. The esplanade in front of the museum is organized around a central path surrounded by six

skylights. This mineral garden paved with stone hosts sculptures throughout the year.

#### The inauguration of the construction site

In order to create the new exhibition spaces, as well as a storage area, parking spaces, an auditorium with 160 seats, and a media library, it was necessary to dig more than twenty meters down without weakening the existing building; a real challenge, which was managed by local associate architect Jacques Aboukhaled. Since 1961, the museum has been organizing a renowned "Salon d'Automne" allowing artists to express their art, but also allowing the institution to constitute a remarkable collection of original works. After 7 years of intensive work, the Sursock Museum is fully ready to reopen its doors. On October 8th, it inaugurates its new spaces with a pictorial retrospective «A glance of Beirut: 160 years of images».

## Contact

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**Address:** Sursock street, Beirut, Lebanon

**Client:** Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock Museum

**Management team:**

Design architecte & museography:  
WILMOTTE & ASSOCIÉS

Local associate architect: Jacques ABOUKHALED  
General contractor: BETABAT

**Area:** 8,500 sqm (existing: 1,500 sqm / new areas: 7,000 sqm)

**Timeline:**

Construction work: 2008-2015

Opening ceremony: 8 October 2015

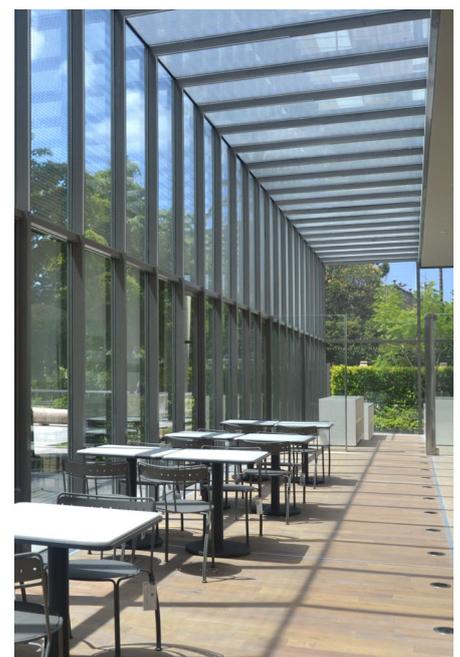
Technical data



| hall leading to the temporary exhibition room



| café-store



| café-store