CARRY ON ARIANA!

Photographs: Courtesy A&D, Jean Paul Lemdjedri
The reinstatement of Ariana Cinema in the recreational fabric of Kabul marked the re-emergence of a suffocated medium of social integration. On the architectural scene it was one of the first examples of adaptive reuse, setting the benchmark for many projects to come.
Many speak of “a face that launched a thousand ships!” but lost in translation are ideas that launch a thousand minds. An impulsive idea led a group of well-known French directors to head towards Afghanistan in 2002 to substantiate the freedom associated with their medium of expression into a built fabric. An idea that would allow minds to evolve in what was the confused and complex post-war scenario faced by the Afghan population. This initiative by Patrice Chéreau, Claude Lelouch, Jacques Perrin, Danis Tanovic and Danièle Thompson gave back to the capital city of Kabul its largest cinema and what was a hub of social interaction.

Sitting in one of the busy squares of the capital city, known as the Pashtunistan Square, the famous Cinema Ariana was built under the Soviet regime, before nearly 20 years of civil war and inoccupancy rendered it into a bullet-ridden ruin of debris. This was a benchmark reflection of most of the cinema halls in Kabul, which once thrived as the prime recreational activity. To interpret and integrate the proposed design, Architecture & Development (A&D-NGO of French origin) represented by Jean Paul Lemjediri took the initiative to execute the design in partnership with the French firm Namur and Lalo, a practice that specialises in cinema design. The aim was to refurbish this symbol of cultural liberation and thus revitalise this much-loved art form of the Afghan capital.

From the onset it was felt important to respect as much of the old structure while allowing for contemporary interventions of film
technologies. As the building took shape, A&D took the reconstruction process as an opportunity to launch activities like vocational training for masons, artisans, and technicians, thus, reintroducing old building crafts. The site became livelier with several partnerships set up with NGOs who specialised in children's assistance in setting up educational programmes for the development. In just short of a year, the cinema hall was made available to the public where the main auditorium seated 650 viewers along with the supporting balcony, latter of which was reserved for women and families. Keeping the local sentiments in mind, two separate entries allowed the filtration of men and women from and back to the square below.

The client, comprising the Municipality of Kabul and the Afghan Film Ministry wanted the newly revitalised theatre to be a beacon for promoting educational and cultural programmes. While much of the screened material is international in nature, the architectural framing is the achievement of the very Afghani hands. The cinema-goers are greeted by a grand hallway in marble where bilingual calligraphy communicates the names of some legendary films that mark the cinema’s progression in time and also mark its position as an epitome and confluence of the city as a crossroad of culture. Finally, accessing an ambient auditorium where the screen is framed by rich-burgundy Afghan fabric belts offset by plaster and woodwork that complete the acoustic treatment. The main hall leads the way upstairs to the balcony. Where the interim lobby hosts the tea room... a burst of surfaces, multiple colours and traditional wooden furniture that encourage social exchange, the very spirit of this space. A recessed screen wall, which on the outside is the front facade works as a solar control during the day and becomes a reservoir for multi-coloured lamps at night. Its pixellated transparency allows the colourful lights of the lamps to warm up the night facade. Thus the complete building reset the Ariana Cinema back into its forgotten position in socio-cultural milieu of Kabul and also winning it a "Architecture + " Award in Dubai in 2004.

Fact File
- Inception: June 2003
- Completion: May 2004
- Area: 2450 sq.m
- Total capacity: 650 seats
- Building Owners: "A Cinema for Kabul", represented by Hughes Dewavrin
- Project Architects: Partnership of Frederic Nnouk Architects, A&D, Jean-Paul Lemajedi (QPC), Cape Ingles, Set, Peutz
- Colour in the niches provide the night ambience.