The Toubkal Quarter in Marrakesh by Charles Boccara

The Toubkal project in Marrakesh by architect Charles Boccara contains various interesting aspects both in terms of a progressive contribution to the design of low-cost housing in developing countries, and at a possible reinterpretation of the heritage of the historic city.

The area where the new district is planned as a point of natural expansion of the city, is southwards behind the Aguedal royal gardens and the various Douar (more or less illegal) districts of self built houses. It is to become the focal point of the whole urban sector between the Aguedal and Oued Issil, and should take on the significance of a «pole of control» for the subsequent extension of the city to the south. Being linked to the city by a by-pass road along the city walls in the northern direction and to the west through the Aguedal with the industrial area and the Gueliz — the present business and shopping centre of Marrakesh — Toubkal could become the node of connection between the centre and the outermost southern part of the city. It is therefore situated in a favourable setting between the medina and the countryside, with the superb view of the peaks of the Atlas Mountains in the distance. The project, commissioned by ERAC (Regional Upgrading and Construction Agency), foresees studies on land use, a site plan study and a detailed study of a district pilot unit for 350 houses. In all, 3160 houses are envisaged, organized in five districts. The basic services are distributed in the first four of these, including primary school, hammam, prayer room and small shops. The fifth district has special morphological and distributive features: it lies to the east in contact with the «illegal» Donar and therefore the building fabric, here is deformed so as to contain the disorderly pattern of the self built areas, and include a large number of services such as high school, police station, post office and youth centre. Small-scale trading facilities, such as workshops for craftsmen, small third-class industry and shops, should permit a real integration between these two realities.

The building fabric proper is based on the implementation of urban systems well tried and tested in the traditional city, such as the «derb» (plural driba). To have these accepted by clients, they have been called «residence» and likened to a horizontal condominium, provided with a janitor. Services of horizontal residences are planned with entrance portico, «placette» (access with garage), recreation space for children and shady corners with trees. Services are almost always hidden by a «curtain» of private hou-
ses and have a reduced frontage onto the road.
The backbone of the urban pattern is the large avenue running in a north-south direction, where the main trading units are situated. But it is with the minor axis, parallel to the first one, that Boccara shows that he knows how to proceed towards achieving quality in urban design. His design starts in the south on a minor scale with low houses and with a small section, then increases in scope with a monumental square on the north. His, is clearly an unprejudiced rereading of the nineteenth-century bourgeois city, not so much in the use of a grid (purely instrumental to obtain an orderly structure) as in the recovery of the value of the street as a primary element in urban composition. Here the street is not a place where to show off the monetary values of the European bourgeois city, but takes on a more intimate and human significance, typical of Moslem cities. Hence a happy blend, where references to 18th century models, such as the large, regular area lined by three-storey houses and planted in the centre, is contrasted with a pattern of horizontal, introverted residences, tending to form closed units around collective services. A new city, which precisely because of the objective difficulty of being interpreted or mechanically "sensed" by means of such repetitive patterns as those found in the nineteenth-century "boulevard city", has to be discovered and lived on foot with the slow rhythm and the imagination of the ancient city.

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