The Architects of Morocco

Unity in diversity, the regional variations of a constant and central identity, is one of the main characteristics of Islamic architecture. Wherever Islamic buildings were constructed, whether in Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq or Morocco, the climatic, cultural and economic elements were absorbed into the different Muslim societies and their architectures reflected their inherent unity.

Similar to the contemporary solutions by Arab architects in Egypt and Iraq, those by architects in Morocco reflect the specific conditions of their country. In each country there are unique multiple layers of the past, but unified in a way that binds them together. These complex layers are part of the contemporary situation and determine elements which structure the way Moroccan architects build today.

Of all the Arab States, Morocco (which in Arabic is “al Maghrib al-Aqsa”, the land farthest west), maintains the closest connections with Europe. With its 172,000 square miles and population of about 18 million inhabitants, Morocco is still a basically agricultural country, in spite of the tradition and importance of cities such as Casablanca, the capital Rabat, Marrakech, Meknes and the old city of Fez.

The majority of the population is of Arab origin, followed by the Berbers who make up 35% of the population, mostly in the south of the country. There are also some 300,000 Europeans and 160,000 Jews who live in the larger cities. The State religion is Islam in the Sunni form. The political character of the society is programmatically conservative, and the form of government is a monarchy ruled by King Hassan II (born 1929), who has been in power since 1961.

The earliest known architecture of Morocco dates back to the end of the second millennium, when Phoenician traders from Tyre arrived and established settlements. The indigenous Berber population later established independent Kingdoms which subsequently came in contact with Carthaginians, Romans, tribes from Central Africa, and later the Arabs. In the middle of the Third Century Christianity arrived in Morocco, but it did not make the impact the Arabs did when they came to Morocco in 683 bringing Islam with them. After long fights with the Arabs the Berbers finally retired to the mountains of Southern Morocco, and by the 8th Century nearly all of them converted to Islam, but maintained much of their self-rule and cultural identity. The architectural and cultural history of Morocco was closely interconnected with the Muslim culture in Southern Spain until 1492 when Andalusia was lost to the Christians. Around 1700, Sultan Moulay Ismail created a new empire which again gave Morocco international importance. However, little occurred in the country's development in the following century, and by failing to introduce the industrial revolution in the 19th Century, the country became a colonised area divided by French and Spanish settlers.

A period of political isolation followed which had enormous consequences for the architectural identity of the country. Major French architects of the 20th century were building in Morocco, but following a policy of apartheid which meant more and
more of an architectural separation from the Islamic past. Urbanism and architecture were introduced according to French traditions, and the alienation of Moroccan architecture from its past was cemented. In spite of this, French Morocco became a field of experimentation for several groups of European architects who achieved important results which have been used as models in other parts of the world. The main task of these mostly French architects was the construction of mass housing incorporating the traditional Arab life style. The most important architects engaged in this type of housing in Morocco were Georges Candelis, Alex Josic, Shadrach Woods and Vladimir Bodiansky. Originally from different countries these architects had all worked in France before arriving in Africa where they founded a new firm called ATBAT-Afrique. The American architect Shadrach Woods, one of the members of the new firm, clearly saw the difference between Muslim and European architecture. "The European dwelling is extrovert, oriented toward the outside world, and loaded with mechanical equipment. The Muslim dwelling is introvert, inner oriented, and generally has little mechanical equipment."

It is worth mentioning that even within the limits of a colonial government and many architectural failures an important step was taken by this group in not only understanding the regional requirements of traditional architecture but also of its regeneration. The same firm did a series of prototype buildings in which they programmatically respected the Islamic life style by creating a community in which there was both communication between neighbours and complete privacy for the individual. The old Muslim house was also the model for a Moroccan housing study in 1951 which was built in the Carriers Centrales Quarter in Casablanca in 1953. The different housing types, later used in other cities such as Oran, Saidia, Algiers and Sidi-Bel-Abbes, included shops on the ground floor and the freedom of the user to determine the plan of his own apartment within the structural limitations.

Unfortunately, because of the strong colonial policies these mass dwelling blocks were built according to European city planning patterns which did not allow for a cohesive urban fabric in the Islamic sense. The same can be said about the placement of the buildings by the Swiss architects André Studer and Jean Hentsch in 1954 which, in spite of their excellent design, also failed because of the overall colonialist government policies. While divergent movements of architectural developments were taking shape after independence in 1956, the strong cultural assimilation of French elements remained, but alongside was a growing reconstitution of the Arab tradition. The growth of works by architects such as Ecochard, Delaporte Delaroziere, Belliot and Deneaux, Everth, and Duhoen were indications of transformations taking place.

The works of Jean-Francois Zevaco, Jean-Paul Ichter, and the firm of Henri Tastemain and Elaine de Castelnau made an especially strong impact on the development of architecture in Morocco. Zevaco's later buildings include a law court in Be-nimellal in 1964, the post office in Agadir in 1966, the Hotel Yasmine in Cabo Negro in 1972 and his own house in Casablanca in 1979. In 1980 he was honoured by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture for his courtyard houses in Agadir.

The main contribution to the Renaissance of Moroccan architecture after 1956 came from a group of Moroccan architects who, in their maturity, contributed to the culmination of contemporary Arab architecture. One of these architects is Elie Azagury. His early school buildings in Casablanca, such as the school complex in Longcamps and the project for the school in de la Vilette, both from 1955, in collaboration with J. Levy, continue the tradition of French architecture in Morocco. In 1960 Azagury built his first mass-housing project in Derb-Jaid, Casablanca, where the economic limitation dominated the form of the structure. Cross-ventilation here was introduced by means of brick-walls with small openings, which are the only rhythmic element in the otherwise monotonous walls. More convincing is his solution of apartment buildings in Rabat, also from 1960, which successfully coordinates the blocks in their spatial relationship. The inward orientation and the small window openings are closer to the traditional character of Islamic architecture.

Along with other architects, Azagury participated in the rebuilding of the city of Agadir which was destroyed in an earthquake in 1960. Among the contributions made by Azagury in Agadir is the new Palace of Justice and the Health Center, in which earthquake precautions played an important role in the design.

Steps toward an independent Moroccan architecture are more visible in Azagury's own house and architectural office in Casablanca, built in 1966, in which the combination of the two parts of the building on different levels respect the topographic conditions. The use of materials and the constructivist formal language, which reflects the international architecture of the period, is applied to the specific conditions of the country. Since 1967 Azagury has been engaged in the planning and construction of vacation buildings and tourist villages which articulate a new direction for his architecture. His contribution to vacation architecture in Morocco concentrates on the village Cabo Negro on the Mediterranean coast. In the image of an old village, hotels and restaurants, bathing and other touristic facilities are combined in a comprehensive unity. Since the Cabo Negro complex Azagury has been involved in a number of other projects such as a hotel building in Tetuan (begun in 1979), a hotel in Ouaimeden (begun in 1980) and a plan for the new town of Ben Guerir for a population of 70,000 inhabitants (begun in 1980). A different nuance of contemporary Moroccan architecture has been articulated by the architect Mourad Ben Embarek whose goal, as Elie Azagury's, is the independent expression of the identity of his country. Born in Morocco, Mourad Ben Embarek went to Scandinavia for his architectural studies, where he became influenced by the architecture of Alvar Aalto and Joern Utzon. After his return to Morocco Ben Embarek began to work toward the reorganisation of the architectural profession in Morocco. As the editor of the Moroccan magazine of architecture "A + U", he devoted a large amount of his energy to the evaluation of old buildings in
Morocco. He wrote about the changing situation of contemporary architecture in Morocco from the Colonial disposition to a new form which would be in harmony with its tradition. Articles in his magazine are not only devoted to new buildings by architects of Morocco, but also to old forms of settlements analysed and seen as one of the necessary bases for the renewal of contemporary Moroccan architecture.

Among the buildings which were designed in the office of Mourad Ben Embarek is his own house in Rabat, a number of hotels and the new international airport in Casablanca.

His hotel Samir in Mohammedia is a linear arrangement directly on the beach. The two upper storeys are devoted to guest rooms, all with balconies, while the ground floor contains a restaurant, bar, salons, boutiques, coffee shop and the service facilities. The back extends to a terrace and swimming pool, and, unlike the traditional inward orientation of the old khan, the building opens to the exterior. His motel des iles in Essaouira is an extension to an existing hotel where the modest architecture of the horizontally structured extension does not disturb the skyline of the city and respects the given historical environment. By means of creating a protective courtyard with a swimming pool in the centre a harmony between old and new was achieved.

The new International Airport in Casablanca is his most important work. Regional identity here was secondary to the necessary technological solutions for a building type which requires functional efficiency and engineering criteria of the highest degree. Ben Embarek argues, in both his publica-
Above: Ben Embarek; the architect's house in Rabat, completed in 1970, reflects his Scandinavian experience in the selection of material and design. The building is closed to the street and arranged in a linear pattern where rooms open onto a side garden. Photograph: U. Kultenmann.

Bottom: Amzallag; Floor Plan and facade of the Club Mediterranee in Quarzazate, 1966, shows the three square blocks which are interconnected to form a continuous environment. Rooms surround central courtyards and the entrance block is extended by a saloon and bar and a terrace restaurant, which interrelates interior and exterior. The building is a conscious revival of traditional Moroccan architecture.

Drawing courtesy of the architect.

...tions and buildings, for a post-colonial architecture in Morocco that does not emphasise images from the local past. He believes that the necessary synthesis of past and present can be achieved in several ways, and puts his emphasis on technology.

A quite different approach is seen in the works of the Moroccan architects Mohamed Agard and A. Amzallag. Agard was born in 1938 and studied in Casablanca and Marrakech as well as at the School of Architecture in Geneva, Switzerland. After some work in the office of the Swiss architects Lozeron, Moser and Koechlin he returned to Morocco where he has been mainly engaged in planning work in the southern part of Morocco (El Kelaa des M'Gouna, Tamelet and El Kelaa des Sragha). He has also constructed a number of buildings such as the Cultural Center, Business Center and Youth Center in Tameelt.

Amzallag has been engaged mainly in the area of vacation architecture and his Club Mediterranee in Quarzazate has become one of the major examples for the revival of the traditional Islamic idea of the khan. Unlike the hotel buildings by Ben Embarek, Amzallag's hotel has an inward oriented structure in line with Islamic tradition. The materials are simple and the general organisation of the structure follows simple design criteria resembling in some ways concepts by Louis I. Kahn.

The work of Abdelslem Faraoui and Patrice de Mazieres can be seen as a synthesis of combining values of tradition as well as today's technology. Their project for a mosque of 1962, which in spite of the Islamic building type, closely follows the rectangular patterns of "modern" European architectural traditions. This same domination can be seen in their administration building in Tangier of 1963, even though attempts were made to cope with the climatically different conditions of Morocco. In 1964 the firm participated in the reconstruction of the destroyed city of Agadir by building apartment complexes which still reflected the earlier French dominated way of building.

Faraoui and de Mazieres' Club Mediterranee in Malabata near Tangier of 1964-1965 indicates a new architectural beginning. This complex, to which they added wings in 1978, is an indication of a return to values of the Islamic tradition.

The two architects followed this vacation complex with one in 1967-1968 in M'Diq and another in Azemmour in 1970, both along the same lines. In M'Diq the complex, like the one in Malabata, consists of bedroom wings surrounding an open interior courtyard. The rooms flank a general concourse containing the restaurant, swimming pool, lounges and reception area.

Two of their more recent hotel buildings follow the established tradition of the earlier hotels but apply the principles of a different geographic and cultural region of Southern Morocco. The hotels in El Kelaa de M'Gouna and Boumalne du Dadès are again inward oriented, and in their pyramidal silhouette harmonise with the character of the mountainous landscape. The hotel in El Kalaa de M'Gouna of 1972-1974 is conceived in a system of cubic elements in harmony with the traditional Berber architecture of the region. The spectacular exterior gives no hint as to the interior courtyards, inner circulation and recreational amenities within the building.

Faraoui and de Mazieres also built a

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**Diagram:**

- Chambres
- Conference
- Bar
- Terrasse
- Restaurant
- Entrance
Faraoui and de Mazieres

Below: Abdeslem Faraoui (left) was born in Kenitra in 1928 and studied architecture at Paris at the Ecole Spéciale d'Architecture. Patrice de Mazieres was born in 1930 in Rabat and also studied in Paris.

Bottom: The Club Méditerranée in Malabata, 1965, is built around a number of courtyards with swimming pools and the bedroom wings open toward the interior. The formal vocabulary creates a Muslim village-like closed-in environment.

Bottom, centre: Hotel in Boumalne des Dades, 1974, is an imaginative continuation of the old Berber architecture of the High Atlas region. The exterior gives no indication of the interior organisation which with its gardens, courtyards and pools, creates an oasis atmosphere.

Bottom, right: Dormitories of the University City of Rabat, 1978.

Photographs courtesy of the architects.

number of other building types. The centre for Family Planning in Rabat of 1976 is a newly established building type for the conservative country. Partly one storey, partly four storeys, the complex is a reinforced concrete skeleton building with interior courtyards. Other building types are the dormitories and the Faculty of Medicine building of the University of Rabat of 1978. These contemporary structures are a synthesis of the old Moroccan tradition and the requirements for contemporary campus architecture. What remains a goal for many other Arab architects has here been realised: a contemporary Arab architecture which gives identity to the people of Morocco.

Contemporary architecture in Morocco is in a state of crisis in spite of a large number of outstanding realisations by Moroccan architects. This crisis is manifested in three major areas: the first being the lack of architectural education. Unfortunately, there is no school of architecture in Morocco where architects can study in line with their national identity. Young architects still have to leave their country in order to learn their professional skills. Most of them go to Paris which not only makes them dependent on the French educational system, but also alienates them from their natural local environment.

The second area in which this crisis occurs is in the field of architectural preservation. The criteria for preservation of major cities and buildings in Morocco are oriented toward a set of rules from the past which does not sufficiently take into consideration contemporary requirements of the people living in the old cities. Jean Paul Ichter put his finger on the problem when at a discussion of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture meeting in Fez in 1979 he said, referring to the Fez Master Plan of 1978:

“We must avoid idealising the conditions of life in the medina and projecting our dreams on a reality which is not always felicitous. Without denying the qualities of the traditional city, we must admit that in their totality they represent neither the ideal nor the lifestyle of future generations.” A realistic approach such as this is urgently needed by Moroccan architects who should, in addition to concentrating on the preservation of old buildings, relate them to the contemporary urban population.

Referring to this new approach at the same seminar Mohammed Arkoun said:

“We are told that land speculation is a decisive factor with regard to the destiny of the medina of Fez. We talk ‘as if’ this aspect did not exist, when it is, in fact, a decisive factor not only for Fez, but for all Muslim societies today.” The third area of crisis is the lack of Moroccan identity which is evident in the design of the Capital Complex and the Congress Hall in Rabat which will be, when completed, a symbol for the country. This most ambitious project by the Japanese architect Kenzo Tange, was commissioned in 1978. As in the earlier
prestigious Mausoleum and Mosque for Sultan Mohammed V in Rabat, which was designed by the Vietnamese architect Vo Toan and completed in 1971, the Master plan for the Capital Complex and International Congress Hall was commissioned to a foreign architect and not to one of the several qualified Moroccan architects.

Tange's plan proposes the separation of government building and urban fabric, a contradiction to the Islamic roots of the umma, which refers to the equality of all Muslims. Tange clearly refers to this separation in his descriptive explanation of the complex: "For the security of the governmental area, the parliament and the supreme court are surrounded by a buffer zone consisting of forest and an artificial lake. The combination congress hall and the cultural centre and the cultural plaza are on the opposite side of the lake. This arrangement assures complete separation of government and public activities but maintains visual unity among the three buildings."

The separation of government and public activities with a maintained visual unity is exactly that element which is contradictory to the Islamic tradition. Islamic architecture in most phases of its past development has put people in the centre of consideration in harmony with government.

Moroccan architecture is only one of the numerous manifestations of contemporary Arab architecture in the world which, as in all countries, is determined by unique regional conditions. In all Islamic architecture there is, more or less, an inner unity based on Islamic life style, which is of the greatest importance for the emerging architecture of the Third World. Perhaps Morocco, which in the past was a bridge between Africa and Europe, can, as part of the Arab world, become an intermediary between the Northern and Southern hemispheres.