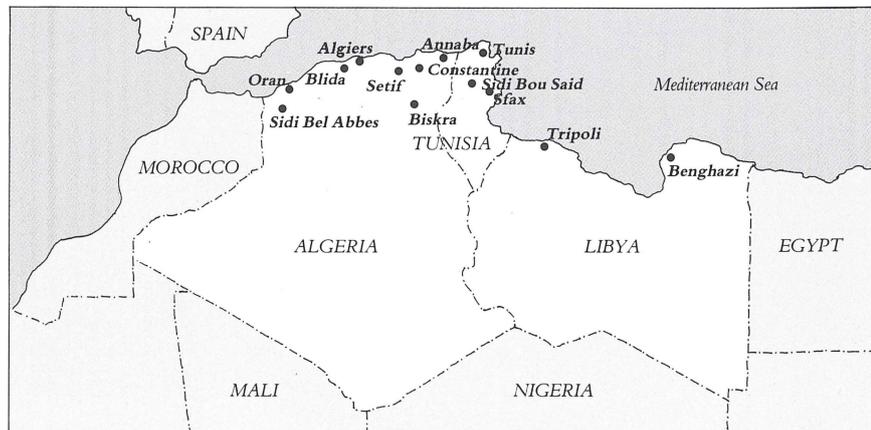


# Contemporary Arab Architecture

## **Architects of Algeria, Tunisia and Libya**

United by their Arab heritage, geographic location and belief in Islam, the present situation in the three states clearly articulates the alternatives of contemporary Arab architecture in general. In

spite of their closeness to Morocco and Egypt the architectures, especially in Algeria and Libya, have produced their own different directions and concepts, and highlight the relationship between local and foreign architects. Here, each country is presented individually.



**A**lgeria covers an area of 2,380,000 square kilometres and is inhabited by 16.3 million people. The coast line on the Mediterranean alone is nearly 1000 kilometres long and is the centre of urban and rural settlements. Four-fifths of the country is desert and has only recently, by the immense discoveries of oil, become the focal point of new efforts.

Islam reached Algeria in the 7th Century, and a new cultural development began which culminated in cities, large-scale planning schemes and mosques. Arab culture in Algeria was dominated by rulers such as the Almoravids, Almohads and Zayanids, as well as a number of local dynasties. Since the 16th Century growing wars between Spain, Turkish pirates and the Ottoman Empire divided the country until 1518 when the government of the Bey of Algiers was created.

France occupied Algeria in 1830 and began the colonisation which was firmly established in 1902. During the French rule large urban settlements were established which were hostile to the Algerian population and a system of apartheid was created. With the birth of the FLN in 1954 and a war which followed, the independence of Algeria from France was finally achieved in 1962. Since independence gigantic programmes of industrialisation, housing, educational buildings and airports, often with the help of foreign architectural firms were started.

The country has six large universities with a student body of 90,000 in Algiers, Annaba, Constantine, Blida, Setif and Oran, which will eventually cater for the growing needs of higher education. All

these universities, some of them still under construction or in the planning phase, express strong architectural images created by famous international architects such as Oscar Niemeyer in Constantine, Kenzo Tange in Oran and Algiers, Jakob Zweifel in Annaba, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill in Blida and Devecon Oy in Setif.

During French rule there were attempts by French architects to accommodate the specific needs of the Arab population; but they were generally limited by the government policies which regulated an apartheid concept and insisted on European urban planning strategies. As in Morocco, the firm of Candilis, Josic, Woods and Pons, in collaboration with M. J. Mauri, built large-scale housing complexes in Algiers, Oran, Sidi Bel Abbes and Saida. Other French architects working in these years in Algeria, such as the firm Emery and Miquel are in the tradition of Le Corbusier. Their buildings are manifestations of architecture on a high level, but they do not respond to the specific cultural traditions of Islamic Algeria. Neither did the various projects of Le Corbusier who was engaged in several urban schemes such as the proposals for the city of Algiers in 1932 and 1933, the plan for Nemours on the Mediterranean coast of 1934 and the later urban proposals for Algiers of 1938. A large number of other French architects, also more or less dependent on the example of Le Corbusier, worked in Algeria in the 1950's and 1960's<sup>1</sup>.

The Algerian architect J. Guiauchain, worked within the context of French dominated architecture by basing his buildings on the then generally accepted French version of modern architecture. His Palais

<sup>1</sup>This is documented in the magazine Techniques et Architecture Number 329, 1980.

This Article by  
**Udo Kultermann**  
is the fifth in a series published  
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architecture of the Arab world.



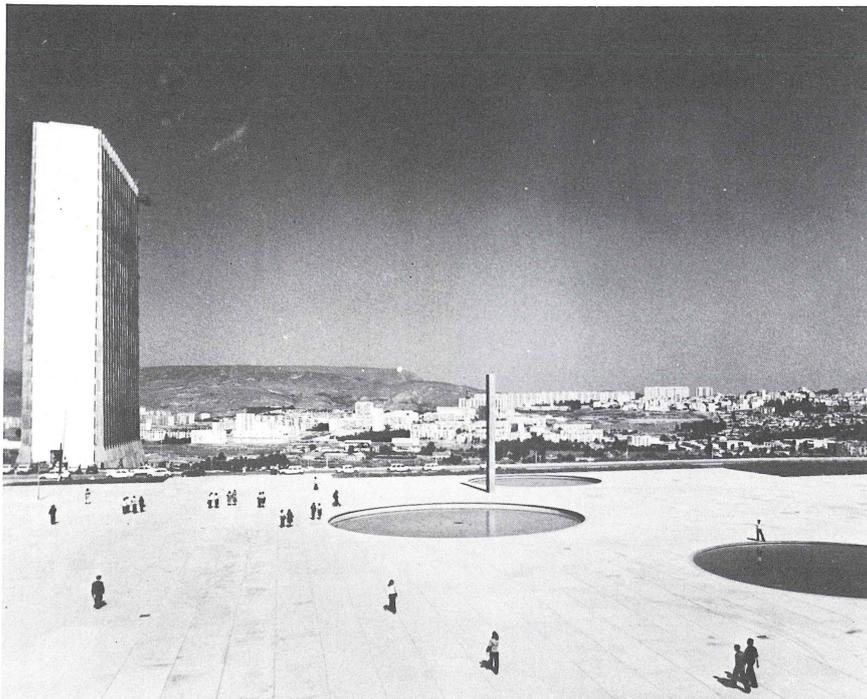
*Above: The elegant Casa di Ghardaia, Algeria by Andre Ravereau, 1980. Photograph courtesy Biennale de Venice.*

*Right: Housing in Djenan-el-Hasa, Algeria by Roland Simoumet, 1959. Photograph courtesy Simoumet, Paris.*

du Government General in Algiers, in collaboration with the firm of Perret Brothers, was completed in 1927. Other works by Guiauchain are the Salle Pierre Bordes in Algiers, the Maison de l'Agriculture in Algiers of 1938 and the Lycee du Champ de Manoeuvres of 1936 in Algiers. Ironically, the works of Guiauchain introduced concept which was called "Perrettisme" by his contemporaries — the handling of reinforced concrete as established by Auguste Perret. It was an Algerian who most strongly adapted this type of French architectural language.

A most important contribution to architecture in Algeria was by the French





*The campus of the University of Constantine, Algeria, showing the main square and administration building to the left, by Oscar Niemeyer, 1969. The complex is reminiscent of his work in Brasilia. Photograph courtesy Niemeyer.*

architect Roland Simounet who relied upon the local tradition and the specific site conditions for his low-cost housing schemes for the Muslim population. His housing in Djennan el Hasan, completed in 1958 was a pioneering achievement as it demonstrated that low economy could result in appropriate dwellings. Other realisations by Simounet, such as his new settlements in Berard, El-Biar and Timgad are convincing demonstrations that housing for a low-income population can be achieved with excellent architectural results.

Two other important events are connected with the work of the French architects Fernand Pouillon and Andre Ravereau. Both proposed uniquely personal solutions which have been extensively applied to the contemporary situation in Algeria. The concept of Pouillon was to shape urban structures by large-scale continuous building systems. His cite "Climat de France" in Algiers of 1957 is one of the most prominent examples of this type, and it was the model for several other schemes by Pouillon himself, as well as other architects.

The concept of Andre Ravereau is completely different; it is based on the anonymous architecture in Algeria. His buildings in the region of the M'Zab have been instrumental in creating a new awareness of rural architecture in Algeria, and are sensitive manifestations of a lost tradition which is being revitalised. A few examples of Ravereau's work are his residence Beni-Isguen in Ghardaia of 1980, his buildings in Sidi-Abbaz in the M'Zab region. The same search for an Algerian identity is represented in recent works by two Spanish architects, J. Emilio Donato and Ricardo Bofill.

Architecture by Algerian architects appeared late and rather isolated in the cultural and political reality. The connections with France and other countries were so long and close that it was difficult to constitute an autonomous Algerian identity. In 1962, when Algeria became independent, there were practically no practising Algerian architects who could offer solutions different from the French models. One of the prominent personalities of the first hour was Abderrahman Hadji Bouchama who, as early as 1966, envisioned in his book *L'Arceau qui chante* what architecture in Algeria could and should be. In the French magazine *Techniques et Architecture* 329, 1980, Bouchama writes about the tasks of the Algerian architect as he sees them: "Arab-Islamic art, in a new world which today carries destiny is called forward to reconquer its place in an infinitely harmonious reverberation that will enchant the soul of future generations. What will become of this architecture of demanding functionalities? What will be the structure in the light of high technology and contemporary means? How to adapt it? After all, many will come to the conclusion, that these heavy decorations will be too costly and, to sum it up, they don't conform to the taste of our time".

Among the buildings by Abderrahman Bouchama are the mosque in El Biar of 1974 and the Islamic Institute in Algiers of 1977. His work for an independent Algerian

architecture is continued by his son Elias Bouchama, who studied architecture in Paris, again indicating the continued interrelations Algeria has with her former colonisers. One of the most prominent buildings by Elias Bouchama is the Salle Harcha in Algiers of 1980, a large hall for sport events with a capacity for 5000 fixed and 5000 mobile seats, built in collaboration with S. Benchmoumou and M. Henry-Baudot.

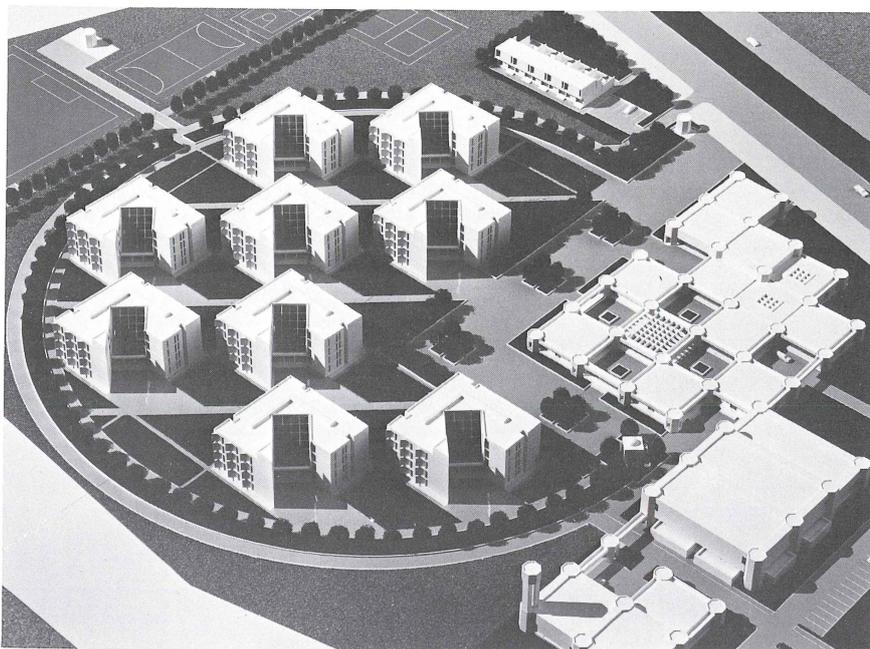
The most advanced articulation of an independent Algerian contemporary architecture can be found in buildings and projects by Hani El-Miniawy and Abdel Rahman El-Miniawy, who partly collaborated with the architect Aly Seraj. The works of these younger Arab architects are closely connected to the Islamic past without contradicting present-day conditions<sup>1</sup>.

Two of their towns, Bou-Saada and Biskra are characterised by architecture resulting from a historic relationship between a cultural and a socio-economic way of life. Other projects by the El-Miniawys also reflect the use of local materials and the acceptance of local traditions as the major goal for their design. Their group of two storey houses in Sidi Khaled are arranged in clusters so that spaces in-between can be used for outdoor activities. The architects' village in Ma'adar in the southern part of the country exploits the barrel-vaulted forms of traditional dwellings of the Sahara region and their housing units at Ouled Djellal, built in local materials, also continue the tradition of Algerian architecture which had been lost for a long time.

Buildings of this kind are necessary for the growing needs of the rural population in Algeria, and together with large-scale housing schemes in the cities they will shape the future development of Algerian architecture. Beyond these more or less controlled forms of settlement there is the uncontrolled reality of self-constructed shelters which mushroom around the large cities.

In general, it is the dichotomy between rapid urban development, hand in hand with the necessary industrialisation, and the emphasis on agrarian development that is characteristic of the present situation in Algeria. Mohammed Arkoun precisely addressed this problem in his lecture at a seminar of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in Fez in 1979. In regard to the new policies after independence, he said: "In terms of housing and urbanisation two phenomena had great impact: industrialisation and the agrarian revolution. In turning to heavy industry, Algeria installed complexes that rival those in Europe in terms of their impact on social structures such as housing and work. Consequently, we must now deal with problems identical to those

<sup>1</sup>The work of the Miniawy office was profiled in *Mimar* 8, 1983 — Editors.



faced by European industrial societies in the 19th and early 20th Centuries”.

These new realities pose severe problems, specifically to the revival of old Islamic traditions, and Arkoun went on to talk about them too: “The leap into modern industry was a bold policy. At the time it was deep-rooted in an ideology that calls for the remodelling of the Algerian identity. That is to say, national construction had as its first principle not only the recovery of an identity, but the remodelling of an identity, first, by regenerating its historical and cultural constituents, and second, by integrating new wealth and modern methods”.

This is exactly the situation under debate in contemporary Algerian society and is reflected in its new architecture. The relationship between the importation of foreign images and foreign architectural and urban ideas, on one hand, and the revitalisation of village cultures in the south of the other appears to be contradictory. Nevertheless, they have to be pursued side by side and perhaps one day, when enough energies have been devoted to the study of their respective meanings, the two will merge. The challenge to the present generation of Algerian architects, immense in this regard, can be met by the equally enormous opportunities of the country’s existing financial resources.

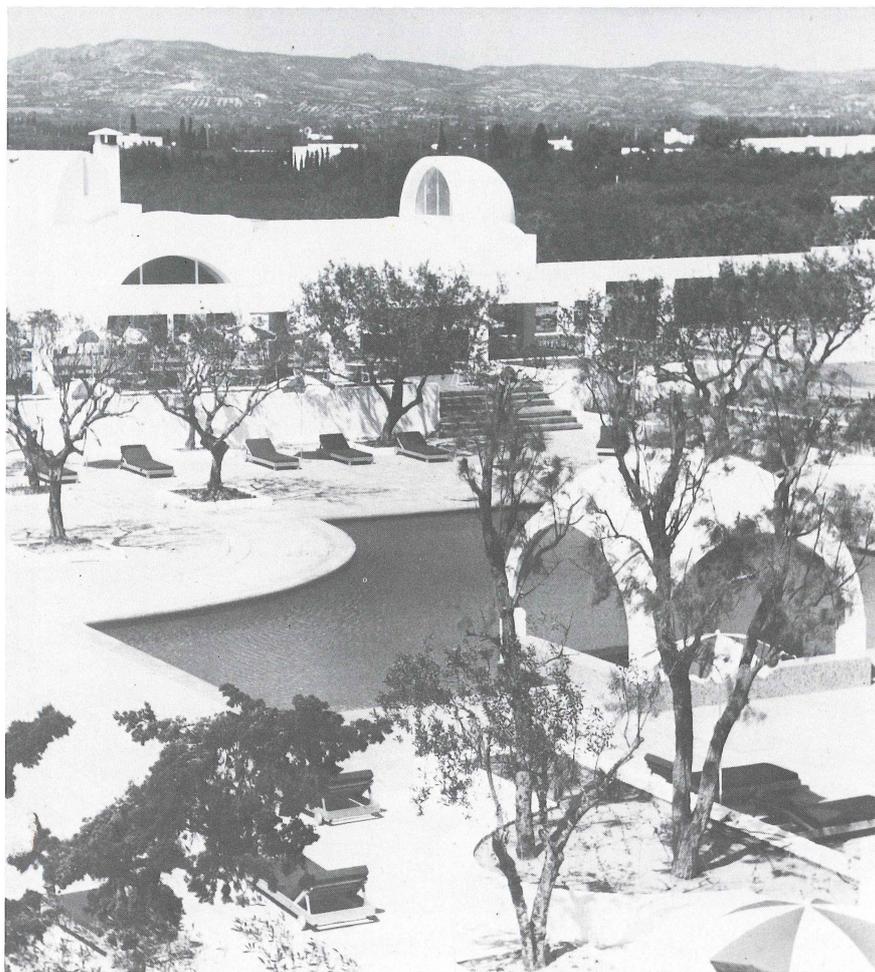
**T**unisia, like Algeria, is connected with the Berber civilisation. Tunisia covers 167,000 square kilometres with a population of 5.6 million of which 99% is Muslim. Islam is the state religion and the head of the state is Habib Bourgiba who led the fight for independence, which occurred in 1956 without the bloodshed of a long war.

Around 800 B.C. the city of Carthage was founded by Queen Dido and remained for several centuries one of the dominating urban centres in the Ancient World. Situated northwest of Tunis the walls of Carthage are still visible today. With the Arab conquest in the 7th Century a new cultural layer was introduced which culminated in the foundation of the city of Kairouan by Oqba ibn-Nafi in 670. In the year 800 Kairouan was made the capital of Tunisia and remained so until 909. The Great Mosque of Kairouan is one of the three most holy sanctuaries in the Islamic world, besides Mecca and Medina.

In the 9th Century the capital moved to Tunis. There were long battles between Christians and Muslims, and in the 16th

*Left, above: Housing in Saida, Algeria, by M. J. Mauri. Photograph courtesy Mauri, Oran.*

*Left: Scheme for the dormitories at the Algeria University, Algiers by Kenzo Tange, 1977. The buildings are now under construction. Photograph courtesy Tange, Tokyo.*



Century Tunisia became a Spanish protectorate. In 1574 it was made part of the Ottoman Empire, ruled by Turkish governors (Beys). In 1881 French troops invaded Tunisia from Algeria and established the French protectorate. In World War II Tunisia once again became the site of battles, but finally, in 1956 its independence was achieved.

Since then, a large-scale programme in agriculture and building has taken place, reliant to a great extent on French architects and architects from other countries, such as the United States, (The Architects Collaborative), Italy (Ludovico Quaroni) and Denmark (Bo and Wohlert). But, as in Algeria, it was the French influence which shaped the development most strongly. The French architect Jacques Marmay, born 1906, who worked from 1933 to 1943 in Morocco arrived in Tunisia in 1943 (where he now lives in Sidi Bou Said), and was instrumental in founding the department of architecture and urbanism in Tunis. In the last three decades his buildings, such as the School in Cartagina of 1949-1955, his Palace in Rakada of 1965 and his Prefecture in Zarzouna, Biserta have responded to the influence of local traditions in the use of arches, barrel-vaulted spaces and stereometric cubic forms. Marmay's architecture is in

*The Sheraton Hotel in Hammamet, Tunisia by William Ahreng, Di Grazia and Frizzell, 1971. Photograph courtesy Ahreng, Rome.*

harmony with climate and cultural traditions.

Another architect who has had a strong influence on contemporary Tunisian architecture is Oliver-Clement Cacoub, who was commissioned to build prominent buildings for the government such as the Presidential Palace in Skanes, the Congress Palaces in Bizerta and Tunis, the Children's Center in Kassar Said, a College in Monastir, and to work out the plans for the city of Kabaria, a satellite town for Tunis. Closest to the re-evocation of old village life in Tunisia is the Tourist Center in Skanes, built in 1966, in which Cacoub integrated streets and squares into the overall plan in order to create a totally articulated environment for touristic purposes.

In determining the contemporary identity of Tunisian architecture the work of Serge Santelli has to be considered as one of the major forces. Santelli was born in 1944 in Paris and was educated in France and the USA. After his studies with Louis I. Kahn in Philadelphia he was appointed Professor at the Institute of Technology in Tunis. Asked in an interview published in *Mimar 2*

(1981), about the creation of a new design vocabulary in Tunisia, Santelli answered: "Within a political framework which has lately encouraged a search for national identity, architects in the Maghreb have felt inclined to adapt their production to an Arab-Muslim esthetic in order to satisfy a perceived need on the part of the population to return to their sources. In Tunisia their language has become 'Tunisified': arcades, cupolas, columns and capitals of carved stone, coloured tiles and multiple irregularities of form for purely picturesque effects now cover the facades of new construction". He continues to evaluate this widespread tendency especially in touristic buildings: "This language operates as a cosmetic decoration within spatial configurations that remain essentially European".

Santelli's own buildings, among them the apartment hotel in Sousse of 1981, reduces the building elements to elementary structures which organise the total environment of 110 apartments as an urban form, with the open spaces of the courtyards relating to the balconies.

The majority of Tunisian architects can rarely compete with recent works by foreign architects but one of the Tunisian architects who falls into this category is Ezzedine Ben-Gadha. He was born in 1924 in Sousse and after his studies worked for the Ministry of Public Works in Tunisia, building a large number of public buildings. Among these buildings are the Cite Ez-Zahra in Sousse of 1967, the Hospital Mahmoud Bourgiba in Monastir of 1968, and the Ecole normale des Instituteurs in Sfax of 1967. They are clearly within the limits of the earlier French architectural vocabulary.

The works of other Tunisian architects such as Mohamed Ajmi Mimita, who is a professor at the School of Architecture in Tunis, continue the early French direction and lack a convincing Tunisian identity. These tasks, in a country where tourism plays an important role are, of course, intensely complicated and influenced by economic facts. The hotels in Hammamet and on the Island Djerba by architects such as Claus Bremer from Denmark, J.U. Kyriacopoulos from Greece (Hotel Meridien in Tunis, 1961-1970), Paolo Ghera from Italy, William H. Ahrens, Di Grazia and Frizzell from Italy, have to be seen as part of the international scene of touristic buildings which relate to the local environment and traditional culture, but do so only on the level of commercially successful solutions, not on that of expressing a cultural identity of the Tunisian Muslim population.

It is with this precondition in mind that the few constructive attempts of architectural and urban preservation in Tunisia have to be evaluated, as this preservation of Islamic heritage may also be exploited solely



for touristic purposes. The city of Sidi Bou Said was awarded an Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1980 for the preservation of its urban environment. The old streets and squares, more or less in conflict with contemporary vehicular traffic requirements, were preserved in order to present the foreign tourist the illusion of an image of the past. Ways of how to productively relate this romantic image of a different era with the actual working conditions of contemporary Tunisians has yet to be found. On the other hand, realistic steps in this direction can be seen in the Training Center for Cabinet makers, which was recently completed in Monastir by the Danish architects Vilhelm Wohlert and Jorgen Bo (1965-1967) in which fifty 14-18 year old Tunisians will be taught professions which will, hopefully, give them a future in Tunisia. Even though the architectural language of the building clearly reflects its Danish origin, it does not contradict the Tunisian tradition.

The most important contribution for a future autonomous Tunisian architecture can be found in the few buildings by the architect Tarek Ben Miled, which not only reflect the best concepts of the Tunisian tradition, but are also on the international level of a contemporary architectural language. Ben Miled was born in Tunis in 1945 and studied architecture with Carlo

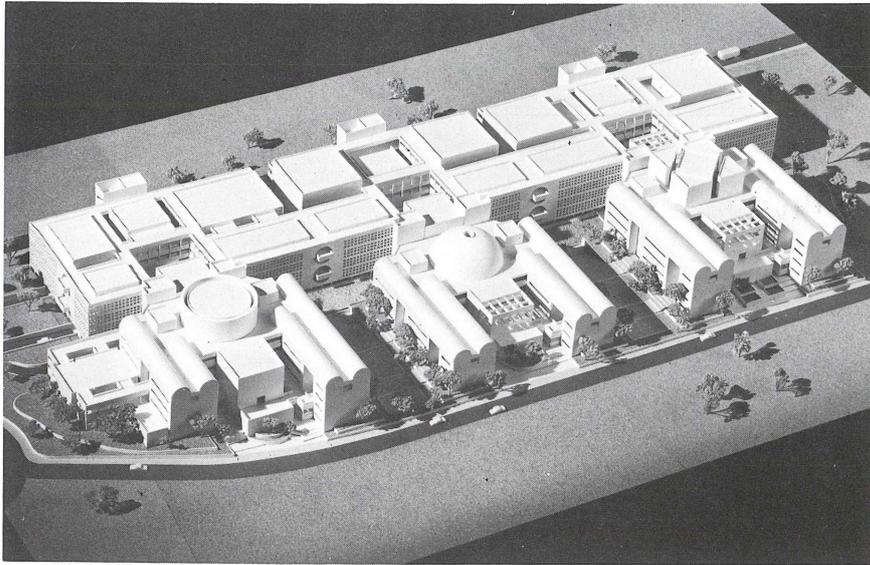
*Sidi Bou Said, Tunisia, a picturesque town conserved through legislation, retains its traditional ambiance. It is now mainly a vacation resort for well-to-do Tunisians and foreigners who maintain homes in the town. Photograph: C. Little/Aga Khan Awards.*

Scarra in Venice, Italy, where he received his doctorate in architecture in 1973. In the years between 1970 and 1973, he participated in the UNESCO project for the preservation of the medina of Tunis which brought him in direct contact with the urban reality of his home town and the yet unsolved dilemma of how to regenerate the old centre in harmony with contemporary needs.

Since 1975 Ben Miled has been teaching at the ITAUT in Tunis in both, history of architecture and architectural composition, working for the unification of these much too long separated disciplines. In collaboration with his wife, Jelila Ben Miled, an interior designer, he has completed several buildings, among them, housing, schools, hotels and urban planning proposals. One of Ben Miled's major goals is to regain the universal harmony of past centuries based on a creative relationship of human concern with a cultural value system. Whether this can be interpreted as a specific Tunisian identity remains to be seen, as the tradition of the country is one of complexity and contradiction.

**T**he political and social experiment in contemporary Libya, can be seen as an alternative to the conservative Arab states. The Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamaharyia which was declared in 1977 constitutes a state for the masses, combining Hellenistic fundamentals of democracy with extreme Islamic beliefs. Libya is mainly desert, with a small coastal area of fertile land: 1,759,400 square kilometres and populated by 2,600,000 people. The capital is Tripoli with around 700,000 inhabitants, and the second largest city is Benghazi, with 350,000 inhabitants.

As in Algeria and Tunisia, the first inhabitants of the country were the Berbers. In 630 the Arab invasion brought Islam to Libya and between 971 and 1045 Libya was ruled, along with Tunisia and eastern Algeria, by the Zirid Emirs who were loyal to the Fatimid Caliphs in Egypt. The 16th Century saw wars with pirates, a Spanish occupation and, finally, in 1551, the Turkish occupation. Libya remained part of the Ottoman Empire until 1711 when Ahmed Karamanlis, a Turkish official in Libya seized power and established a government of his own which, until 1835, was recognised by the Ottoman Empire. Then Libya was again made a province ruled for Con-



*Left: Model for El-Fateh University, Tripoli, Libya, by Kisho Kurokawa, due for completion in 1985. Photograph courtesy Kurokawa, Tokyo.*

stantinople. In 1911 the Italians invaded the country and established a colonial regime which ended in World War II, when Libya was the battlefield for German and Anglo-American troops. In 1951 Libya was declared independent under King Idris, who in September 1969, was overthrown by Qadaffi.

The immense oil revenues since the late fifties have made Libya an important world trade partner. There have been internal reforms in all areas, which have wide-reaching consequences for the building of new universities, schools, housing, hospitals, factories and streets. Not only are all levels of education and health care free for every citizen, but also the right to free housing. As in Algeria, which retains a close relationship to France, Libya relies on British expertise for large-scale architectural and planning work. In 1973 Colin Buchanan and Partners were appointed as consultants to the National Housing Corporation, which has influenced the housing situation in Libya.

The building of the most important institution for higher learning in Libya, the University of Garyounis in Benghazi, was commissioned to the English architect James Cubitt in 1966. Most of this work was completed by 1981. Other individual commissions given to British architects in Libya include the plant houses in the Nasr Forest in Tripoli by Mathews Ryan Partnership, to be completed in 1983.

Besides architects from England, Italian, Finnish and Japanese architects have also been invited to contribute to the new goals of the country. The Italian Paolo Andina built the General Tobacco Company Plant near Tripoli in 1979; The Finnish architects Simo Jaevinen and Eero Valjakka developed a structural system for use in Libya which especially addresses the climatic conditions. The result was a standard block of three storey flats and courthouses

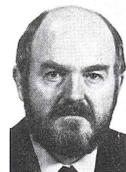
for the city of Tripoli. Another Finnish project was developed by the firm Devecon Oy for Ras Lanuf, a new town with a population of 40,000. The commission was given in 1979, and in 1981 building began on the urban concept of a linear town with high rise buildings in the centre. Work began in 1983 in a hotel with 200 rooms and a shopping centre as well as 200 flats.

Another new town with an axially planned centre with three neighbourhoods grouped around it was developed by the Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa for D'as-Sahir in the south of the country, designated for a population of 20,000 inhabitants and projected to be completed in 1990. Kurokawa was also commissioned to design the centre of El-Fatah University in Tripoli, the Gharyan Seismological Research Building of El-Fatah University, the Higher Institute for Management and Banking Services in Tripoli and the Omar Mukhtar Memorial Park in Soluk, all to be completed in 1984 and 1985.

In comparison, the contributions by Libyan architects remain insignificant. The vast number of commissions given to architects from England, Finland and Japan create a discrepancy in Libya that is greater than in any other Arab state. One of the few exceptions is the Libyan architect Intisar Azzouz Al-Sanousi who is primarily devoted to her teaching at Al-Fatah University in Tripoli and to her efforts toward preservation of the architectural heritage of the country.

Libya has a long way to go in gaining an architectural identity, as do all other Arab states. The short span of little more than a decade makes it more visible in the case of contemporary architecture in Libya, as no links with earlier traditions have yet been established.

Ideally, all these efforts should be synchronised into one process in which each element reinforces the other.



*Udo Kultermann is Professor of Architecture at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. He is the author of numerous books and articles on modern architecture.*

