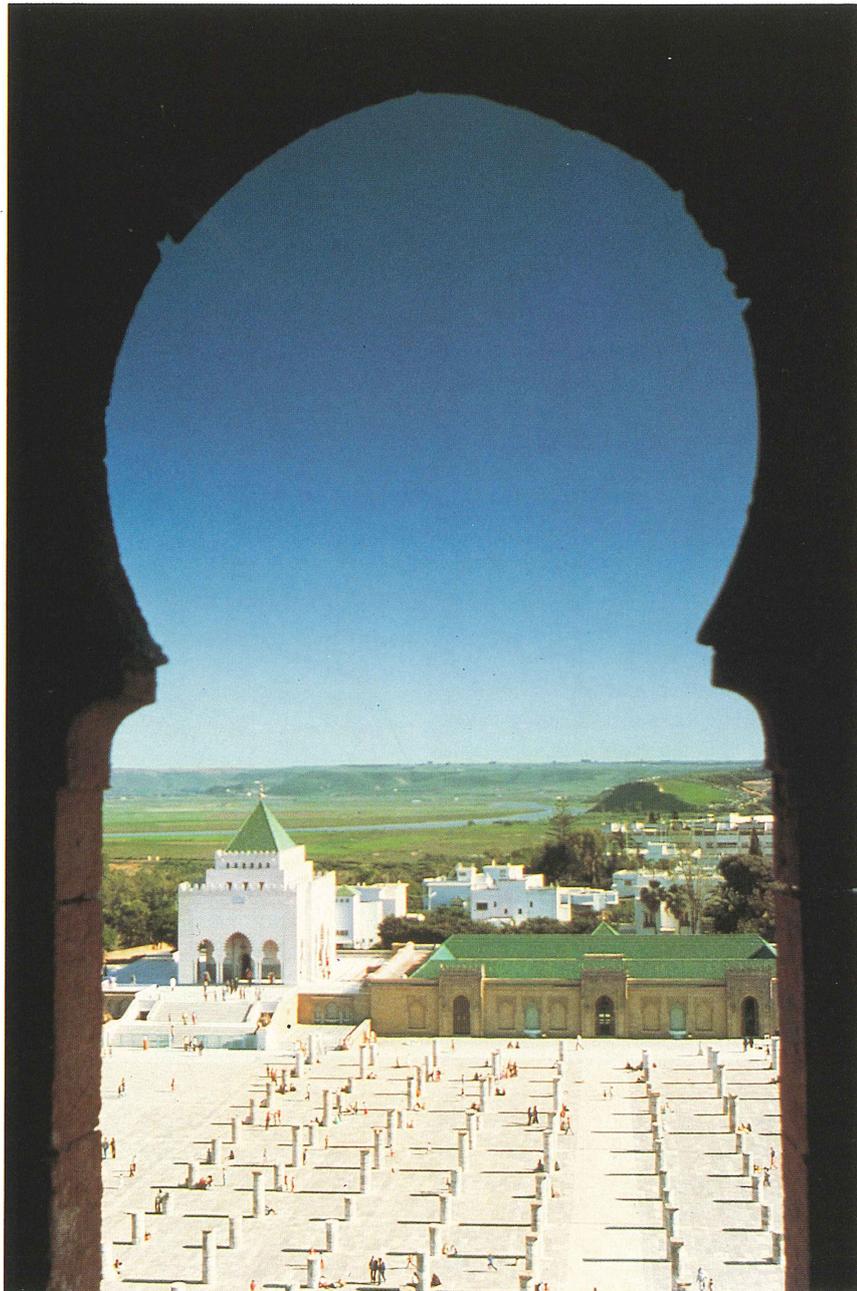


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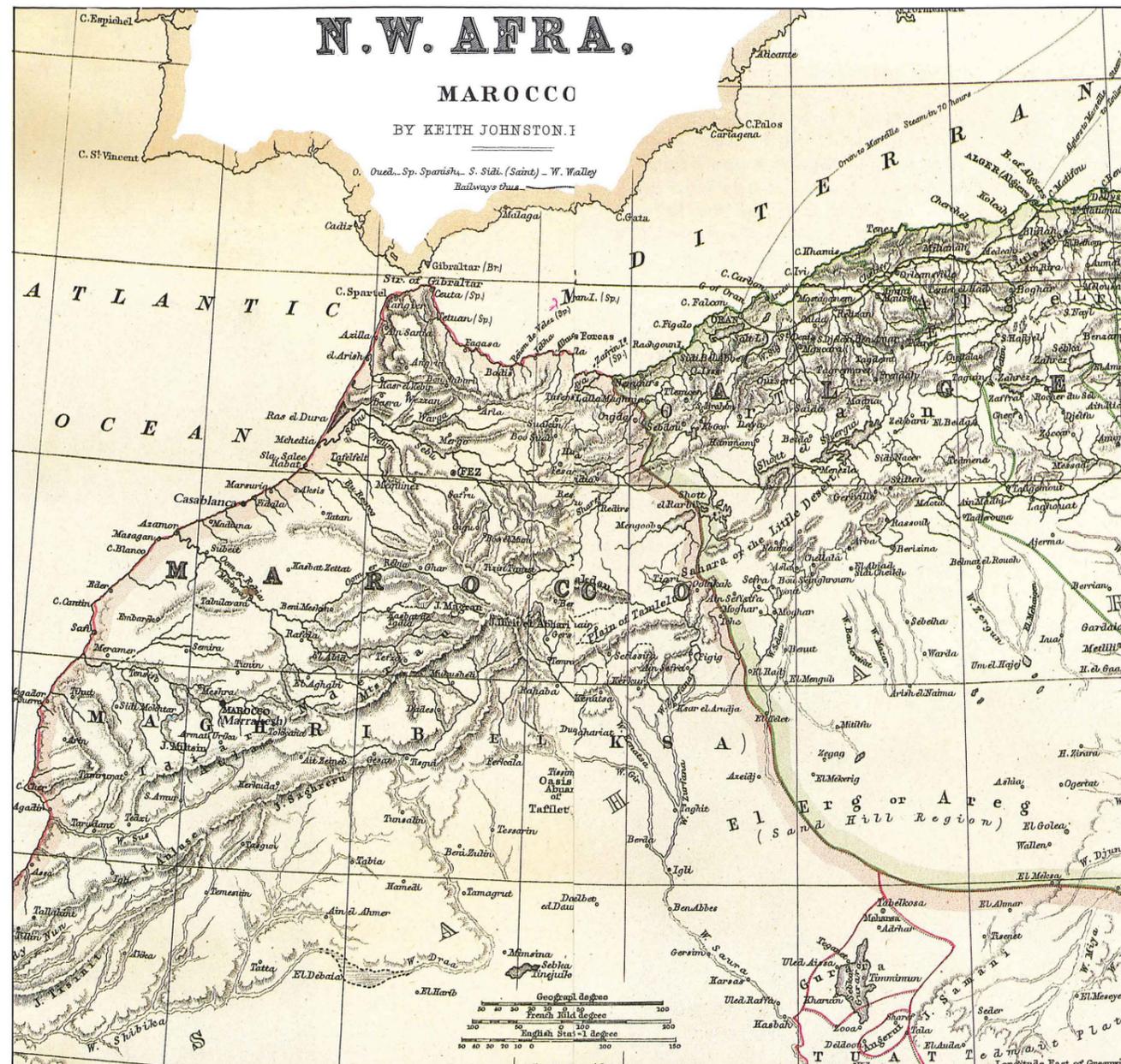
Fascinating things are happening architecturally-speaking in Morocco these days, in spite of the slow-down in building generally as a result of the international economic situation. There is much activity and discussion surrounding official recognition of the architect's professional status earlier this year, and subsequent negotiations between representatives of the profession and the government on new legislation defining the role of the architect in Moroccan society.

The personalities and institutions that have become involved in the architectural debate in the country are as intriguing as the quality of what is actually being produced today. His Majesty King Hassan II set the tone in January, 1986 by addressing an assembly of architects invited to the royal palace in Marrakesh — a speech comparable to several previous ones he has made in recent years, the specific content of which spells out the parameters for future architectural development. In addition, architecture and urban planning are now administratively under the direction of the Ministry of the Interior (including the teaching of these subjects), although Habitat has remained a separate ministry. Reorganisation and decentralisation of the existing Order of Moroccan Architects has followed, and architecture has even been featured in front-page articles in national daily newspapers (see *l'Opinion*, week of 27 June 1986). Finally, it is noteworthy that the new faculty of architecture in Rabat (E.N.A.) created in 1983, graduated its first group of students a few months ago.

Such effervescence is indeed a significant expression of public interest and concern in a country with some 800 registered architects now, the majority in private practice; however, approximately 300 of these have jobs in various public administrations, many as part of their national service obligations. In spirit, this latter system is well-founded: knowledge and experience gained in the public sector, on the side of administrations as clients, allows young architects to perceive the country's needs for housing, schools, institutional buildings, and to comprehend the resources, limitations, and procedures of governmental commissions from the inside. On the negative side, as everywhere they may not be given a chance in such a short, 2 or 3-year period to exercise their design capabilities on behalf of the administration, and may even find themselves doing tasks not directly related to their previous training. Yet it must be said that much of the lively, positive debate in Morocco focussed on architecture and planning is due to high-level policy-makers stimulating, inciting the profession to become maximally, responsibly involved.

Situated on the northwest shores of the African continent, and the western periphery of the Muslim world, Morocco has a long and rich Islamic cultural heritage (see the guide to Rabat in this issue). Within its present borders the country is composed of quite diverse geographical regions, from temperate climate and rich soil along the coastal plains, to arid deserts and high mountains inland. Benefitting from a wide cross-section of ethnic and tribal groups over the centuries, Arabs, Berbers, Hebrews, who have left their imprint on the physical environment under these geographical conditions, there has arisen several distinct forms of architecture in different regions.

Apart from these regional vernacular traditions, this country can rightly claim to possess one of the greatest and



best-preserved legacies of monumental and palatial Muslim architecture in the world. Much of this legacy has been recorded and published over the years (see Andre Paccard, *Le Maroc et l'Artisanat traditionnel Islamique dans l'Architecture* reviewed in MIMAR 2) and has, over the last decade, been the source of imitation and, more rarely, inspiration in new designs. *Maalem*, or master-builders, from Morocco have been greatly respected and sought after elsewhere in the world for centuries, particularly in Africa and the Middle East. Above all it is the refined decorative work, whether in mosaic tile, stucco, wood or stone, for which these craftsmen are the most renowned.

Attempts are being made to reintegrate traditional materials and motifs into modern architectural designs (see article by Mr. Mohammed Chebaa in this issue), occasionally with truly debatable results. So unique to Morocco are some of the techniques and decorative patterns, those based upon *zelliges* tiles for example, that it has even

been suggested these constitute a basis for a national style of architecture today. This is not the thesis of Mr. Chebaa, nor of very many architects, who point out that traditional crafts can only be meaningfully included in a contemporary architectural language when there is understanding and participation between architects and craftsmen right from the outset of design conception. However, a major obstacle to achieving such a collaboration is the limited number of artisans capable of executing the highest quality workmanship; hence, their contribution becomes expensive.

Among the innovative efforts to reintroduce spatial or decorative principles of traditional Moroccan building to contemporary programmes, the work of architect Abdelrahim Sijelmassi is exemplary. Steeped in the tenets of modern architecture in the West from his training in France, Sijelmassi's work over the years since his return to practice in Casablanca shows a subtle incorporation of elements from his own culture: the central (covered) cour-

tyard garden in the plan of his brother's house for example, and the arrangement of typically Moroccan sitting rooms and sleeping areas around it; the volumes, proportions and some of the detailing of the Fez Bus Station recall, but on a really secondary level, monumental buildings of the past; his bank in Marrakesh responds to the urban context of the former colonial new town, even down to predominant colours, without resorting to superficial 'Moroccanisation' in decor. A studio-house for the Moroccan painter Belkhaia is under construction in mud brick, at the client's request, and represents Sijelmassi's first experimentation with this material — although the architectural vocabulary retains a modern flavour. In each project Sijelmassi's answer is determinedly contemporary, searching for a convincing, unstrained balance of modern sensitivity and traditional elements. One of the best synthetic statements of the trend this architect represents is the competition design he did several years ago with a group of architects (Moumen Ibnabdeljalil, A. Lazrak, and others) calling themselves the Collectif d'Architecture, for the new National School of Architecture located in the city of Meknes. Their project won First Prize and was to be erected on an unique historic site near the old ramparts; unfortunately, no final decision on construction has been forthcoming.

Among the most pressing problems in Morocco, as in most rapidly urbanising countries, is that of providing adequate amounts of low-income housing to meet a radical demographic growth in the cities. Whereas only 20% of the Moroccan population lived in cities in the 1930's, today more than 45% do so, and nearly one-half of this figure are people crammed into the peripheral, spontaneously-conceived shelters around large cities like Casablanca. The government, acting through building societies such as the Compagnie Generale Immobiliere (C.G.I.) and the Etablissement regional d'Amenagement et de Construction (E.R.A.C.), has endeavoured to meet some of these needs. Dar Lamane neighbourhood (see elsewhere in this issue) with its 4000 new housing units at an incredible cost of US100 per square metre is an impressive example of conceiving, financing and erecting mass housing on a vast scale. Parallel to such experiences have been the activities of the E.R.A.C. in different locales, of which the branch in Marrakesh has been among the most dynamic. In addition to funding new medium — and low-income housing built with conventional materials, they are financing research into earth construction, practical in that region of the country, by commissioning several different architects to conceive and then oversee the achievement of experimental prototypes. By seeking to diversify the housing options (for example, stone or even wood in other regions) such public clients hope to develop appropriate alternatives to the purely conventional construction methods — taking into account of course the scale of any given operation.

The examples of recent architecture in Morocco presented here constitute only a tiny glimpse into what is in reality transpiring there, but they are nonetheless a reasonably valid barometer of the climate, in terms of attitudes, trends, policies and debates. Few other countries of comparable size and wealth of architectural heritage are doing as much in this realm — perhaps no others.

Editors