

Final Report: Agadir, Morocco: *Synthetic City*

Boston Society of Architects Rotch Traveling Studio 2009

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After being destroyed by an earthquake in 1960, the coastal city of Agadir, Morocco was completely reconstructed according to CIAM Athens Charter principles. Today Agadir is one of the least known, but most uniquely important sites of modern architecture and urbanism in the world. The architecture of Agadir **synthesized** the hybrid culture of a newly independent nation still rooted in Islamic tradition, but also irreversibly transformed by its ties to France. By exposing students to this North African version of modernism, this studio invited students to develop a broader and more critical understanding of the legacy of modern architecture and the diversity of its global influence...

In May and June of 2009, Assistant Professor Marshall Brown toured Morocco with ten students from the IIT College of Architecture. The travel was funded by the Rotch Traveling Studio Scholarship from the Boston Society of Architects. This special grant is given to one school of architecture in the United States annually to fund a single traveling studio. In a period of three weeks they traveled to six cities: Casablanca, Marrakech, Essaouira, Agadir, Sidi Ifni and Rabat. In addition to the specific history of Moroccan urbanism, the studio also focused on the intersection of urbanism and tourism. In general, Morocco relies heavily on tourism as a major part of its economy, as now do many countries and cities around the world.

Agadir, in particular, has become a major destination for vacationing Europeans and Moroccans, as it boasts one of the best beaches in the country. The master plan of Agadir was for a city of 50,000 people and it now supports a population of 200,000. Therefore, considering the enhancement of Agadir's urban core for the integration of urban and tourism related activities was our challenge. After the 1960 cataclysm, the strategy for Agadir was to create a more concentrated city where typically urban and other activities could be mixed together to create an intense and rich social life. However, modernist zoning principles created a spatial organization for the city that has resulted in disjunction and disconnection between different uses and user groups. Current tourist developments also threaten the future viability of this model by dispersing density and creating privatized enclaves far outside the city, and Agadir now supports more than one quarter of the hotel capacity of Morocco. Thus our research focused on strategies for reinvigorating the 1960's urban core by capturing the increasing growing tourist activity in ways that enhance the existing architectural heritage, while also managing ecological impacts. Given the scale of the problem, students worked at the variable scales of master planning, landscape and architecture.

The trip began in Casablanca, where the students studied principles of inhabitation behind Morocco's unique strain of modern architecture on tours guided by Casamemoire, an organization dedicated to the preservation of Casablanca's architectural heritage. Tours were led by Casamemoire Director Abderrahim Kassou and fellow architect Laure Augereau and included visits to the colonial center of Casablanca as well as to important housing projects on the periphery by ATBAT Afrique and others. Tremendous contributions were made by Sophia Sebti, local architect and IIT alumna, who developed our entire itinerary for Casablanca which also included a special visit to the architecture office of Omar Alaoui, located in the former home of Elie Azagury, one of the key architects from the reconstruction of Agadir.

Following Casablanca, we traveled south to Marrakech, where the students experienced contemporary life in a traditional Moroccan *medina*. We also spent five days living in a *riad*, a traditional Moroccan courtyard house. The students spent days and nights exploring ancient monuments and *souks* (markets). A day long excursion was also taken into the foothills of the Atlas Mountains to spend time at a weekly country market and in small Berber villages. Immediately following Marrakech, we headed on for two days in Essaouira, a beautiful fortified city on the sea that for some time has been a very popular bohemian tourist destination, especially for Europeans.

But the main destination was Agadir, where the group spent several days surveying the condition of the 1960's urban core in order to understand how it operates today, in the context of Agadir's transformation into a global

tourist destination. While in Agadir, the group engaged in a multi-day workshop with Moroccan architect and historian, Ahmed El-Hariri. The students focused on strategies for **reanimating** the modernist urban core in ways that address the urban and ecological challenges of current tourism-related coastal development. The focus area for our study was an axis stretching from the New Talbordjt (a new *medina* built after the reconstruction) down to the sea. Mr. Hariri emphasized not only the history of the reconstruction, but also current problems of preservation as they relate to the developing urban culture of Agadir which is so heavily influenced by the ebb and flow of tourist activities. Their field research and analysis was eventually brought back to IIT and used as a basis for developing a series of design proposals for public spaces and public infrastructures that stretch from the urban core to the tourist zone on the coast. These design proposals, as well as material collected during the trip are being assembled in an exhibition that will travel to Boston and possibly to Morocco for the 50th anniversary of the reconstruction of Agadir.

After a brief pause in Sidi Ifni, an old Spanish garrison two hours south of Agadir, we rejoined Sophia Sebti in Rabat, the capital of Morocco. There we spent a day at the Ecole Nationale d'Architecture (ENA) where our students had the opportunity to present the preliminary results from our travel and research to students and faculty at ENA. IIT and ENA students spent the rest of the day together, sharing lunch, music, and a tour of the center city where IIT students were able to see the beginnings of some of the new infrastructural developments that are radically transforming the city with light rail and a reconfigured harbor. During the visit, Marshall Brown and Sophia Sebti also met with Dean Mountassir Bensaid, who welcomed us to the school and expressed sincere interest in continuing to develop exchange programs between IIT and ENA, which has already developed associations with schools in Europe, but has yet to connect with any institutions in the United States.

Upon return to the United States, the studio spent the remaining six weeks of the course developing the proposals they had started in Agadir. Working in teams, they developed three proposals for new public infrastructure in the center of Agadir. The projects were exhibited in Mies Van der Rohe's S.R. Crown Hall in time for the opening of the fall 2009 semester.