

the mediterranean medina

international seminar



TABLE OF CONTENTS

- pag. 11 Ludovico MICARA, Attilio PETRUCCIOLI, Ettore VADINI
Introduction
- pag. 13 André RAYMOND
Presentation des thèmes
- Photographic Atlas**
- pag. 17 **AR - The Role of the Archaeological Remains in the Formation of the Mediterranean Medina**
- pag. 19 Quenza BOUGHERIRA-HADJI
Integration of a Medina on a Roman site. The Case of Cherchell.
- pag. 25 Giovanna BRAMBILLA
Between East and West: the Sicilian Code.
- pag. 31 Khaldun BSHARA
The Roman City of Jerusalem. Searching for an Identity.
- pag. 39 Youcef CHENNAOUI
The Forms of Urban Transformations of the Roman City in the Medina of Cherchell.
- pag. 44 Alessandro MASSARENTE
The Story of the Different Meanings of a Ruin. A Project by Adalberto Libera for the Augustus Mausoleum and Ara Pacis in Rome.
- pag. 49 Michael MILOJEVIC
Medina as Palimpsest: Centre and Periphery.
- pag. 56 Mohamed SAIDI, Palma LIBRATO
From the Grid to the Labyrinth. The Medina with a Roman Substratum in the Cases of Miliana and Koléa, Algeria.
- pag. 61 **MA - Marginal Areas Echoing the Urban Mediterranean Identity**
- pag. 63 Mahvash ALEMI
Safavid Gardens, Khiyaban and Maydan as Theatres for Kingship Display.
- pag. 69 Angela DE MARCO
Mediterranean, Unformal Economy and Industrial Clusters: Mutations and Perspectives.
- pag. 75 Carmelina GUGLIUZZO
Maltese Mdina
- pag. 80 Carla LANGELLA
Designing Bioclimatic Open Space Paths for Promoting and Selling Local Typical Products in the Mediterranean Area. The Case of the Rehabilitation of an Ancient Coastal Path in the Sorrentina Peninsula.
- pag. 85 Mariavaleria MININNI
Architecture, Nature, Agriculture in the Landscape of Oases. Siwa Oasis.
- pag. 91 Carlo POZZI
Culture of Excavation and Sculptural Geometry of the Ground.
- pag. 95 Maria Gabriella TROVATO
The Proximity Landscape in the Urban Reality of Morocco.
- pag. 99 Michel VAN DER MEERSCHEN
Jama'al Fna: a Forum for Cultural Exchange.
- pag. 103 Rosanna VENEZIANO
High-Low Technologies for the Mediterranean Production Activities, Toward Sustainable Strategies.

Dusan VUKSANOVIC <i>Transposition of Traditional Building Patterns in Montenegro.</i>	pag. 107
MBT - The Mediterranean Building Technologies	pag. 111
Roberto RUGGERI <i>Climatic Factors and Carrying Structures Decay on Masonry Walls Made up of Limestones, Mortar and Plaster.</i>	pag. 113
MCH - The Mediterranean Courtyard House	pag. 119
Carlo ATZENI <i>Court Houses in Sardinia, Patio Houses in Andalusia. Mediterranean Variations on the Topic of Full and Empty Spaces in the Culture of Traditional Housing.</i>	pag. 121
Aydan BALAMIR, Türkan URAZ <i>The Extrovert Courtyard House: an Urban Typology in Mardin. The Mungan House.</i>	pag. 127
Francesca DE FILIPPI, Irene CALTABIANO <i>The Berber Courtyard House: Space, Form and Building Systems. A Case-Study in Tannougalt (Drâa Valley, Morocco).</i>	pag. 133
A. Senem DEVIREN <i>The Inside Story. Courtyard Experiences in an Eastern Mediterranean City.</i>	pag. 141
Benedetto DI CRISTINA <i>A 20th Century Kasbah: Courtyard Building in Modern Architecture.</i>	pag. 147
Khalid EL HARROUNI <i>Improving the Indoor Climate of the Traditional Courtyard House in the Medina of Rabat – Morocco.</i>	pag. 153
Eliana GITTO <i>Designing a House in Nefta Today.</i>	pag. 161
Michele M. LEPORE <i>The Energetic-Environmental Characteristics of the Courtyards. The Ortigia Courtyards Case Study.</i>	pag. 167
Carlo MOCCIA, Annalinda NEGLIA <i>The Courtyard House in Kairouan.</i>	pag. 173
Roula NTEFEH, Christian MARENNE, Daniel SIRET <i>Old and Contemporary Mediterranean Courtyard: Between Climatic Performance and Social Evolution.</i>	pag. 179
Muain QASEM <i>Courtyard Housing in Palestine: Typological Analysis and Development.</i>	pag. 185
Paola RAFFA <i>The Courtyard Houses of Tunisian Oasis. Houch Bakimi, Nefta: Architecture of a Domestic Space.</i>	pag. 190
Magda SIBLEY <i>The Courtyard Houses of the Medina of Fez: Contemporary Transformations and Space Use Patterns.</i>	pag. 194
MM - The Modern in the Medina	pag. 201
Tarek ABDELSALAM <i>The Architectural Legacy and Contemporary Identity: Impact of the Early 20th Century Architecture of Beirut on the Architectural Identity of its New Central District.</i>	pag. 203
Mourad BOUTEFLIKA <i>The « Diaries » of Alger by Fernand Pouillon. Visions of Urban Architecture.</i>	pag. 212

- pag. 217 Ozgur DINCYUREK, Ozlem Olgac TURKER
Global Understanding in the Search of New Design Principles for Contemporary Living Environments: Can Common Heritage Be a Design Tool for Reunification of Divided Cyprus?
- pag. 223 **UA - Urban Analysis Case Studies**
- pag. 225 Arianna AMBROGIO, Caterina CAROCCI, Vittorio CERADINI, Mario DE CUNZO, Paola TEREZNI
The Medina Kadima in Tripoli. Techniques of Construction and Critical Analyses of the Structural Damages and Material Degradation.
- pag. 231 Giuseppe ANDRIANI, Domenico CATANIA, Luigi GUASTAMACCHIA
The Medina of Antakia: Diachronic Analysis from the Fabric of the City to the Building Work System.
- pag. 237 Zarminae ANSARI
The Historic Medina: Understanding Through Comparison. The case of Essaouira, Morocco and Chiniot, Pakistan.
- pag. 244 Barbara BARTOLI
The "Environmental Typology" Approach and the Mediterranean Medina.
- pag. 247 Benedetta BIONDI, Chiara CIRINNA, Saverio MECCA, Franco SACCHETTI
Innovation and Sustainability in Architecture and Traditional Technologies in a Rural Settlement of Drâa Valley, Southern Morocco.
- pag. 253 Maurizio BRADASCHIA
Trieste 2010.
- pag. 259 Emiliano BUGATTI
The Istanbul Divanyolu: Urban Transformations Between 19th and 20th Century and Rehabilitation Urban Projects.
- pag. 265 Gianluca CADONI, Annalisa MOSETTO
Searching for an Urban-Upgrading Project in the Tradition of the Medina of Gafsa in Tunisia.
- pag. 271 Paolo CARLOTTI
Traces of Historical Buildings in the Urban Fabric of Apulia.
- pag. 279 Maurice CERASI
The Central Axis of Istanbul: Urban Spolia, Mediterranean Compactness and Asiatic Looseness.
- pag. 285 Naima CHABBI-CHEMROUK, G. LAHLOUH, Farid KHALIL
A Plea for the Development of Sensitive Approaches to Sustaining Historical Structures Through their Adaptive Reuse.
- pag. 289 Pilar CHÍAS
New Methods and Technologies Applied on the Study of the Historical Heritage: the Use of Gis and Photogrammetry.
- pag. 291 Barbara CIPRIANI
Dynamics of Self-Representations in a Context of Reconstruction: the Souks of Downtown and Bourj Hammoud in Beirut, Lebanon.
- pag. 297 Simonetta CIRANNA
Roman Persistence and Re-use of Ancient Remains.
- pag. 301 Danya CRITES
From Mosque to Cathedral: Late Medieval Religious Architecture in Seville.
- pag. 307 Cory CROCKER
Sustainable Analysis of a Historic Italian Hilltown.
- pag. 312 Nadia Samaia DAOUDI, R. BENSALAM
The Sanitary Decree as an Urbanization Tool: the Case Study of Algiers' Atrium Buildings.
- pag. 321 Giuseppina DE GIOVANNI
Support Project to the Protection of the Cultural Heritage in the Medina of Oujda.

Adriana DE MIRANDA <i>The Islamic Architecture in Medieval Palermo: a Case Study of Cefalà Diana.</i>	pag. 325
Ozgur DINCYUREK <i>Cypriot Vernacular Architecture. The Study of a Distinctive Natural and Cultural Environment.</i>	pag. 331
Mahmoud Ahmed EISSA <i>The Benefits of Compact Urban Fabric as a Green Community.</i>	pag. 339
Anton ESCHER <i>Rehabilitation of the Mediterranean Medina in Morocco.</i>	pag. 345
K. Kutgün EYÜPGILLER, Mine TOPÇUBAŞI <i>Urban Analysis in Historical Antakya.</i>	pag. 351
Elizabeth FENTRESS <i>Excavations in Medieval Settlements at Volubilis 2000-2004.</i>	pag. 357
Maria Cristina FORLANI <i>Sustainable Materials, Dimensions and Technologies for the Rehabilitation and the Construction with "Raw-Earth".</i>	pag. 364
Vincenza GAROFALO <i>The Muqarnas of the Zisa in Palermo: High Artistic Expression Fruit of the Cohabitation Between Two Cultures.</i>	pag. 371
Enrico GENOVESI <i>Preservation of a Precious Heritage in Libyan Medinas.</i>	pag. 375
Gian Marco GIRGENTI <i>Palermo: the Urban Space of the Market-Roads.</i>	pag. 383
Khalid Al-Sayed AL-HAGLA <i>Medina Transformation Versus Sustaining Identity. Vitality of Medina Genetic Characteristics Towards Cultural Sustainability. Alexandria, Egypt: Case Study.</i>	pag. 391
Annegrete HOHMANN-VOGRIN <i>A Study on the Historic Center of Nablus, Palestine.</i>	pag. 400
Tarek KAHLAOUI <i>Tracing Urbanization in Early Modern Jerba.</i>	pag. 406
Hind KAROUI <i>Luminous Environment in the Bourgeois Domestic Architecture of the XVIIIth Century in the Medina of Tunis.</i>	pag. 415
Farid KHALIL <i>Learning from the Past: the Kasbah of Algiers. Historical Process of its Formation-Transformation.</i>	pag. 419
Annarita LAMBERTI <i>White City Mediterranean Medina. Tel Aviv.</i>	pag. 427
Saleh LAMEI <i>Rashid (Rosetta). Past, Present and Future of a Living Heritage.</i>	pag. 433
Ludovico MICARA <i>The Model of the Medina of Tripoli. A Unique Contribution to the Understanding of the Mediterranean Cities.</i>	pag. 440
Calogero MONTALBANO <i>The Medina of Fez as Model of Settlement for the Macro Mediterranean Area.</i>	pag. 447
Attilio PETRUCCIOLI <i>The Labyrinth of the Hierarchies in the Arab Mediterranean Fabric.</i>	pag. 459
Gemma PINTO <i>Construction, Technique and Form in the Circassian Mamluk Architecture: the Mausoleum of Sultan Qaytbay in the Northern Cemetery of Cairo.</i>	pag. 467
Luigi PISANO, Claudio RUBINI, Paola TRAVERSA <i>Samarkand: a Case Study on Urban Restoration and Rehabilitation.</i>	pag. 471
Elisabetta PROCIDA <i>The Definition of Tripoli's Outlook: 1921 to 1925, Volpi and Brasini.</i>	pag. 477

MED

The Mediterranean Medina

- pag. 483 Moshira EL-RAFEY
Preservation of a Precious Heritage in the Contemporary Mediterranean City, Alexandria.
- pag. 490 Ángel Martín RAMOS
Bethlehem: the Old Town from Star Street.
- pag. 497 Nicola RIZZI, Paolo AVARELLO, Mario PANIZZA, Marco CANSIANI, Alessandra FIDANZA, Simone OMBUEN
The Medina of Constantine.
- pag. 503 Antonella RUGGERI
The Albaycín of Granada: a City in the City. Persisting Past and Changing Present.
- pag. 509 Philippe Charles SAAD
Beirut and Mount Sannin... a Contemporary Orientalist Myth.
- pag. 519 Zafer SAGDIC
The Rehabilitation Project of Suleymaniye Site (1996-2004).
- pag. 523 Adriana SARRO
Tradition and Modernity in the Mediterranean Cities. The Cities of Tunisia: Tunis, Kairouan, Tozeur, Nefta.
- pag. 529 Habib TAHARI
From Algiers and Besides. A Natural History of an Urban Morphology.
- pag. 535 Çiler Buket TOSUN
A Case Study on the Use of Traditional Dwellings as a Housing Stock: Bartın, Asma Street.
- pag. 541 Anne Parmly TOXEY
Recasting Materan Identity: the Warring and Melding of Political Ideologies Carved in Stone.
- pag. 546 Mohamed ZERARKA
The Oued-Souf Traditional Urban Centres: an (a)Typical XVlth Century Urban Planning Model.

REHABILITATION OF THE MEDITERRANEAN MEDINA IN MOROCCO

Anton Escher

The old towns of the Orient are deteriorating! Only international aid programs or some local initiatives can mainly preserve religious buildings and outstanding monuments (see Wirth 2000). However, from the beginning of the 21st century, this statement has not applied to the old towns of Morocco.

This profoundly different orientation in the Medina results from two connected phenomena: "economic globalization" and "post-modern environment." Globalization, which has been promoted since the early 70s, is characterized by the establishment of globally acting organizations in every political, economic, and cultural aspect of life, by a more effective global capital transfer, by worldwide increasingly marketable material and non-material commodities, by faster worldwide communication, and by locally independent possibilities of action of organizations, institutions, and individuals all over the world (see McMichael 1996). Economic globalization is paralleled by an altered meaning of life for the people in industrial countries and subsequently a different lifestyle. Post-modern culture has left behind the modern focus on scientific progress and rather concentrates on the present moment as the main focus of interest. Its prevailing feature is the importance of consumption. Consequently, "socio-cultural milieus" have emerged in which the main focus is not consumption and possession as such, but rather on the possession of *special* things and the way people consume. This is why the post-modern society has also been called the *society of the spectacle* (Lash/Urry 1999), in which the symbolic meaning of places and goods has become paramount.

At this point the questions which are to be answered in the following essay are raised: Who lives in the Medina? Which interests concerning their property in the Medina do the Europeans have? What does the rearrangement of the Moroccan Medina look like?

In order to answer these questions, nearly all old towns in Morocco have been searched for foreign home owners in the previous years (see fig. 1). Moroccan and

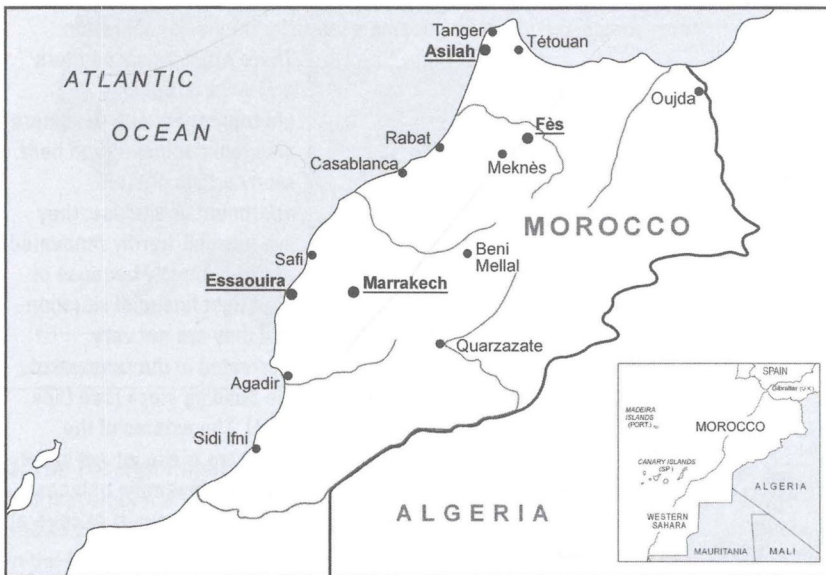


Fig. 1
Map of Morocco

foreign key persons, as well as randomly chosen foreign home owners, have been interviewed, and the design of the renovated houses has been documented. Furthermore, newspapers, lifestyle magazines, travel literature and guides, popular literature, movies, games, and other cultural products dealing with Moroccan old towns have been analyzed.

1. "Tourist Discovery" and "European Conquest" of the Moroccan Medina

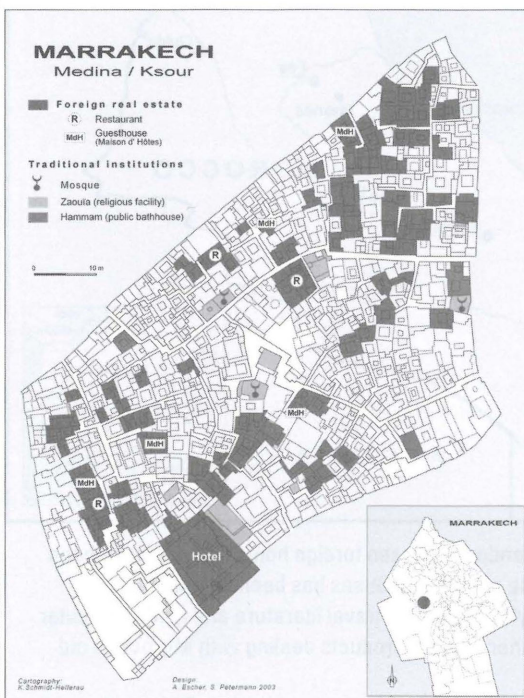
As far back as the 1920s, European artists, beginning with Jacques Majorelle, discovered "their Orient". This was because they were fascinated with the strangeness, the bright colours, the peculiar smells, the glaring sun, and the exotic people. Tangier, at that time under international administration, soon became a preferred meeting place of the high society after World War II. The focus of rich and/or intellectual dropouts shifted from Tangier to the "Gate of the Sahara," Marrakech, and to the "Gateway to Europe," Essaouira. During the 1960s, the international jet-set, psychedelic rock musicians and flower-decorated hippies met there. In addition to that, many Europeans and Americans came to Marrakech because of its expanding gay community. During the 1970s and 80s, the European influx stagnated. At the end of the 1990s, the real estate market in Essaouira and Marrakech suddenly boomed. The number of foreign home owners in Marrakech rose to 150 in the summer of 1999. A significant reason for this upturn was the broadcasting of an episode of the series "Capital" on French TV on June 14, 1998. The program dealt with the various possibilities of buying a house in the old towns of Marrakech and Essaouira and the financial and legal framework of real estate purchase in Morocco. Moreover, the print media, international movies, and the Internet have contributed to promote the oriental fairy-tale image of Marrakech and the attraction of buying a house with a garden in the inner courtyard in the Medina. Between the summer of 1999 and 2000, the number of foreign home owners in the Medina rose to about 500. In March 2003, more than 900 foreign real estate owners could be counted in the Medina of Marrakech alone.

2. The Foreign Population in the Medina of Marrakech

The French are the largest group (two thirds) in the Medina, followed by the Germans, Italians, British, Spanish, Americans, Belgians, and Swiss (fig. 2). Apart from nationality, six different types of home owners with respectively different interests in their property can be found in the foreign residential population within the Medina: intellectual artists, cosmopolitan members of the jet-set, the busy working class, tourists looking for status symbols, active pensioners, and bicultural married couples (see Petermann 2001). Intellectuals and artists were the pioneers in Marrakech, and for these long-term guests, the old town became a stage for their self-realization.

There are not only painters and writers, but also photographers and designers who look for inspiration here. Many artists rent an apartment or a house; they live in small, hardly renovated houses - mostly because of their tight financial situation - and they are not very interested in the renewal of the building stock (see Clos 2001). The estates of the members of the jet-set in the old town resemble palaces and usually consist of several houses. They are meticulously renovated and modernized; the buildings have been extensively adapted to the new occupiers' needs. The foreigners with jobs work

Fig. 2
Foreign real estate in the quarter Ksour in the Medina of Marrakech



either temporarily or permanently in Marrakech, most of them running a guest house in the Medina, exporting arts and crafts, working in the real estate market, interior architecture, catering, tourism, or the educational sector. Looking at the restoration and design of their houses, a broad variety of styles can be found, ranging from a completely new building to oriental reconstruction up to “authentic” renovation. For status-loving tourists, a house in Marrakech is a second home under the southern sun. Since the tourists spend most of their vacation within their own walls, the inner courtyard is an especially good place for recovery, relaxation and celebration. Correspondingly, the design of the purchased house, which is often modelled after architectural examples by well-known artists belonging to the “oriental scene,” is very important. The examples can be found in magazines, or a local architect is employed. Many active pensioners, who have all established professional or private connections to Morocco at some stage in their lives, decide to retire temporarily or permanently to Marrakech. They look after the renovation of their houses with care and dedication, while the extent of the construction work depends on their budget. Furthermore, Marrakech is a new home for bicultural married couples, who opt for Marrakech either right after their wedding or after having lived in Europe for many years. This smallest of all groups consists mainly of foreign women who met their husbands in Marrakech. Their houses are very functionally equipped, according to the cultural premises of the Moroccan society.

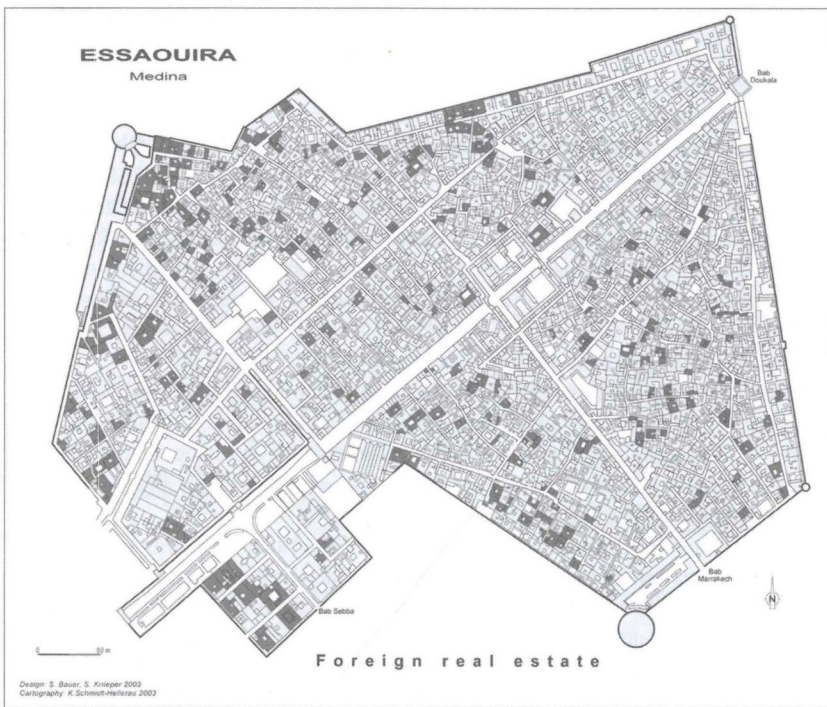


Fig. 3
Foreign real estate in the Medina of Essaouira

3. The Foreign Population in the Medina of Essaouira

The last empirical data collection in the Medina of Essaouira in the spring of 2003 shows 298 non-Moroccan real estate owners, who possess more than 320 properties in the Medina. Only buildings that foreigners renovated, reconstructed and/or use and live in were considered (see fig. 3). More than half of all owners, 148 people are French. The second largest group, with almost 15 percent, are German owners. Four main types can be identified among this population: creative people, intellectual dropouts, tourists, and pensioners. The creative people are real estate owners who in the broader sense are artistic or creative professionals, such as photographers, architects, painters, authors, Internet designers, advertising managers, and scientists.

They possess a high potential of creativity and look for the confrontation with the unknown and the different, which very often can be seen early on in their biographies. The intellectual dropouts often come to Essaouira without concrete ideas. They want to stay and realize the necessity of earning money. They pursue a seemingly profitable operation; they invest into a hotel, a guesthouse, a restaurant, or a store. Another group of these Europeans came to Essaouira for biographical reasons: marriage with a Moroccan, or birth in Morocco and the subsequent return to the childhood place. To realize their ideas, they don't want expedient and functional institutions; they would rather develop their own style. The investments of this group are considerable and contain all of their money, which tourism managers invest in the Medina. It is important for those people to be able to lead a self-determined life. Another fourth of the Medina-Europeans are tourists. These Europeans have established a secondary or a vacation home in Essaouira. They have extraordinarily high incomes in their home countries. Their houses and apartments are often lavishly renovated and improved. These houses are advertisements and represent a specific dimension of the owners' self-realization. The tourists generally come to Essaouira for about three months, split up into several stays during the year. The Europeans characterize and experience not only the society but also Islam as liberal. The only fear that tortures these tourists in the Medina of Essaouira is the fear of other Europeans. Pensioners, as far as they are concerned, have settled in Essaouira for good. They know Morocco, which they have visited many times before. They are not bound by a European community, and they do not associate with Moroccans, with the exception of Moroccan maids. They reside in Morocco for at least half a year straight, or in reality permanently, and they publicly adapt to the customs of the country very well.

4. Organizations, Institutions, and Administrations in Morocco's Old Towns

The first international organization that needs to be mentioned is the UNESCO. It was the very first institution that took care of Morocco's old towns, and by now it has declared the following cities to be world cultural heritage: Fès (1981), Marrakech (1985), Meknes (1996), Tetouan (1997), and Essaouira (2001). The interaction between the world cultural heritage rating and scientific as well as tourist access to the Medina is obvious.

Inspired and provoked by the activities of the foreigners, the municipal administrations have increased their developmental efforts and their monitoring functions in the old town. In all old towns, new land development plans are being drawn up. Water and power supply and sewerage systems are being renewed and adjusted to modern needs. The alleys of the Medina are being newly paved or tarred, while planting greenery rounds up the activities.

New institutions emerge in the old towns: foundations, museums, patronages, guesthouse organizations, and real estate companies. Museums and foundations are built and maintained in the old town mainly because of cultural and commercial interests. The museums are usually private collections made accessible to the public. When it comes to museums and foundations, artistic and cultural interests are prominent. The general public gains access to former residential buildings through museums, foundations, and galleries. The patronages commit themselves not only to protecting the building stock, but also to maintaining and preserving the traditional townscape. Other institutions that need to be mentioned are foreign and Moroccan real estate companies, which on the one hand manage several residential and guesthouses that are either personal or other people's property; on the other hand, they help potential buyers find the right real estate and they assist in buying, renovating, and maintaining that property.

5. Guesthouse, a New Type of House in the Old Towns of Morocco

The houses of the Europeans in the Medina are furnished and renovated as oriental residential buildings or as European vacation homes. However, over the years a trend towards guesthouses has developed, which are run either officially or illegally. While

only 14 official guesthouses were known in the old town of Marrakech before 1999, this number rose in 2002 to 169 registered guest houses. Although many of the foreigners do not come to the old towns with the intention to build a guest house, the trend to open such a house increases because many real estate owners do not live in the old town all year round, and the costs of maintenance are significant. This trend is even stronger in the Medina of Fès (see fig. 4 and Därr 2004). The only professional organization that represents the interests of the—mainly new-founded-guesthouses in Marrakech is the

Association des Maison

d'Hôtes de Marrakech et du Sud (AMH). It has about 60 members. Along with the guesthouses, though, comes a significant transformation of the residential building structure in the old towns. Only the most obvious changes are mentioned in the following. Since the demands make extensive renovations necessary, guesthouses are usually built with modern materials such as concrete and steel beams, even

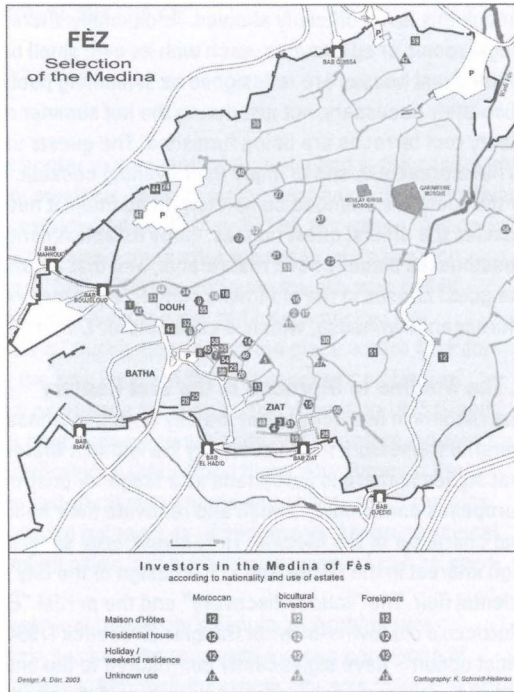


Fig. 4
Real estate investment in the Medina of Fès

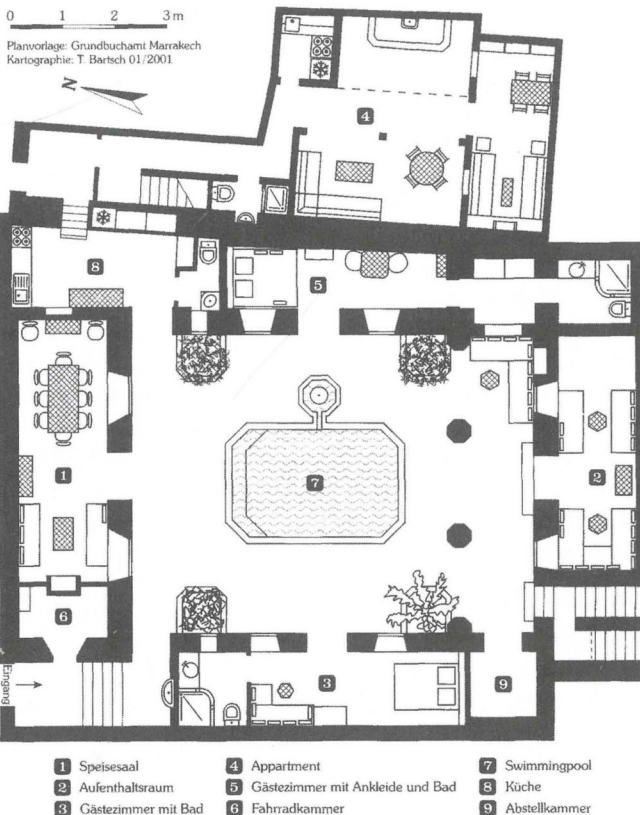


Fig. 5
Ground plan and use of a guesthouse (Maison d'hôtes) in the Medina of Marrakech

though this is not officially allowed. Additionally, there is a division of the houses into single rooms or apartments, each with its own small bathroom. The inner courtyards of the guest houses are redesigned as swimming pools, which are considered absolutely necessary, not just during the hot summer months (see fig. 5). The usually empty roof terraces are being furnished. The guests use them as a place to sunbathe, to have breakfast, and to enjoy their evening cocktail. Thus, function, use, and design of the roofs are changed completely. In addition, it needs to be mentioned that besides the official guest houses, many establishments are run illegally, that almost all guesthouses illegally have restaurants, and that alcohol is served illegally. As a result, the guest houses in the old towns completely transform the character of the Moroccan townhouse, which is called either *Dar* or *Riad*, depending on its structure.

6. The Medina in Morocco in the 21st Century

The Medina in Morocco is not the city anymore whose only purpose is to give the material framework for an everyday life within a Moroccan social order, but it is a city that serves numerous Europeans as a stage for post-modern life fulfilment. The Europeans consciously design and renovate their houses and thus change the face and character of the Medina. They invest large sums of money and therefore have a high interest in the house and in the design of the city and the preservation of the oriental flair. The "tourist discovery" and the partial "European conquest" of Morocco's old towns-or what Gangler & Ribbeck (1994) call the "commercial and elitist option"- have significantly contributed to the improvement of the infrastructure and to the preservation and modernization of the building stock in the Medina. However, the future old towns will neither be a reconstruction nor a restoration of the Moroccan Medina. The political developments in the next few years will show - as long as the economic and social conditions generally remain constant - whether the old towns of Morocco can continue to establish themselves as an exclusive retreat, an oriental dream world, and as a post-modern playground for parts of the European society.

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