Weaving and Stamping

Elementary school and craft training center, Aït Benhaddou, Morocco

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Project data
Project group: Architecture, building and civil engineering
Client: "Ait Aissa for Culture and Development" Association
Project background: Private commission
Planned start: January 2018

Summary and appraisal of the project by the jury

Through its program and the buildings themselves, the project fosters local artisanship. The complex will house a children’s school and an adult training space within a recent expansion of the village of Aït Benhaddou. By means of straightforward architectural forms that follow principles of passive climate control, the expression of the design counter narratives that commend only industrial materials as modern. The project incorporates local rammed earth construction and also local wool and cane weaving as screens and canopies to shade the facades and exterior common spaces. The woven screens are produced by local women.

The jury commended the intricate relationship between the project’s program and its design. By explicitly incorporating the craft traditions that the project aims to advance, the building’s construction actively cultivates its own program. The elegant architecture was seen as an intelligent way of reestablishing traditional techniques of artisanship that are no longer in common use. At the same time, the thick walls and modulated shading present a careful response to climatic conditions that are simultaneously used to give the design aesthetic complexity. The project still requires refinements that adjust to the realities of working with rammed earth construction. Despite this crisp, comprehensive, research-driven approach of the design convinced the jury of the project’s merits and its strong statement of craft as a living and modern tradition.

Statements on the sustainability of the project by the author

Environmental performance and economic viability

The project responds to the particularities of the region: climate and natural environment are our key design parameters. Hence, instead of adapting design solutions to the site, the site itself becomes the solution. It allows us to conceive a bioclimatic model with a small footprint, based on the building’s configuration with respect to natural components, and the use of an efficient local, widely available material: clay. Thinking about sustainability and passive strategies from the early stages of design allowed to achieve not only social and environmental welfare, but also a significant economic benefit. The project’s design ensures an optimal consumption of energy and water, as well as a high thermal comfort. It also allows wider access to renewable energy by making it affordable.

Innovation, transferability and contextual impact

The project is an exploration and upgrading of local crafts, through introducing them into innovative production cycles and diverse fields, other than artisanal production. Elements of the project, such as sunshades and double skin facades, are the reinterpretation of local weaving of carpets, cane and tents, practiced by the women of the region. These elements illustrate the authentic local character, and beyond the cultural and aesthetic aspects, they have an excellent energy performance and contribute in income and activity generation. The power of this design concept is that it can be easily duplicated and reproduced in different regions, based on their own materials and crafts. It promotes transferability of old practices and their adaptation to current needs and future aspirations.

Ethical standards and social inclusion

The project contributes to enhancing a sense of belonging and community cohesion, through integrating the inhabitants in the planning process of their locality, and restoring their faith in the power of their own know-how and abilities. The project’s educational program, community-based design and participatory construction process will regenerate activity within the village and foster gender equity as they involve men, women and children. This is an illustration of how architecture can preserve a meaningful interaction between a given community and its environment, and ensure transferability of the singular aspects of its culture and social life, in order to lead it towards sustainable development.