Urban precinct reconstruction and rehabilitation, Fez, Morocco

Project data
- **Project group**: Building and civil engineering works
- **Client**: Government of the Kingdom of Morocco
- **Project background**: Public commission
- **Estimated start of construction**: March 2012

Main author
- **Name**: Michel Mousseihan
- **Institution**: mosseihan & partners
- **City, country**: London, UK

Further author(s)
- Yasser Khalil, Architect: Yasser Khalil Studio, Casablanca, Morocco

Comment of the Holcim Awards jury Africa Middle East

The jury recognizes that the transformation of this unique yet particularly neglected site on the banks of Fez River will not only contribute to the local environment but will also improve the poor labor and economic conditions of the native copper-plate and leatherworkers artisans that dominate the site. It is expected that the improvement of this site will become a catalyst for the development of surrounding areas with positive social impact that will not end at the site’s boundaries.

Project description by author

The brief is to revitalize Place El-Alla Yaddouna, a public square and surrounding buildings at a central crossroad in the Medina of Fez, a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the oldest and largest Medinas.

We will create a distinctive architectural solution for this ‘Loom’ site, an area that is full of tradition, vibrancy and functional diversity. The site comprises a mosaic of small-scale, modest, sand-colored houses and a labyrinth of alleyways, a square, a river, a 14th-Century bridge, some dilapidated buildings that will be replaced and others of historic and architectural significance that will be rehabilitated. Place El-Alla Yaddouna will serve as a vibrant mixed-use urban hub for the local community as well as for visitors to the Medina, becoming a major catalyst for artistic development, with spaces for educational programs, artisan production, shops, restaurants and cafés.

Place El-Alla Yaddouna used to be one of the major links between the two sides of the old city that is divided by a river. Latterly the city has turned its back on the riverfront, creating a series of disconnected and urban spaces. Our strategy is to reconnect Place El-Alla Yaddouna to the riverfront, moving the river crossing point to offer a more logical pedestrian route that leads through the Medina, maintaining the rich urban pattern of its passageways. A cellular network of contiguous spaces is the foundation for the unity of a neighborhood. Our approach is to prioritize the space between buildings, sculpting the void rather than filling it with new buildings. The buildings become the background to community activities and form a framework for people to work, meet and connect.

Our scheme recognizes that the square has to attract visitors and residents, young and old, it has to function as a space for public and private activity. Our inspiration comes from the Moroccan Riad, a courtyard at the center of the home that melds public and private space. The Riad mirrors the public square at the center of a building. We think of the project as a single building with Place El-Alla Yaddouna as an urban room at its heart.

A key requirement is to preserve historical references whilst using contemporary thinking and techniques to unite fragmented spaces. We have taken cues from the use of pattern and massing, the classical design and structural variation and accents on the traditional forms of Moroccan vernacular architecture to generate a new building which references the old. Outdoor galleries and public spaces will be clad with colorful tiles, produced by local artisans, giving each space a specific identity, cooling the passageways and acting as an intuitive navigational aid.

Studying the local environment and drawing on the intelligence of traditional Moroccan architecture has helped us develop a scheme that is highly sustainable. Sun, wind and mass are the key drivers of our passive strategy we will work in partnership with nature and harness its potential for maximum ambient comfort. The aim is to embed environmental strategies and technologies into the architecture, ensuring long-term effectiveness and grounding the architecture firmly in its local context.

Innovation and transferability – Progress

Our approach is to respect and learn from the success of the project site, which is the world’s largest car-free urban zone and a UNESCO World Heritage site. Our sustainability strategies, guided by the local environment, have drawn on the intelligence of traditional Moroccan architecture. Our brief is to create a blueprint that will inspire any future rehabilitation of the Medina. The project will preserve historically important buildings, some of which date back to the 18th Century. These buildings will be reconfigured to enable new uses. New development will be constructed with respect to the old regarding massing, scale and location, complementing the existing, rather than mimicking the past. The new spaces will accommodate a unified community of artisans who can work, socialize and knowledge share with future generations.

Ethical standards and social equity – People

Part of the USAs Millennium Challenge, which aims to reduce poverty through economic growth, the artisan and Fez Medina Project is a US$10 million scheme to support 1,000 students and 30,000 master artisans. As well as design and renovation of the site through our scheme, it will offer literacy and vocational training for artisans. The new development will dramatically improve working conditions for the artisans, thus improving a series of new public spaces for social and educational activities.

Environmental quality and resource efficiency – Planet

Passive environmental strategies - shading, natural ventilation and thermal mass will give a low carbon footprint. Solar canopies on a nearby parking lot and solar roof top equipment will provide energy. Shaded streets will be oriented to benefit from the cooling westerly wind. Hot-dry wind from the south will be deflected by wind towers which act on pressure differentials and a naturally stacking effect. Local and naturally sourced building materials will be used throughout.

Economic performance and compatibility – Prosperity

Our passive environmental strategy scheme and use of locally sourced materials are economically efficient. Our project will raise the living and working standards of artisans in Fez Medina, dramatically improving their productivity and hence their earning potential. New facilities, such as hotel, restaurants, cafés and public information centers will increase the income from tourism as well bringing in local business.

Contextual and aesthetic impact – Proficiency

Our challenge is to unite a fragmented urban space whilst preserving its history, identity and character, so that locals and visitors want to use it. Our approach has evolved through analyzing the Medina, its growth over time and its daily functions. We are working organically, retaining the unique character of the Medina. A key element is connecting Place El-Alla Yaddouna to and across the river via internal streets and courtyards, with appropriately scaled buildings, massed according to the inner logic of the city. The rich urban pattern of small passages, offering traditionally non-linear circulation, will offer glimpses towards the riverfront, emphasizing the relationship between the alapa and the river. Currently buildings block any view of the river. New buildings will follow the footprint of those they replace, establishing clusters of archetypes. Our scheme will become a blueprint for future development in the Medina.

Relevance to target issues by author

Urban Circulation
- **Expected**: Intricate car-free network created
- **Actual**: 35% reduction in traffic
- **Difference**: 37% reduction in traffic

Public SOnce
- **Expected**: A vibrant new public square
- **Actual**: A vibrant new public square
- **Difference**: A vibrant new public square

Ancient Architecture
- **Expected**: Incorporation of traditional Moroccan architecture
- **Actual**: Incorporation of traditional Moroccan architecture
- **Difference**: Incorporation of traditional Moroccan architecture

Energy Use
- **Expected**: Energy-efficient design
- **Actual**: Energy-efficient design
- **Difference**: Energy-efficient design

Economic Growth
- **Expected**: Economic benefits for artisans
- **Actual**: Economic benefits for artisans
- **Difference**: Economic benefits for artisans

Social Equity
- **Expected**: Equity for all community members
- **Actual**: Equity for all community members
- **Difference**: Equity for all community members

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