

Aswar El Beyt

An innovative project for a theoretical city in Morocco, post Covid crisis

Introduction

The current health crisis affects and transforms our visions of the world and our lifestyle as a community. Our architectural and urban planning model has been unchanged for decades. Yet, this model is now facing criticism, based on factors such as its obedience to the laws of globalization, its constant expansion, and the pollution threat it creates.

Moreover, our global way of living and working is also changing with the increasing trend of home-office. People no longer accept to cram into public transportation, or waste hours in traffic jam to get to their workplace, especially since we are all now well aware of the polluting consequences.

Meanwhile, our communication channels are evolving, improving and making physical meetings between colleagues from the same workspace unnecessary. Our lifestyles are evolving, reinventing themselves, leaving behind the old patterns of the “old world”, i.e. the standard housing made for families. Since our traditional model is disappearing, we are experiencing new types of homes (blended families, roommates, etc.). Moroccan families have also involved by offering a new position to the woman. Indeed, the urban way of life, combined with economic inflation and the education of women have encouraged their access to the professional life, reducing their time spent at home. The rural exodus has led young people to leave their family home to live alone or in flat shares...

These new dynamics have inspired us to design the Aswar El Beyt, a flexible and lively place, where living and working together is possible. Aswar El Beyt rethinks the pre-established functions of a home. It allows us to be free and flexible enough to support the on-going societal changes. Aswar El Beyt brings back a natural environment into the city, promoting new commonly shared spaces and social interactions between its residents.

The urban concept

Setting a free model

In opposition to the “villes nouvelles”, formed by gigantic geometric outlines extend without logic over the territories of Morocco, the project is inspired by the model of the medina to offer a flexible and scalable system. The principle is simple: the city develops organically through the continual addition of new architectural objects, of similar size and volume, which are established by freeing themselves from all rules of orthogonality.

Our urban project is developed in a 10 hectares square, which appeared as a city’s “macro unit”. They are defined as follows:

- Each district has collective facilities and shops, which makes it autonomous (cultural equipment, sports equipment, place of worship, shops and green spaces).

- Each district offers to its residents two types of housing: apartment buildings and private villas.
- The building height rules follow a simple logic: Build high and dense in the center of each macro unit and around a central void (place of public and social life in the neighborhood). Build low at the periphery.
- The volumes break down on the upper floors to create a succession of terraces open onto the landscape.
- Buildings are placed next to each other's, by forming a "chain" of volumes.

Urban maze

The massing of buildings creates urban voids of various geometries. The public space uses those voids, the tortuous negative of the system, and recalls the urban mazes specific to the medinas.

Mineral Aswar

Each building is surrounded by an open structure, the Aswars, made of adobe columns and local stone lintels. It creates a second skin 4M away from the facades who provides an architectural screen, filtering the domestic spaces from the public ones.

Pedestrian mobility

The project promotes soft mobility by removing lanes for motorized vehicles. The internal pedestrian streets offer quality public spaces, without any pollution.

The architectural concept

A Flexible architecture supporting new uses

The project redefines the living spaces, supporting the uses and imagination of its inhabitants. Living rooms or "modul-R" (as the project calls them) are reversible, hybrid and adapt themselves to these requirements. They are no longer limited to a single function but are neutral, equally sized, allowing residents to schedule various activities over time (day, week, years). Integrated furniture systems allow the reversibility of each of these spaces.

Considering a society where the remote work will take a larger place, the project provides an individual workspace or "modul-O" to each apartment. All these workspaces face a courtyard and have direct access to collective terraces. Depending on needs and time, they can be connected to the rest of the apartments or isolated and oriented towards the active courtyard. The shared outdoor spaces promote social and professional interactions between residents and workers.

A contemporary vernacular architecture

This double-sided housing model has two facades expressions: On the city side, the private apartments are visually filtered through a mineral crown made of extracted stone blocks (locally sourced) and adobe piles. On the courtyard side, wooden modules (locally sourced) become the structural framework of the project.

Moreover, we want the project to be built by following low-tech design rules (a regular structure, a column-beam system that is easy to assemble, the use of locally sourced materials, etc.).

In addition, various devices ensure a good management of the available resources / energies (green spaces to promote biodiversity as well as a natural ventilation, the collect of rainwater for gardening, responsible waste management, recovering thermal energy from the building to heat a seedling greenhouse, etc.)

Programs for an inclusive and virtuous “living together”

Nowadays, many of the architectural projects respond to outdated modes of "living together". In fact, they follow rigid regulations and suffer from the power of big building companies. Consequently, there support frozen and rigid programs, with little flexibility.

At the opposite, we want to create flexible places with innovative programs that complement and enrich each other. These programs are conceived to allow individuals to open up to the community, share and exchange. Inclusive and intergenerational programs break with the loneliness of fragile populations and promote social interactions between inhabitants. Green spaces finally create a link with the environmental ecosystem and allow the residents to reconnect with the nature, the land and the seasons. All of these activities follow a sustainable economic model.

Conclusion

The uncertainty and fragility of the individual and his environment therefore invite architects to rethink the city and its habitats. Spaces and temporalities blur together, and separations between programs and communities seem to belong to the “old world”. In this perspective, Aswar el Beyt has chosen to ignore the standards and codes of traditional housing. It is no longer just a question of offering spaces for pre-established functions. Our now model is free and flexible enough to sustainably support these societal changes. The new generation of architects must be creative in order to come up with new models of design for the contemporary city, so much criticized today.