

“Casbahism” in Europe: the Journey of an Architectural Idea

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ABSTRACT: The paper examines how a new architectural idea gained visibility within post-WWII European architectural culture. By tracing its trajectory from Casablanca to Berlin, attempting to reconstruct the relationship between the Free University, often considered the prime representative of what later became known as the “mat-building” typology, and the North African “casbah”, the paper explores how the visual or perceptual, emphasized during interactions between the narrative’s protagonists or disseminated through architectural publications, played a salient role in popularizing the idea in European circles. The main argument the inquiry puts forward, by situating the original spark that launched the mat-building idea in research that its chief promoters conducted while in North Africa prior to instrumentalizing this research in later design projects, is that research can stretch the discipline’s boundaries by introducing new ideas from plural sources, which can only enrich architectural culture and critique its prevalent, increasingly autonomous, practices. The paper thus elucidates a way in which foreign influences entered Western architectural discourse, constituting a palpable example of how modernist dogmas were challenged by its very agents, through a historicist as well as a cultural ‘other’, on the eve of postmodernism.

1.0 Recognizing a Genealogy

Alison Smithson published her legendary article *How to Recognise and Read Mat-Building: Mainstream Architecture as it has Developed towards the Mat-Building* in 1974. The article is often taken as a reference point by those probing the mat-building typology which gained significant attention in the last few years within architectural practice (thanks perhaps to the engagement of international architects with emerging cities in the Middle East, which called for solutions deemed authentic to the region), as well as scholarly circles (thanks to revisionist and critical historiography). Various genealogies that attempted to situate the idea historically have been written, and contemplating a new one seems superfluous. Yet what has not been attempted so far is a serious consideration of Smithson’s own suggestion of what she considers a legitimate pedigree for the mat-building. At the beginning of her article, Smithson coins the term “casbahism”, suggesting that the traditional Arab city is the mat-building’s “formative influence from the immediate past” (A. Smithson 1974, 573). In the last page of the same article, Smithson annotates a number of images representing examples of Turkish and Indian “Islamic architecture” apologetically, stating that “we know all too little [of the Islamic tradition] considering the direction of our [current] interests”. It seems inevitable for anyone writing about the mat-building to consider these hints, and to study how Arab or Muslim cities became imbricated in the, essentially Western, mat-building discourse; yet this narrative seems to still be missing.

In fact, Alison Smithson herself does not follow her own lead. The majority of her article can be characterized as a meandering investigation, in text and images, of the mat-building idea, concerned ostensibly with tracking its antecedents, which find their logical conclusion in the recently completed Free University project in Berlin, by Candilis, Woods, Josic, and Jean Prouvé. But rather than an actual genealogy, the main body of the article ends up adhering largely to the purpose suggested by its title, that is, it ends up being a sort of manual for understanding what is meant by the mat-building, explicating its most important features. In imagery and accompanying captions however, Smithson does provide a loose genealogy that touches upon various building traditions, Western and non-Western, new and ancient, in an attempt to prove the historical continuity of the mat-building. Perhaps the most coherent narrative Smithson presents, of how the mat-building idea became recognized and celebrated, is paradoxically found in the following statement (A. Smithson 1974, 573):

The way towards mat-building started blindly enough: the first Team 10 review of the field of its thought became collectively covered in the Primer (AD 12/61). The thought gradually got further bodied-out in projects, and these in the early ‘seventies began to appear in built-form. At this point mat-building as an idea becomes recognisable. To be able to recognise the phenomenon at the end of this, its first, primitive phase, calls for a specially prepared frame of

mind... Mainstream mat-building became visible, however, with the completion of the F.U. (Berlin Free University)

Thus one end of the thread can already be caught: the role of Team 10 is instrumental to the formation and dissemination of the mat-building idea, first through their collaborative gatherings, and later in their built projects. Various iterations of the building type might be recognizable before the 1950s, but it was through Team 10 that the idea seems to have been articulated in the first place, allowing later identification of earlier structures that fit the description. This paper attempts to reconstruct the outlines of this particular genealogy, to trace the thread along which the idea of 'casbahism' has travelled from North Africa up to Berlin, and what took place during the process. The paper is not concerned with pondering the formal characteristics or performative possibilities or merits of the mat-building typology – a lot has already been written about that – but with constructing, or unveiling, an alternative narrative that can be assembled from original statements by the main protagonists or contemporary collaborators, particularly those of Team 10, instead of one that is based on individual conjecture.

2.0 Beginnings

Rather than starting from one historical end of the thread or another, that is, rather than starting from Casbahs and working up to the Free University, or vice versa, one can start from the middle, precisely at where Smithson points: the formation of Team 10. Indeed, the denouement of the narrative at hand, or its most salient episode, seems to have taken place in 1953 in Aix-en-Provence, France. It is here that the idea made its remarkable debut in Europe, gaining serious momentum and garnering sufficient interest, making the rest of its journey seem inevitable. It is also here that many of Team 10 young members had a chance to interact for the first time, at CIAM's 9th Congress.

The early role of CIAM in institutionalizing modernism, and transforming it from an ideology advocated by a few pioneers, into a large organization with a wide international membership, consolidating the movement into a set of agreed upon principles which CIAM members would simultaneously adhere to and propagate, cannot be underestimated. The heyday of architectural modernism may have been the interwar period, but one can claim that it was in the years following World War II that modernism actually had its opportunity to be tested on a wide scale, during the massive building campaign launched across Europe to rehabilitate the continent. CIAM became instrumental in this period. The significance of CIAM, for the inquiry at hand, probably lies in the fact that the organization became a forum where many voices were heard, and a pool of information to which a variety of sources contributed, making the set of possible references, hitherto mostly European, more heterogeneous. Due to some of its members' involvement in non-Western contexts, French architects working in colonized North Africa for example, contact with the non-West became unavoidable.

In 1953, CIAM-Alger, a group founded in 1951 and consisting of a number of French architects and urban designers working in Algeria, presented its study of an informal Arab local settlement to the rest of CIAM members at their meeting in Aix-en-Provence, France. The analysis was meant to represent a unique dwelling example from which other CIAM members can learn, as well as a demonstration of a possible response, through the recently completed projects, to the challenging cultural and environmental issues the group grappled with in North Africa. The presentation was apparently so effective that CIAM decided to hold its next meeting in Algiers in 1955. The meeting in Algeria did not go ahead eventually, despite preparations, due to several reasons, the most obvious of which was the deteriorating situation in the last years of French colonialization (Celik 2005). What is important to note however is not whether the event took place in Algiers or not, but the perceived salience of CIAM-Alger's work, and its pertinence to other members working around the world; what is also important to note is that the idea of holding a general CIAM meeting in a non-Western context was actually entertained for the first time (notwithstanding the fact that Algiers was a French colony then).

This is not surprising, given the fact that GAMMA (Groupe d'architectes modernes Marocains), another group of French modern architects working in Morocco, which included Victor Bodiansky, Michel Ecochard, Henri Piot, and most notably (because of their later activity and significance for the narrative at hand), Georges Candilis and Shadrach Woods, also presented studies on the housing theme, in the form of an analysis of recently completed projects in the region. In these projects, most famous of which is the housing development of *Carrières-Centrales* in Casablanca (a joint project by Candilis's ATBAT-Afrique and Ecochard's Services de l'Urbanisme), GAMMA illustrated how Moroccan traditional living conditions were reinterpreted to create modern housing for the local population. The schemes must have attracted attention at the CIAM meeting, given their invention of novel housing typologies –new even for European modernists. Some of the projects involved adapting the traditional courtyard house for instance, stripping it down to what the architects thought was the most essential characteristic, namely the private patio, and stacking a series of these houses on top of each other, creating a distinct residential tower typology, with a volumetrically playful façade, but one almost devoid of any windows (Tom Avermaete 2005). These projects were

presented to other members attending the 9th Congress through the classic CIAM method of the grid. GAMMA's grid, titled *Habitat du plus grand nombre*, was distinct from previous CIAM grids however, and it was by far the most exciting during that congress. Its innovation was in that it focused on the quality of life of the poor local inhabitants of the 'bidonville', for whom the GAMMA housing schemes were intended, rather than reiterating CIAM traditional formulas of analysis. Reflecting back on 1953's CIAM, Alison Smithson recalled that "it was the ATBAT 'Grille' from Morocco, not much larger than our own yet without waste space; with its golden suns on wands and new language of architecture generated by patterns of inhabitation that seized us. The nascent Team 10 found each other in their admiration of these schemes, about a third of which had got built" (Alison Smithson, "A Record of Team 10 Meetings", 1991, 19-20).

3.0 North Africa

ATBAT started in Paris in 1947, as a multidisciplinary firm the initial aim of which was to support the construction and engineering of Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseille. The firm was set up by Le Corbusier along with another firm, ASCORAL - the latter would undertake theoretical investigations, while ATBAT would handle practical ones, and both firms were meant to become extended arms of Le Corbusier's main office that was overwhelmed with work at the time (*Architectural Review*, 1987). The firm was on one hand a response to a need for closer collaboration between engineering and architecture to meet the reconstruction challenges following World War II, and on the other, it facilitated a more efficient project execution and building construction. Under the leadership of Vladimir Bodiansky, the firm, which attracted many young architects and started doing projects around the globe, soon produced offshoots, most notably ATBAT-Afrique, which established itself in Morocco in 1951. The latter's leaders, Georges Candilis, Shadrach Woods and Henri Piot, became involved in coming up with solutions to the housing problem which plagued North African cities due to rapid internal migration from rural areas. They collaborated with Michel Ecochard to produce the innovative housing solutions later presented at CIAM's 9th Congress ("ATBAT [Fr. Atelier des Bâtitseurs]", 2012).

Both Georges Candilis and Shadrach Woods worked at Le Corbusier's office on the *Unité d'Habitation* project, which is where they met prior to their later collaborations. Candilis met Josic in the main ATBAT office in Paris, after he returned to it in 1954. A year later, and following Woods' return to France, the partnership Candilis-Josic-Woods was established, along with other collaborators. The firm expressed its dissatisfaction with conventional modernist ideologies that they believed could not address the challenges of post-war reconstruction. They chose to work on low-cost housing developments, and other practical schemes in which they could test the ideas they were simultaneously sharing with and learning from other Team 10 members. Their most memorable works today are their *Frankfurt-Römerberg* and *Freie Universität Berlin* in which they explored the mat-building idea ("Candilis-Josic-Woods", 2012).

Remarkably, it was members of the GAMMA group, such as Georges Candilis and Shadrach Woods, and other members of CIAM, most notably Alison and Peter Smithson, who were among the first to challenge established modernist dogmas, leading to the creation of Team 10 and the subsequent dismantling of the older CIAM. The dissenters shared a "mutual realization of the inadequacies of the processes of architectural thought which they had inherited from the modern movement", while each member of the new group "sensed that the other [members] had already found same way towards a new beginning" (A. Smithson 1968, 3). The group, in its attempt to reform modernism, was interested more in pragmatic solutions to contemporary urban problems than in abstract theoretical approaches, and advocated an active role for architecture in responding to the specific human conditions in a particular cultural context. What is perhaps most significant about Team 10 is the fact that the group, as a result of their practical approach that rejected universal blanket solutions, did not hesitate from actively borrowing and appropriating architectural and urban traditions from outside the West.

Alison Smithson testifies to a sort of maturity that GAMMA members seemed to have at the time when Team 10 was being formed, that allowed the French protagonists to contribute disproportionately more to the nascent organization. She suggests that "Georges Candilis had probably no need of any Team 10 interchange to evolve as an architect. His extension of modern architecture into his personal language had been worked out in Morocco"; Smithson went on to describe Candilis's impact on Team 10 meetings by relating: "in gearing his description of work in progress to the theme of the meeting, Candilis always helped to open up an interchange of opinions that would be distilled into that meeting's nebula of collective thought" (Alison Smithson, "The Beginning of Team 10", 1991, 14). It was thus GAMMA members' experience in Morocco, consisting of recently built projects, that seemed to largely define the topics around which Team 10 early gatherings would revolve.

But it was not only the experiences of CIAM-Alger and GAMMA members working in North Africa that had an influence on Team 10 members during their interaction in 1953. Aldo van Eyck, whose Orphanage

project in Amsterdam is often invoked as a prime example of the mat-building typology, was very enthusiastic during the 9th Congress about work done in non-Western contexts. Van Eyck had not only studied Algeria and Morocco himself in the past, but also traveled there several times in the early 1950s, to survey the vernacular architecture of casbahs, market places, and oases, in which he discovered architecture that he thought "cannot have been so very different in Ur 5,000 years ago" (quoted in: Eric Mumford 2001, 52). Although van Eyck's relationship to North African urban form was different, in that his admiration was more for the abstract, primitive, and seemingly timeless architectural forms than for the context-specific cultural values these forms putatively implied, after seeing the work in the Grids presented by the French architects from North Africa, van Eyck enthusiastically proclaimed that "CIAM now had no choice but to abandon its narrow Occidental viewpoint" (quoted in: Zeynep Celik 2005, 278). Indeed van Eyck's orphanage project executed in the mid 1950s predicted the later Free University in Berlin, proving a fascination with the mat-building typology within Team 10 that was not simply restricted to its French members.

4.0 Earlier Influences

In chronicling the contributions of individual Team 10 members, Alison Smithson recalls that "'Le plus grand nombre' was one of George's [Candilis] standard phrases for many years; confirming that the language of discussion, as the structure, emanated from Le Corbusier" (A. Smithson, "A Record of Team 10 Meetings", 1991, 19). Although Team 10's efforts are often seen as a mutiny against Le Corbusier's control of CIAM and his strict modern dogmatism, his architectural influence evidently continued well into Team 10's mature years. Indeed, this was particularly the case in the work and rhetoric of the French members, whose previous experience at Le Corbusier's office had a lasting effect. Soon after the ATBAT-Afrique's buildings were finished, they were celebrated by the Smithsons; the couple declared that they considered "these buildings in Morocco as the greatest achievement since Le Corbusier's Unite d'Habitation at Marseilles" (A. and P. Smithson 1955, 2). The comparison did not come from a vacuum. It was not only Candilis's and Woods's involvement in the Marseilles project that needs to be pointed out here, but their exposure to Le Corbusier's earlier work in Algiers.

Le Corbusier's work in Algiers, from site visits, numerous studies, to the several iterations of the uncommissioned proposal, reveals an interest in engaging and learning from the context's cultural uniqueness (Le Corbusier 1967). Not only was his architectural solution informed by the existing context, but it is perhaps most notable in how the proposal worked around, and delicately preserved, the old Casbah. As opposed "to the callousness he exhibited toward the vibrancy and charm of ancient Paris in Plan Voisin, a deep respect for the Muslim vernacular extending beyond the simple joys of *folklorique* emerges in Le Corbusier's descriptions and drawings"; Mary McLeod adds that Le Corbusier "declares, 'O inspiring image! Arabs, are there no peoples but you who dwell in such coolness and quiet, in the enchantment of proportions and the savor of a humane architecture'" (McLeod 1980, 65). In Algiers, Le Corbusier seemed to have found a primitive version of modern architecture that was spontaneous, popular, and happily inhabited; he recognized in it a sense of community, and the kind of symbiotic relationship between architecture and its inhabitants that he aspired to in his own work. His proposal for Algiers surely disregards the harsh realities of living in the Casbahs, or the colonial suppression of locals that took place at the time, and perhaps focused more intently on the poetics of vernacular architecture and the visual qualities of urban form he observed. Nevertheless, Le Corbusier's informal analysis of the Casbahs he visited, his fascination with the local culture, even if it was a removed or distant admiration, and his subsequent proposals which were situated as not only the outcome of these exercises but as an appropriate contextual response to the conditions of the city had a lasting impact; all of these factors must have provided a strong precedent from which later architects could learn. Therefore, Le Corbusier's role in the narrative at hand cannot be underestimated, whether it was through his early work which set the tone for a more meaningful engagement with a non-Western culture, in his centrality to the birth and success of CIAM which was the breeding ground for Team 10's ideas and relationships, or his direct interaction with members of Team 10 central to the narrative here.

5.0 Plurality

Indeed it is the fact that most of the protagonists in this narrative were French architects who worked in North Africa that makes it easy to fall for an identification of the mat-building with a French or European tradition. However, in a Team 10 meeting in Rotterdam, April 1974 (when the idea of Alison Smithson's famous essay was formed (A. Smithson, "Tuesday the 9th of April, A.M.: Facing 'consumerism'", 1991, 124)), Candilis confessed to the true origins of Berlin's Free University: "In Morocco with Shad, we began to work on an idea of a special conception to create place. Certainly the special concept was influenced by the Souks of Marakesh... Berlin has been decided in Morocco in 1952, where we had the opportunity to make a school, though never built" (in A. Smithson, "Tuesday the 9th of April, A.M.: Facing 'consumerism'", 1991, 130-1). It is not difficult therefore to connect the dots, and to sketch out a rather simple and straightforward

genealogy delineating the path along which the mat-building arrived in Berlin: from the young architects working for Le Corbusier and getting exposed to his work in Algiers, to their own later work in North Africa, to their participation in CIAM meetings and subsequent formation of Team 10 through which the ideas were propagated to architectural communities in different parts of Europe, and finally realized in their own built work in various cities, most notably Berlin. This sketch is not meant to reduce the enormous complexities inherent in processes of influence, adaptation, and appropriation, but it is meant to elucidate the rather direct causal relationships admitted by Team 10 members themselves. The resulting genealogy is one that is simultaneously about the journey of an idea, and also about the journey of actual protagonists who believed in an idea and cared to develop it, share it with others, and implement it in various guises.

Once assembled, this genealogy is so simple and straightforward that it is surprising not to find it explicitly compiled to date. In fact, this particular genealogy seems to be overlooked, or perhaps even deliberately suppressed. This may be due to the fact that despite recent contributions to critical, culturally-inclusive historiography of modernism, the discipline seems to continue to be interested solely in established narratives that claim an exclusively Western architectural history of the movement. That is unfortunate because in avoiding engagement with cultural or hybrid aspects of architecture, the discipline cannot realize that Team 10 members' greatest achievement was perhaps their openness and engagement with building forms that were hitherto derided by architectural histories – an openness suggesting that in order to enrich contemporary architecture, it was as valid to reference a Casbah as it was to contemplate Rome. This attitude, welcoming and encouraging plurality, is what will remain the legacy of Team 10, and it is the role of architectural historians to illuminate it today.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some of the issues explored here were initially examined in a paper written for the course GSD HIS_04359 Urban Form: History + Theory, offered by Eve Blau, Spring 2012, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University; I am grateful to Professor Blau for her guidance and generous feedback. Some of the ideas presented here have also been developed in a series of conversations with Professors Hashim Sarkis and Sibel Bozdoğan; I am deeply thankful for their continued support.

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