

## Post-War Reconstruction

The genius of the times – none other maybe than the *genius loci* – saw the establishment of an architecture studio dedicated to reconstruction, the *Perchoir*, named for its location directly above the Dar el Bey kitchens. In its midst, the future great names of the profession would breathe life back into a dormant architectural style. *Arabisance* would become the architectural style of the reconstruction and the experimental ground for a “deep thought about the use of the principles of vernacular architectural tradition”. Traditional masonry building, Catalan vaulted roofs, brick-wall screens, and the overall simple volume of the Tunisian Sahel construction systems, would be explored, reducing thus the reliance on concrete and steel which were in short supply at the time.

The *Perchoir* experiment would not last more than a few years; it preceded the coming of modernity represented by the international style at the service of a new and now independent State. Tunisian architects took over, following up on the questions of the architects who had preceded them, namely regarding the integration of local decorative arts and the rewriting of traditional forms. The questions, approached differently in private or public architectural commissions, yielded mixed results. The issue of the survival of the *Arabisance* and of its application was more than ever at the heart of architects' discussions, who were in the process of rediscovering and exploring a style which had been held up as a highly successful model. Its success was such that “nowadays, many believe that this French-Arab architecture is a traditional Islamic-Arab one”.

## After Independence

International style architecture had very little followers. Although the architectural modernity of the period after independence was to a certain extent accepted as a vector of the orientation that the “New Tunisia” government had taken, it was nonetheless questioned and rethought time and time again through a constant discussion of local know-how and traditions. This phase of intelligent dialogue survived for only one decade, and was replaced by a much less harmonious approach constituting heavy renovations of historical centers and partisan urbanism dedicated to the glorification of state power. The issue of the fate of historical centers resulted in 1967 in the establishment of the *Association de Sauvegarde de la Medina (ASM)* of Tunis, a preservation body whose scope of intervention would go beyond the Medina to include the new city and its recent heritage of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In parallel, Western architecture was simply copied, and the local repertoire only used as cladding in order to ‘Tunisify’ the buildings without any real tackling of the issues of adequacy underlying this hybrid style and the construction technologies in use, despite the fact that solutions were at hand and had been successfully implemented in the past. The architect Bernard Huet would thus go on to highlight the importance of rediscovering the inaugural work of the *Perchoir*: “In the midst of the present extravagant conundrum of Retro, Neo and Post-Modern styles, and at a time when architecture indulges in an increasingly fast, and panicked consumption of fashion trends, it is useful to learn the lessons of calmness, reason and silence that Tunisian architecture from 1943 to 1955 offers”.

More than ever, Tunisia remains this great laboratory of architectural combination and creation in constant renewal, where the exploration of the past and recent heritage offers a vital source of inspiration.

The colonization process of this part of the Maghreb began in the nineteenth century. Based in Senegal, the French took advantage of the strife between the many relatively autonomous tribal entities, and submitted them to French rule thereby achieving the unity of the French Empire from Algeria to Western Africa. In the 1920s, the region became an entity within the framework of French West Africa, whose capital was for a long time Senegal's Saint-Louis. Apart from historical cities like Chingetti, and a few compounds surrounding mining operations, there was no significant large city in this part of the Maghreb at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Constituted of a large underpopulated territory, the country that obtained independence in 1960 witnessed very slow urban development in comparison with the other countries of the Maghreb.

The capital city, Nouakchott, had for example less than 400,000 inhabitants in the 1980s and currently has less than 800,000. Nouadibou, the second largest city, has less than 100,000 inhabitants.

Nouakchott was created from scratch at the end of the 1950s to house the Mauritanian government (which was based prior to that in Saint-Louis) in a region that was chosen precisely because no single tribe would be able to claim it. Official buildings for the different ministries were therefore erected, in addition to an airport, and since then, the city has developed in the middle of the desert.

Among the remarkable projects in the country in recent times is the Regional Hospital in Kaédi, near the border with Senegal, designed by Fabrizio Carola in 1989. More than the mere provision of a much-needed facility, the project was an opportunity to empower the rural population and contribute to developing local building skills in response to scarce means. Entirely built using hand-made bricks fired in kilns, the facility develops like a stem, producing clusters of vaulted passage-ways and domed rooms. The project received the Aga Khan award in 1995.