

# Tunisia

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### The 1960s / 1970s: the Independence

Right after Independence, an important setup is put in place for the construction of new projects. The political and media-related issues of this vast project aim to reaffirm the sovereignty of the young Algerian state and to spread the image of modernity. Large-scale projects, which are symbolically powerful, are entrusted to brand-name architects. Oscar Niemeyer builds the Universities of Constantine and of Algiers (1971), as well as the Olympic City of the 5th of July, ushering in a new era in architectural production. Fernand Pouillon is entrusted with the tourism plan for the country around the end of the 1960s. The many hotels he designed show his borrowing from the vernacular and the Mediterranean style. The Matares complex at Tipasa (1969), the El Gourara Hotel in Timimoune (1971), or even the M'Zab Hotel in Ghardaia are examples of this crossbreeding logic. By willfully rejecting the international style of the Aurassi Hotel (1963 - 1973) erected in Algiers, projects such as this one revealed the general context in which they were built.

### The 1980s/1990s

The 1980s were known for the erection of many luxury buildings. In Algiers, the construction of the cultural and commercial complex of Rhiad el Feth and of the martyrs monument, both inaugurated for the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of Independence in 1982, as well as the Palace of Culture (1984), the National Library of Hamma (1994), the Sofitel Hotel (1995), probably make up the most emblematic realizations of the period. However, although this production is close to the postmodern language of architecture constituting the general trend at the end of the Twentieth Century, some atypical realizations reflect a kind of crossbreeding where modern requirements and local know-how intersect, as is the case in the Hydra and Tala Amara Mosques.

### The Twenty-First Century: a new era?

The twenty-first century is witnessing a diverse and varied architectural production. The new center of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2010), by architect Halim Faidi connects modern architectural language and Neo-Moorish vocabulary. Faidi renovated the *Galerie Algériennes* of Henri Petit (originally named *Galerie de France*) on Larbi Ben M'Hidi Street, Algiers, and converted the building into a Modern Art Museum (2007). Facing that building is *l'Historial* (2012), a deliberately purist building, which integrated successfully with the streets' buildings and the rhythm of the existing facades. It is the work of Larbi Marhoum, the same architect who built the Library of Ain Zeboudja (2004) and the extension project of the old *Institut Pasteur* building in Algiers. Other large-scale projects were launched around the same time, such as the towers of the Bahia Center in Oran and the new business center of Bab-Ezzouar in the East of Algiers.

Tunisia at the dawn of the twentieth century offered great opportunities for architects from all over the world; it was a kind of open-air laboratory for enterprising contractors and building owners. With some enticement, Tunisia allowed the crystallization of European imagination to take place on its soil.

### The Beginning of the Twentieth Century

Arriving in the country for the most part as implementers of the "Style of the Victorious", and expressing the imperial agenda of the French Republic, architects were trained in the *Beaux-Arts* tradition would initially indulge in the most austere of Neo-Classicism, before seeing their vocabulary evolve considerably, under the influence of the *genius loci*.

The local heritage and arts that the Orientalists discovered, and that painters such as Paul Klee and August Macke searching for inspiration rediscovered, had an clear influence on the architects arriving in the country. Importing Western architectural models was no longer common practice, rather architects aimed to use decorative elements of the local architectural vocabulary: as such the *Arabesque* style was born, and, notwithstanding the numerous criticisms of Orientalist cladding (which in its early stage juxtaposed minarets next to clock towers of town halls) the style was in vogue and marked the minds of the people and the cities alike.

Eclecticism, which appeared in Europe around the middle of the nineteenth century, was reborn in Tunisia where numerous buildings constituted syncretic works aimed at conveying the many influences that the "Protector" carried and which reflected the original diversity of the big cities' mixed populations. Eclecticism, especially in Tunis, nonetheless cohabited with *Liberty*, the other name of Art Nouveau that flourished through private commissions and bequeathed the Capital with architectural jewels.

At the end of World War One, the International Style made its appearance, although it was already somewhat present in the creative Art Nouveau style that was free of historical references. In the 1920s, the desire for distinction was shared by architects and clients alike, and the decorative idioms inherited from the first decades of the century, seemed increasingly outdated. Such desires were served by the opportunities offered by reinforced concrete technology, as well as by the constructive substructure systems. Buildings with smooth façades and discreet architecture began to appear in the main cities of the country. These new buildings were conceived in the classical spirit of their predecessors (1880 - 1920), where façade symmetry was the prevailing rule, but where moldings were stylized or disappeared altogether. The buildings showed a juxtaposition of simple voids and simple volumes. The horizontal was privileged and the effect was rendered more pronounced by the use of balconies that followed rigorous curves and alignment. The urban landscape had changed; corner turrets and canted bay windows floating on vast cantilevered canopies, so dear to Michel Roux-Spitz, were integrated.

### The 1930s

The *Paquebot* movement, inspired by Art Deco, spread in cities causing the admiration of locals of all ages who visited the futuristic structures on family outings. These achievements of the 1930s cohabited with the joyful *Belle Epoque* work that was flourishing in the country despite the unwavering rationality that dominated at the time. Italian architects, backed by the renewed interest in their country's diplomacy for its subjects, developed the Rationalism of which the *Duce* was such a fan, and which was the pride of the EUR 42 neighborhood in Rome. Historicism, Milanese *Novecento*, and Italian Art Deco fueled the Rationalist production of the inter-war period. On the sidelines of this official urbanism the *Gourbis* (those first informal neighborhoods) appeared on the periphery of the now over-populated large cities.

World War Two and the destruction that followed put an end to the creative laboratory which Tunisia had become, that knew neither historical frontiers nor style dictatorship. The effects of the war on the country were disastrous. After the trauma of the German occupation and the allied bombings of 1943, production picked up again in a partially destroyed Tunisia, under the protection of France whose image and imperial power had greatly declined. Reconstruction attempts started quickly, but with limited means.