

Self-built Urban Housing, Rabat and Tunis

The Editors obtained a copy of a research report completed only in July 1985 by a group of specialists in low-income, self-built urban housing from Morocco, Tunisia and France and under the guidance of architect-teacher Serge Santelli, IERAU/Ecole de Paris — Bellville. Entitled *L'Habitat Populaire au Maghreb* (Working-class Housing in North Africa), it contains fascinating drawings, photographs and analyses of recent owner-built housing types in the

sprawling suburbs of major North African cities, and the processes by which unauthorised urban form comes into being. This urban housing differs from the precarious dwellings of recent rural immigrants to the city in that the materials are solid and durable (concrete), and the owners can show title (however illegally acquired) to the land they paid someone to obtain. Mr Santelli agreed to summarise the main findings of this remarkable study in the following interview.

MIMAR: The theme of your research is self-produced housing, and the principal examples you analysed are recent dwellings in Ettadhamen suburbs of Tunis and El Hajja on the periphery of Rabat. What bases are there for comparing the two?

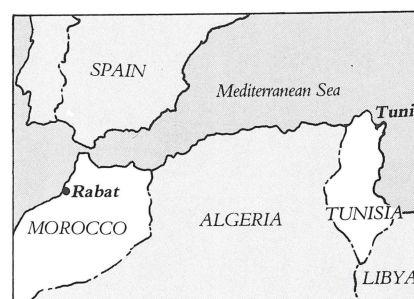
Santelli: As it turns out the underlying structure is similar whether on the level of the house itself or the level of urban form in both the Tunisian and Moroccan examples. The self-produced houses are invariably of the courtyard type with the rooms off of it, be it a real court as in Ettadhamen or a more or less covered space as in El Hajja. Their form is identical, or quite close, and in this sense they illustrate continuing reference to a traditional North African model for dwelling. But what is very interesting is that traditional housing model is *evolving* towards a more contemporary model.

MIMAR: If, the traditional house-type is not fixed and rigid, where do you perceived the changes being introduced?

Santelli: The elements of modernity that are altering the traditional habitat are, among others a) the elements of construction, b) the slightly different forms and uses for rooms, c) different processes by which the houses are built technically, and d) aspects of the facade. Let me take them one by one.

Building elements are for the most part reinforced concrete for structural framing and cement block or brick infill, right from the beginning. The people in Ettadhamen (which means the city of "Hope") and El Hajja are basically lower working-class urban families who have saved a little money and since they have acquired title to their piece of land from land speculators (who may or may not have any legal right to give them one), they feel they can stay permanently — which is different from the people in the shanty towns who build first out of wood, tin or earth and hope to be able to convert later to masonry.

Secondly, while the distribution of rooms around a central court and the



types of rooms (e.g. salon, parents' bedroom, kitchen) remains traditional, even in their linguistic appellation, their specific uses are changing with the introduction of modern furniture and appliances, such as a refrigerator. The older Muslim Arab house hasn't been overturned; it is being adapted to new requirements.

In addition, the client now buys the materials himself — just as in centuries past — and pays a small contractor with one or two helpers to build and pays them by the hour or by the job. This is much cheaper than hiring conventional contractors and has resulted in the growth of many of these small building enterprises. But the owner has to furnish the materials.

Finally, the most characteristic new element which is transforming the traditional house-type is the facade. In both Tunisia and Morocco, the modern trend is to develop certain elements of the facade, either decorative (painted doorways and walls, tiles, designs) or functional (larger windows, or cement grill-work that imitates the villas of richer suburbs). The fascinating irony is that these dwellings have dual aspect: a *modern* facade which clearly states its modernity by trying to resemble a villa (with front garden in Ettadhamen) and an interior configuration of spaces which is still *traditional*, and is inhabited traditionally.

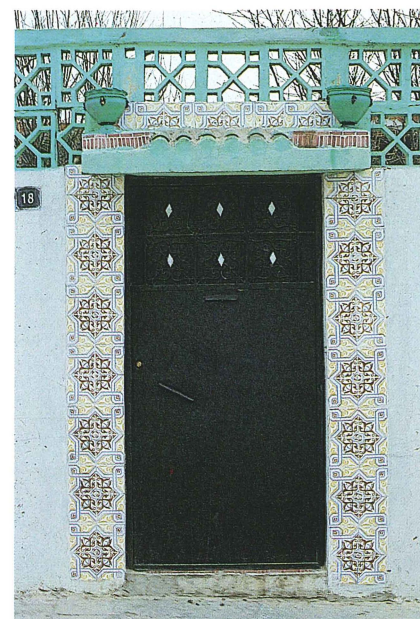
MIMAR: On the urban scale, what are the mechanisms by which this urban fabric develops and what are the physical characteristics of these cities of 60,000 and 70,000 inhabitants?

Photographs and plans by
Serge Santelli
unless otherwise indicated.



Above: Detailed site plan of Ettadhamen neighbourhood, Tunis, indicating houses in the sector which were the focus of study.

Below: View of Ettadhamen suburb of Tunis, built illegally by residents who form part of an already urbanised lower middle class.

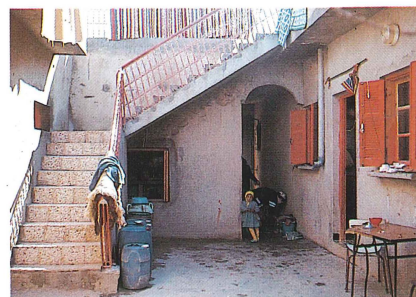
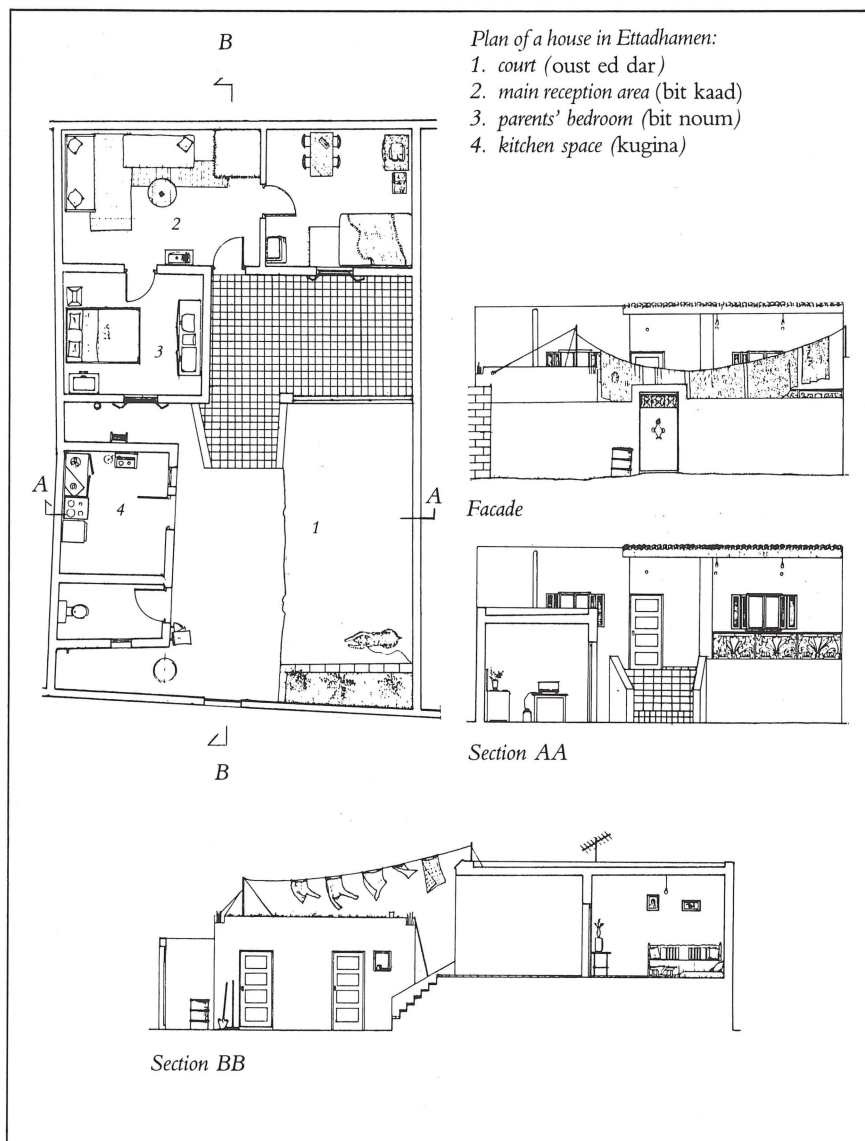


Decorated doorway typical of the extroverted "modern" facades of self-built housing in Ettadhamen, with traditional courtyard and a tree behind it.

Santelli: In both of our case-studies the land was subdivided and plots sold off more or less legally by private land speculators, although the subdivision was not part of an official, authorised Master Plan. Plots tend to be rectangular, being narrow on the street and deep, with series of two plots back to back forming a block. The system is a very rational one, with straight small streets perpendicular to main thoroughfares. Everything is parallel. There is a logic behind this modern speculation that results in a similar urban fabric in both Morocco and Tunisia but that is also typical of North African medinas in centuries past. Houses are constructed with party walls on three sides, the fourth being the street facade.

Municipal authorities ignore developments until nearly everything is finished; only when people are already installed do they bring in the electricity and pipe in water to a few public water outlets. However the people are left to arrange among themselves to provide sewers, pave streets and build services (e.g. baths, schools, etc.). On the other, small commerce appears to thrive, and in Ettadhamen it is said it's the land speculators who reinvest their money in small commercial enterprises in the city!

In the final analysis, the astonishing thing is that the urban character of these recent working class cities, spontaneously created, resembles that of the older medinas of most North African cities.

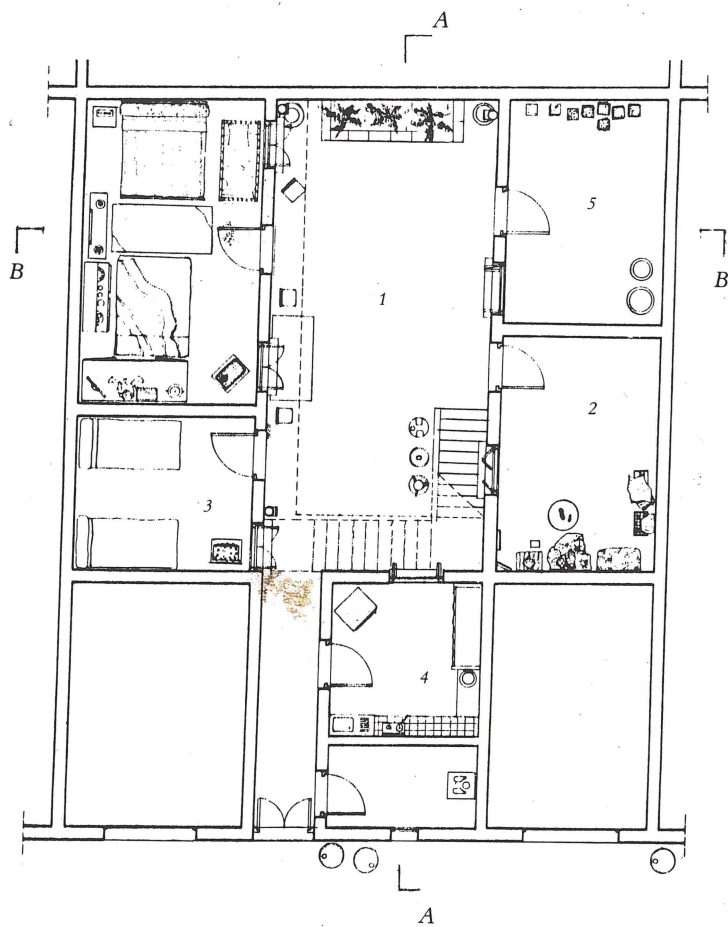


Top: Typical courtyard of a house.

Above: Interior of a house.

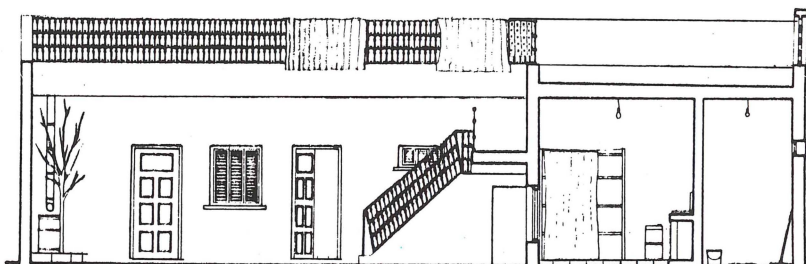
Left, below: Painted facades of houses and shops in Ettadhamen suburb. Photograph: Rochant/Prost.



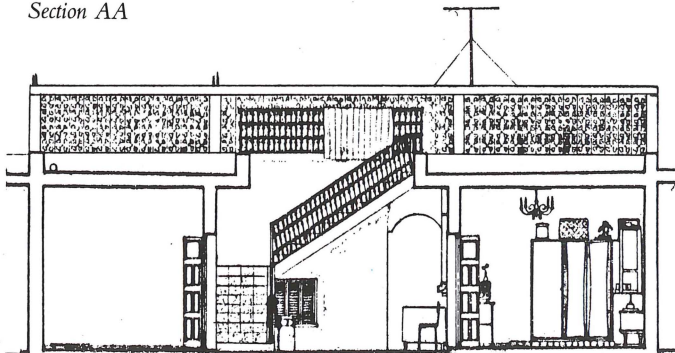


Plan of a house in Ettadhamen:

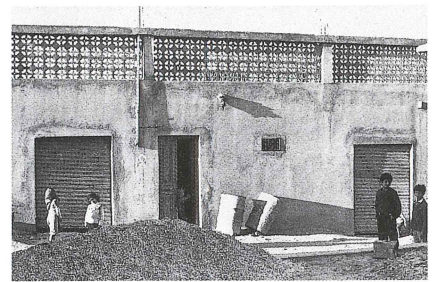
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|--|-----------------------|
| 1. court (wastel dar) | 4. kitchen (kugina) |
| 2. reception/multi-purpose room (bit Raad) | 5. storage (maksoura) |
| 3. parents' bedroom (bit noum) | |



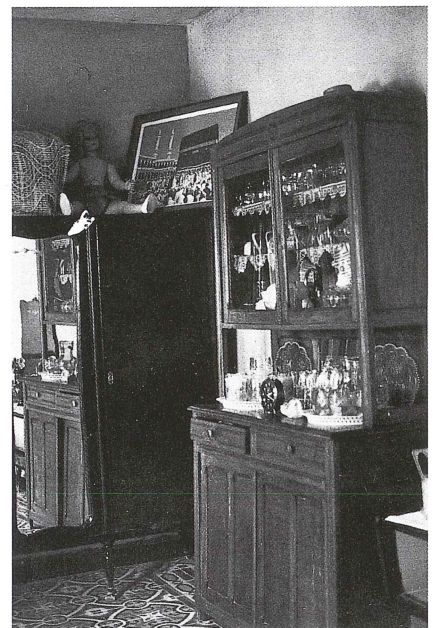
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Section BB



Street facade.



View of a bedroom.

MIMAR: Yes, in El Hajja the first storey of most dwellings is projected out over the street, with more storeys above, resulting I suppose in higher densities than in Ettadhamen, Tunisia. Why is this?

Santelli: The problems of quantity and of density in housing are not the same in Tunisia as in Morocco, where the housing crisis is more acute. The plans from Tunisia shown here are of basically one-storey dwellings, with larger courtyards than those of the multi-storey houses in El Hajja. Plots in Tunisia range from 150-200 square metres, whereas they are 70-80 square metres in El Hajja. They are smaller in the latter instance because land speculation is more intense, prices are high, and hence the houses have smaller surfaces. Yet the traditional typology of courtyard house persists at El Hajja, one superimposed upon another, with the courtyard of lower floors covered with glass bricks to allow light to filter down. Stairs are placed usually in a corner of the street facade when the dwelling is begun in order to ensure privacy at each level,

especially when the owner rents out lower floors to non-family.

MIMAR: What are the lessons to be drawn from your group's research into contemporary self-built housing?

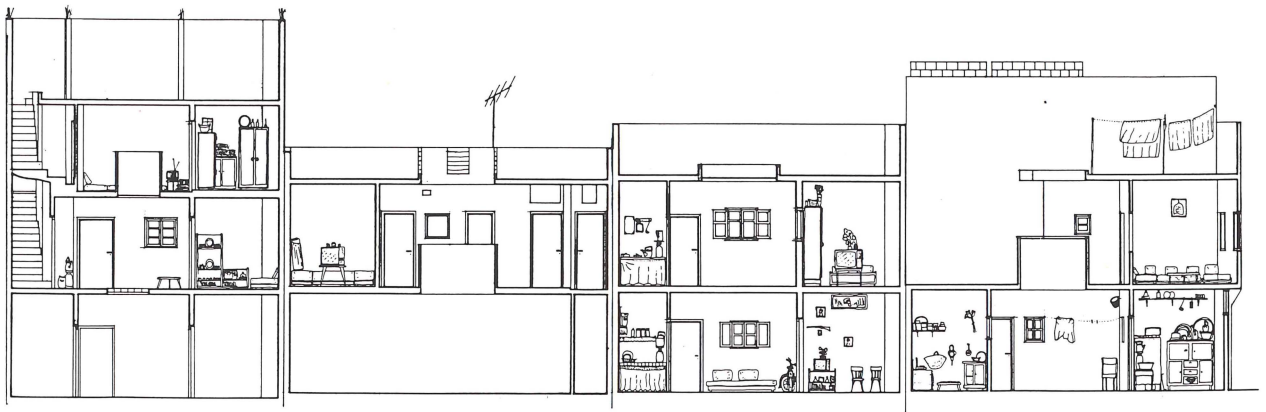
Santelli: We are by no means finished, this is only a first phase. We intended from the beginning to investigate also the changes people have made in their government-sponsored, architect-designed housing in these countries over the past 20 years. An analysis of this and comparison with our present findings should be illuminating.

Nonetheless, since much discussion today is devoted to *how* cities or neighbourhoods are actually produced, we feel that we have shed considerable light upon the relationship between house types and urban form, as well as upon the processes by which low-income (as opposed to the very poor) families are providing shelter for themselves. These case-studies focus upon an economic stratum of people above the slum-dwellers, but they represent an important stage, in a vast segment of, an urbanising population's attempt to improve their lot.

Below: Partial view of El Hajja neighbourhood, Rabat. Housing is built by people on unregistered land and without an official permit. Construction is reinforced concrete post-and-beam with cement block or brick infill.

Right: Site plan of El Hajja neighbourhood built clandestinely on the outskirts of Rabat. Heavy black line indicates the series of houses studied in the report. Scale 1/2000.

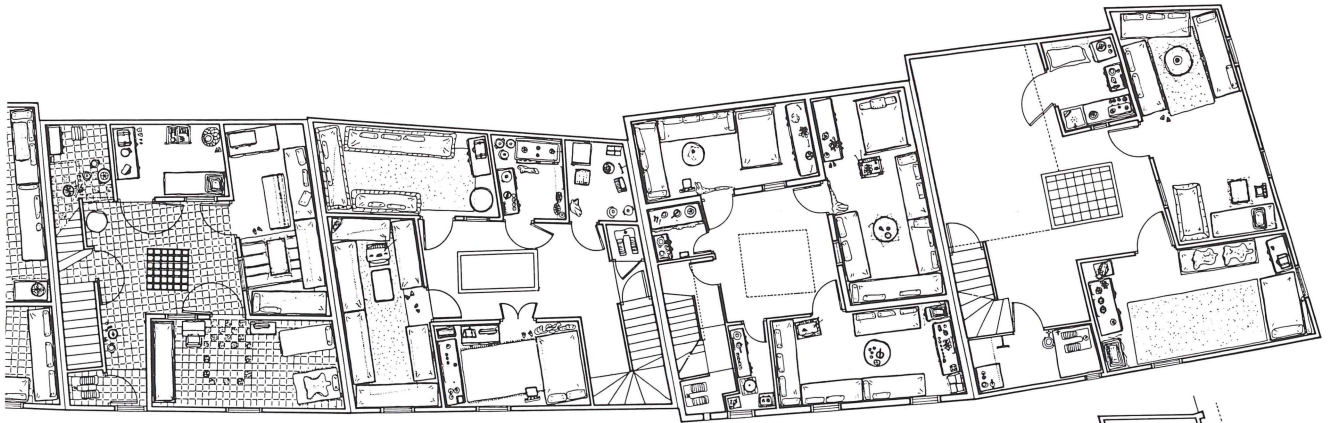




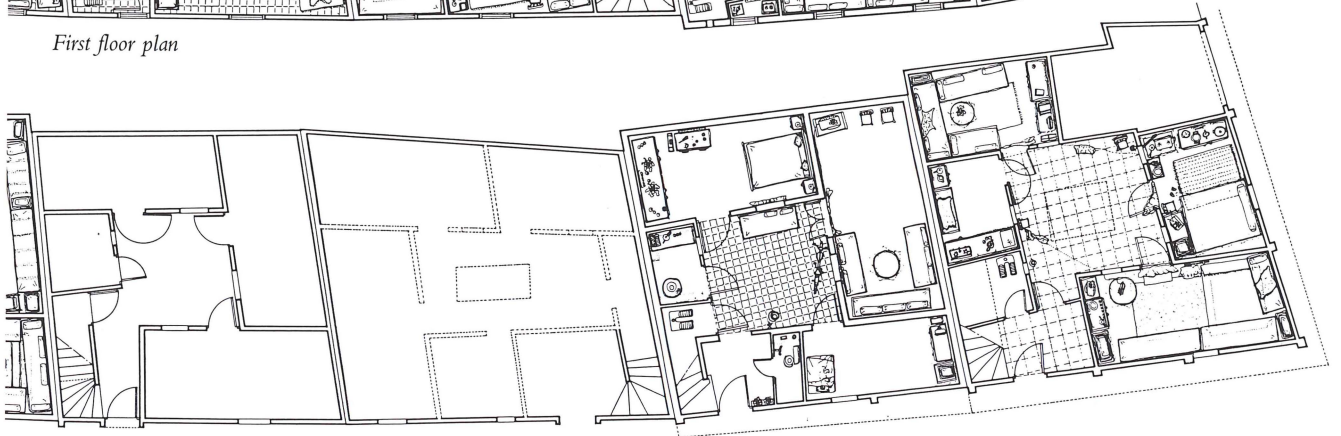
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Facade

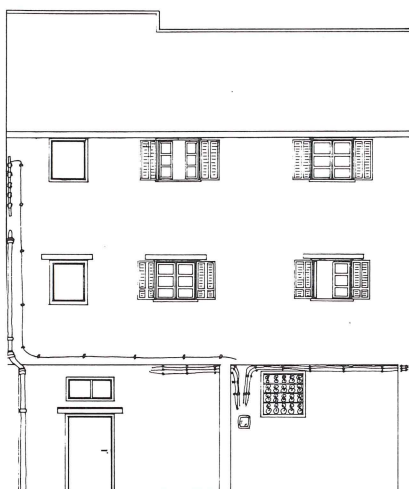


First floor plan

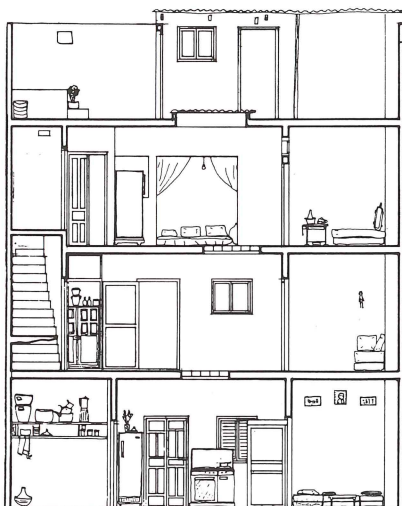


Ground floor plan

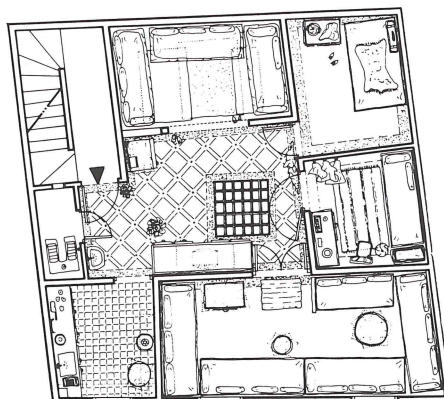
Plans of the ground floor and first floor, street elevations and sections of houses in El Hajja. Note arrangement of living spaces around a central court, sometimes covered by glass bricks on lower floors.



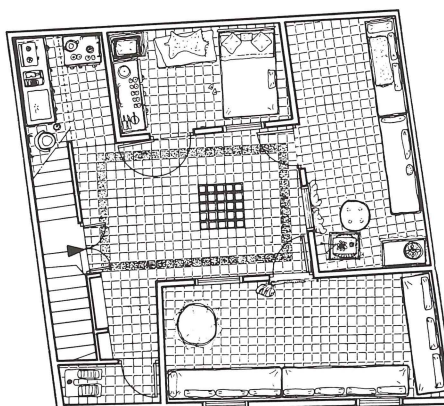
Facade



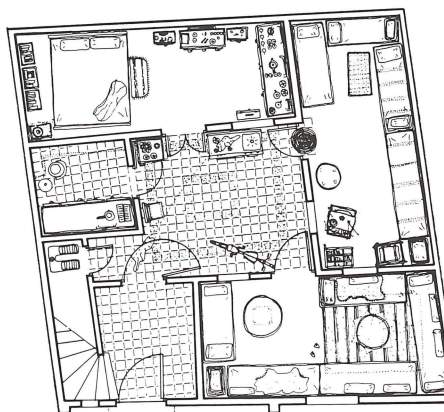
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Second floor plan

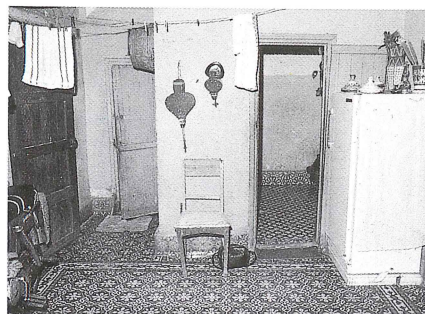


First floor plan



Ground floor plan

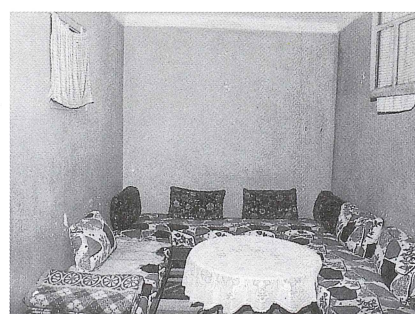
Plans of the ground floor, first and second floors, section and elevation of a typical dwelling in El Hajja quarter.



Interior of ground floor courtyard.



View of master bedroom.



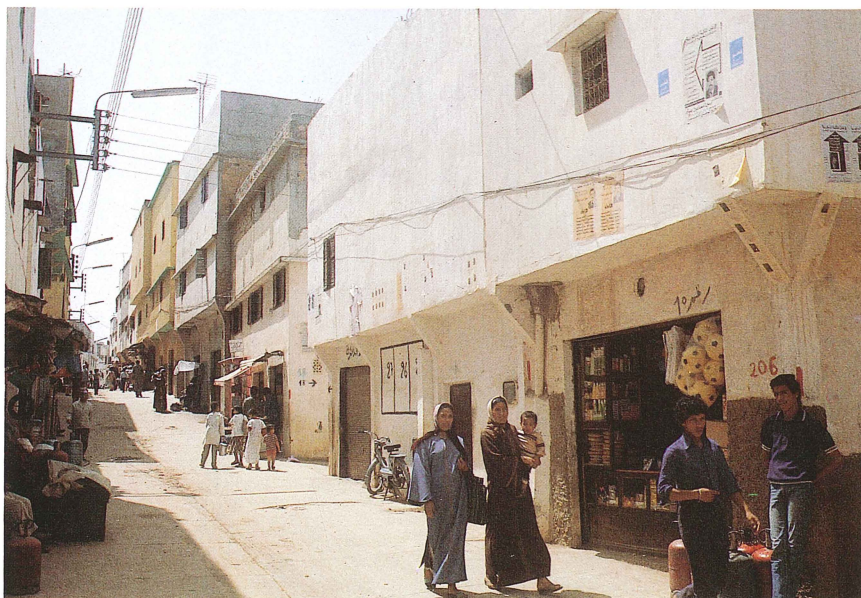
Typical arrangement of reception room.



Left: View of a residential street in El Hajja. Although of recent construction it has the atmosphere of older medinas.

Left, below: Mixed residential and commercial activities in a street of El Hajja quarter.

Left, bottom: View of commercial street with residences above.



Serge Santelli, architect and professor at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, is MIMAR's correspondent in Paris and North Africa, where he goes frequently for research, teaching and business.

