

1986 TECHNICAL REVIEW SUMMARY

Prince Abdallah Al Saoud Mosque and Library Complex
Casablanca , Morocco

638.
MOR.

Date of Completion: 1983

I. OBJECTIVES

- A. To provide a facility for religious, educational and social services for the community of Enfa, near Casablanca, and to complement those services of the Casablanca Metropolitan area.
- B. To help identify Enfa, in particular, and Casablanca, in general, with the traditional character of Moroccan cities.

II. THE SITE

Prince Abdallah Al-Saoud and Library, known as Al Saud Center for Islamic Studies, is located on the corniche of Enfa, a luxurious suburb some 4 kilometers south of the center of Casablanca. The site is a part of Prince Abdallah's summer residence compound which stretches to the west of the complex and contains two palaces and vast gardens.

A. Topography

The site is part of a sloping plain at the foothills of the residential community of Enfa. A sudden drop at the north edge of the site is formed by the corniche road, and is held by a long, tall retaining wall.

B. Local architectural character

A rich suburb, Enfa is an upper class residential district, with few public or community buildings. Individual villas with extensive landscaping form the dominant type of housing; a few condominiums or town houses are now developing along the east side of Enfa, linking its environment to the more public character of Casablanca.

Architectural expression is mixed, and very individualistic, with a clear European reference. Yet, there are a variety of styles and shapes, from Greco-Roman styles to post-modernistic showpieces and including some traditionally fashioned houses. No sense of unity or cohesion is given by these houses, yet the lavish and extremely well kept gardens give the community a pleasant sense of order.

Casinos, restaurants and beach facilities form the public façade of Enfa. A mix of Mediterranean architecture with its terraces, arcades and white façades, and a commercial "strip" character with neon signs, bill boards, and the huge advertisements of the casinos.

C. Access

The site is mainly accessible from the corniche where the entrances of the mosque and the library are located. A pedestrian access for the residential units and the women's mosque are located on the east and south sides of the site.

III. DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

A. Architect's Brief

In his brief, the architect stressed five main points:

1. The ideas of the project are rooted in the custom of Saudi Royalty to build small mosques attached to their residences wherever they live. A small mosque of a capacity of 400 faithful was originally built attached to the Prince's summer residence, established in Enfa-Casablanca around 1979.

2. An over-flow of use of the first mosque led the Prince to build a much larger mosque of a capacity of 5000 faithful, attached to the old mosque.
3. The idea of a religious and cultural complex was introduced by the architect and accepted by the client, and then developed by specialists into a program for an educational, research and religious center focusing on the human sciences in Islam.
4. Housing and community facilities were introduced to generate income and to maintain the facility.
5. Restrictions of the site, land speculation and pressure from the client to complete the work in as fast a time as possible, formed the main constraints under which the architect worked and the project was executed: three months for design development, and twenty collaborating builders working simultaneously to complete the entire complex in eight months.

A. Evolution of the Design Concept

1. Response to physical constraint

- a) The location of the old mosque determined the location and the orientation of the new one.
- b) The cornice defined the main entrance to the mosque and the library. Neighbouring conditions and relations to the Prince's residence determined the organization of the complex.
- c) The ground level of the mosque forms the main prayer space with the library facility above.
- d) The houses are located along the north-east corner of the site connecting to the neighbouring residential development.

- e) The hammam, the bakery and the rest of the community facilities are located on the south east corner to serve the community and to link up with the newly developing center for Enfa, just to the back of the site.

2. Response to User's requirements

- a) The creation of a new mosque was a direct response to the overwhelming use of the old and much smaller mosque. It was reported that people from all over Casablanca used to overcrowd the old mosque and to fill its surrounding streets for Friday prayers. The present mosque of a capacity of 5000 is also used to full capacity as observed in Friday prayers.

Arranged in four sets of aisles (Rwaks), the prayer space is organized around a central 'Sahn' running the entire height of the building, and linking the mosque space to the library above. The Sahn is covered with a very large, traditional cupola.

- b) The library, initially a modest proposal for an Islamic library attached to the mosque, was developed to a full scale research and documentation center for Islamic sciences. The size, capacity and scope of the services considered for the library were made as a result of a local as well as a regional assessment of library needs in Casablanca and the region.

The spaces of the library are organized above the mosque, following the arrangement of the prayer aisles. The entrance, information, card catalogues and the main desk are to the north of the central space. Staff and librarians are to the left from the entrance.

Periodicals and reading spaces are to the right as well. The library is open-shelved, with varying arrangements of shelves, from open to the public in the periodical section to closed rare-books section.

Microfilm and other library aids are available and are located around the central space. Computer, filing and catalogues occupy the south east corner of the library.

Binding, photography and book repairs are in the basement.

The library is staffed by about 30 staff members. Fifteen of them are highly qualified for library and research work. Specialists in documentation, cataloguing, computer programming, information systems, etc., are among the staff of the library.

The other staff are very skilled and experienced technicians in photography, printing, book binding, etc.

Since its operation in 1983, the library has collected over 65,000,000 volumes, and all issues of 500 periodicals. A very advanced computer and word processing facility with a memory of 500,000,000 digits is available and 132,000,000 digits are already in use.

The library has a computer link with the Arab League Documentation Center, ALDOC, as well as 93 documentation centers in Europe and the U.S., such as NASA, the library of the U.S. Congress, FADA, CNRS, and others.

Visiting scholars, book exhibitions, seminars and lectures are among the regular events of the library, in addition to its basic service as the main center for library research in the field of Human Sciences of Islam.

- c) Housing and community facilities, such as the hammam and bakery, although considered to generate an income for the complex and its operation do not, in fact, provide such support. Neither the hammam nor the bakery are in use because of the high cost of operation. Most houses are not yet occupied.

3. Formal aspects

The project complex is part of a much larger development including two palaces for Prince Abdallah. In a formal sense, the language used in the articulation of the building is at best, eclectic. One of the Prince's palaces is an exaggerated Moorish building, with traditional cupolas, glazed roof and characteristic horseshoe arches. Next to it lies an ultra-modern free-form palace. The mosque/library complex, located immediately adjacent to the modern palace, employs traditional moorish motifs and façades. On the extreme east side of the site, the expression of the apartment building follows the character of the residential areas of Enfa with its modernistic expression.

Yet, the whole is made comprehensible by two elements : a tall standstone retaining wall, about 7 meters high, running the entire length of the boundary of the site, forms a horizontal podium for the entire development, and terraces and gardens are arranged atop the wall in an Andalusian tradition. Second, the towering minaret of the mosque, the tallest element in the environment of Casablanca, unify the whole complex and establish an unmistakable identity for Enfa.

The mosque/library building itself is lavishly decorated using the best of the traditional crafts motifs and materials. Although little innovation is left in the ornamentation, the excellence of the craftwork and the superiority of the materials are indeed commendable.

4. Landscaping

The arrangement of the buildings on the site leaves a small plaza in front of the mosque and a pedestrian street between the mosque and the rest of the facilities on the site.

A careful handling of the floors and walls of those spaces establishes an attractive character of the landscape: cut stone, with marble and zellige (mosaic) inlaid is used in the floors of the plaza. Sand stones and terraced gardens form the character of the walls.

In contrast to the extremely lavish and somehow overdesigned landscaping in the palace grounds, the landscape of the mosque/library complex is modest and enjoyable.

B. Structure, Materials and Technology

1. Structural system

Semi pre-fabricated girders and columns assembled on the site.

2. Materials

Reinforced concrete for structural elements;
Cut stones and double layer brick for the walls;
Plaster and gypsum ornaments for the finishing material
of the walls, marble or cut stones for the floors,
ornamental carved woods for the ceilings;
Glazed tiles and terra cotta for the roof.

3. Construction Technology and Labour

Combination of pre-cast, prefabricated elements, along with conventional cast in place concrete work was used to save time. All labour and techniques were local. Twenty builders and contractors worked simultaneously to complete the entire complex in an eight-month time period.

C. Origin

Technology, materials, labour and all professional involvement are local.

IV. CONSTRUCTION SCHEDULE AND COST

A. History of the Project

1979 - The small mosque was built as part of the Prince's residence. An overflow of users led the Prince to larger mosque, to serve not only the immediate community, but Casablanca at large.

June 1982 - After a long deliberation, architect Sabounji was commissioned to design and construct a complex of a mosque/library with attached facility for the community and some revenue generating building such as housing.

September 1982 - The design was completed in the office of Sabounji with associates : Charly Edward, Simon Jack and Abdel Rahim Jamal.

Construction began in November 1982 and it took 8 months to complete the entire building.

B. Total cost and main sources

The total cost was 33,000,000 dirhams or about 3,300,000 U.S. Dollars, all provided by Prince Abdallah Al-Saud.

C. Comparative Cost

Cost per square meter in the complex is about 2700 dirhams or 270 US\$.

Comparative cost in Casablanca is about 2500/3000 dirhams, or about 250/300 US\$.

D. Qualitative analysis

Cost per square meter for mosque and library : 3500 dirhams

Cost per square meter for housing facing : 2000 dirhams

E. Cost of Maintenance

Not available (part of the maintenance operation of the palace).

V. TECHNICAL ASSESSMENTA. Functional Assessment1. The mosque

The mosque serves its purpose providing ample space for prayer. The spaces are almost full in collective prayer (Friday) and are always used. The relation of the ablution to the mosque is somehow questionable. The entrance from the ablution to the mosque through the kebbala wall interrupts the front row of prayers. The main entrance runs axially to the prayer space, which also interrupts the sense of prayer. However, the space of prayer is beautifully articulated.

2. The library

Occupying the floor above the four Iwans of prayer, the library functions well as a graduate research library. Some observations:

- a) The information and librarian desks have no direct or indirect relation to the stacks.
- b) The management and the library staff offices and stations are not well coordinated with each other or with other activities.
- c) Reading and research spaces are located within the shelf space without proper arrangement to guarantee seclusion, privacy and ease of circulation.
- d) Seminar and lectures room are accessible only through the space for the periodicals, limiting its use or causing disturbance to the use of the library.

- e) These are clear sense of direction or possibilities of future growth.

3. The Complex

As a whole, the complex was conceived on a Masjid-Madrassa (Mosque-school) model, yet, the relation between the two elements hardly gives any feeling of unity:

- a) The entrance of the library is separated from that of the mosque by an arcaded gallery on the front façade.
- b) There is no sense of spatial relation from the inside, even though the main void of the mosque cupola penetrates through the heart of the library.
- c) The only attempt to link the mosque to the library through the void of the Mosque's Sahn are two layers of windows along the edges of the Sahn:

windows open to the spaces of the library are made of aluminium, expressing high technology;

windows opening to the mosque are made of wood, relating more to tradition (quoted from the architect).

- d) No interaction is possible between the library and the mosque; one has to leave the library completely to get to prayer, and vice-versa.

B. Climatic Performance, lighting, etc.

The atmosphere of the mosque seems to be very pleasant. The opening of the main gates towards the sea creates, along with the other doors, a refreshing and ventilating breath. The quality of light is beautiful: diffused light floods the carpeted floors from the main gates creating a sense of direction towards the central space. Lit from above, this central space is truly beautiful.

The library is air-conditioned and artificially lit. This has been amended by series of sky lights using plexiglass domes to generate a fairly interesting quality of light, and a unique sense of place for reading. Yet, no genuine articulation is made between natural and artificial lighting.

VI. DESIGN FEATURES

As a whole, the building acts as a landmark for the community of Enfa. The minaret, the mosque and the massive presence of the palace complex formed a pole around which the scattered suburb character of Enfa became more unified. This is not only true in a symbolic sense, but functionally as well. A community center of shops, restaurants and public facilities began to be formed immediately to the back of the project.

VII. AESTHETIC ASSESSMENT

Aesthetically, Prince Abdallah Al-Saud Mosque and Library can be judged on a number of levels:

1. The complex added a tone of grace and beauty to the skyline of Casablanca, a city of European and modernistic characters.
2. The mosque and the minaret gave the architecture of the community of Enfa a sense of cohesion and balanced the chaotic character of its beach developments.
3. Being a part of the residence of the Prince, the mosque/library building added a commanding and unifying character to the different formal expressions of the palaces and their grounds.
4. No pretense of monumentality or grandeur, but adherence to the traditional vocabulary of mosque architecture in North Africa. An attempt can be made to articulate the library, and to introduce a more refined level of expression within the architecture of the Mosque.

5. A modest attitude towards the architecture of the houses, employing plain surfaces, secluded yards and fenced gardens helped to integrate the houses within the neighbouring community.

As a whole, the complex appears a restrained exercise in formal aesthetics with clear reference to traditional Moroccan architecture.

Technical Reviewer : Abdel-Halim I. Abdel-Halim

June 1986