Investment in Heritage of Oldtowns and Cultural Tourism: Project for the Restoration of the Five Houses in the Medina of Tetouan

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Credit Photos by Otman El-Absi

Medina of Tetouan lies on the heights of Mount Dersa overlooking the Mediterranean coast only ten kilometers away across the plains of Beni Ma’dan along the Martil River. The Medina of Tetouan was created as a fortress by the Andalusian immigrants during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. Its unique Andalusian cultural and its natural heritage have been the product of its important strategic situation. Its history, culture, traditional arts along with its urban and architectural development during the last five centuries have made it into one of the most original, authentic and fascinating cultural heritage cities in Morocco. Described in the historical sources as the white dove, the daughter of Granada and the little Jerusalem, the Medina of Tetouan stands out in Moroccan history as one of the most outstanding cities in the Mediterranean world. The combination of beaches, mountains and the cultural world cultural Medina of Tetouan make it an ideal place to visit.
Its history is one of has been closely linked to the expulsion of the Andalusians from the Iberian Peninsula by the Castilians and their settlement in the Maghreb area. Successive waves of Andalusian settlers following the expulsion of the Andalusian Muslims of Granada in 1492 passed across Tetouan to settle in other Moroccan cities like Chauen, Fez, Rabat or Salé, while others remained in Tetouan adopting it as their new home. That was how the Andalusian culture was transmitted to Tetouan and other Moroccan cities. Although the inhabitants of Tetouan included immigrants of diverse origins ranging from Andalusians and Rifians from the rural surrounding areas to Fassis and Algerians from Tlemser, the cultural and artistic influence of Andalus was strongest in Tetouan. It is clear in the Tetouani names of Andalusian origin such as Medina, Torres or Lukash, the architectural structures of the private houses, mosques, city wall or towers dating from different centuries.

The fountains in the private houses and in the public streets and squares receive their water from Mount Dersa thanks to a sophisticated underground distribution system called the Skundou network. One of Tetouan’s most original historical monuments is the sixteenth century chapel in the Mtamar or Mazmorras, a network of underground prison built for the portuguese hostages especially during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Tetouan’s private houses represent the most impressive monuments in the city. Some are enormous mansions and the variety of these houses is due to the fact that they were built over a long range of time over a period of five centuries.

The city’s museums include an archeological museum, an ethnografic museum, a museum of the religiuosheritage and a museum of Nationalism in Northern Morocco which was created in a beautiful early twentieth century house in the Medina.

The Medina of Tetouan’s urban and architectural development over a long period of five centuries explain the great variety of its architectural monuments and their authenticity.

Besides its Muslim inhabitants, an important Jewish community settled in Tetouan which is why its Jewish quarter is the largest Jewish quarter in Morocco, bigger than the Mellah of Fez or Rabat. The Muslim, Christian and Jewish historical cemeteries of Tetouan stand out for their originality too.

Tetouan’s special historical relations with Spain have been the result of such important historical events as the War of Tetouan in 1860 when Spain occupied Tetouan militarily until it 1862 when the Spanish army left in 1862 after signing a peace treaty with the Moroccan Sultan.

During the period of the Spanish Protectorate in Morocco which lasted from 1912 to 1956, Tetouan became the capital of the Protectorate in Morocco and the Sahara. A new colonial quarter called the Ensanche was built to serve as the capital of the Spanish Protectorate. This colonial quarter is a real architectural jewel. The buildings in the Ensanche stand out for
the beauty of their facades and the simplicity of the interior, while the buildings in the Medina of Tetouan have simple facades, but are extraordinarily beautiful in the inside.

The Medina of Tetouan has been classified as a world cultural heritage city by UNESCO in 1997. Far from being a dead museum, this city is characterized by its continuous cultural activities. Tetouan is a cultural city par excellence. The King of Morocco's frequent visits and the city's transformation into the summer capital of Morocco have increased its attraction and visitors flock to it from numerous parts of Morocco and from abroad. That is why Tetouan has changed more during the last decade than it had done over the past fifty years. Its new highway, its numerous tourist complexes along the Mediterranean coast and its beautiful mountainous spots in its surrounding areas have made Tetouan one of the most pleasant cities to visit, especially during the Spring and Summer seasons. Its mild temperature cause by the east wind from the sea characterise the city throughout the year's four seasons. Finally, it is perhaps its people that make this city such a cultural and artistic attraction for visitors from many parts of Morocco and from abroad. The number of tourists who come to Tetouan from different parts of Morocco by cars, buses or trains and those who come by ship and by plane, have increased continuously over the past decade. It continues to change for the better and this is clear to see.

The private houses of the Medina of Tetouan are perhaps the most beautiful type of historical monument to be found in the city. These houses are numerous and many of them are still in an excellent state. They are characterised by their diversity and originality too. That is why the Tetouan Asir Club of Friends of UNESCO launched a project which consists of the restoration of five houses in the Medina, one from each of the last five centuries. The criteria which we used to restore these houses are the following:

- We used the same construction materials as those used to build each house originally.
- We also used the same construction techniques which were originally used to build each house.
- We restored the decorative elements in each house.

Our main goal was to study the architectural development of the houses in the Medina of Tetouan over the past five centuries. We wanted to demonstrate how the architecture of these houses evolved and how many decorative elements were introduced progressively.

We also wanted to illustrate the original elements in each of the houses. For example, we discovered a variety of systems that were used to distribute water including the fountains which used water from the sources in the mountain, drinking rain water which was stored in underground cisterns or large clay jars. Some houses dug wells and drank their water.

The decorative elements included the Tetouani zulayj, inscriptions on lime stone walls, painted wood or iron rails used in the windows overlooking the courtyards.

While carrying out the restoration project, we had to solve some difficult technical problems such as rebuilding ceilings using wooden beams, cementing the walls of the entire house with lime stone mixed with earth, restoring the zulayj or mosaics in the courtyard, pillars, walls or stairs.

As a result of our restoration project, we have studied and understood many aspects of constructing houses, which we think are necessary for the conservation of the cultural and architectural heritage of the Medina of Tetouan, classified by UNESCO as a world cultural heritage city.