



Here and Nowhere Else

ICI, Casa

What happens when six designers from The Netherlands decide to come open-minded and empty-handed to Casablanca, in order to put together an exhibition from scratch, using the city as an instant source of inspiration and production? Between 20 August - 20 October 2010, the project ICI was conceived and realised in Casablanca. Its title ICI, meaning 'here', refers to here and now, almost as if one would press pause in everyday life. At the same time, the term 'here' points to where one comes from (there). Set up as an artistic residency, ICI produced new work made in collaboration with a Moroccan team. The residency was complemented by a programme of lectures and workshops with local partners, which opened up the process to a wider audience and intensified the exchange. The different aspects came together in the exhibition-manifestation 'ICI, Casa Resourceful City', a Dutch perspective on the city of Casablanca in the form of objects and installations. The article below tries to orchestrate the experiences and findings of the team during the eight-week working period, in an effort to feed the discussion around the issues at stake in this complex city.

text & images SOPHIE KRIER (except where otherwise mentioned)

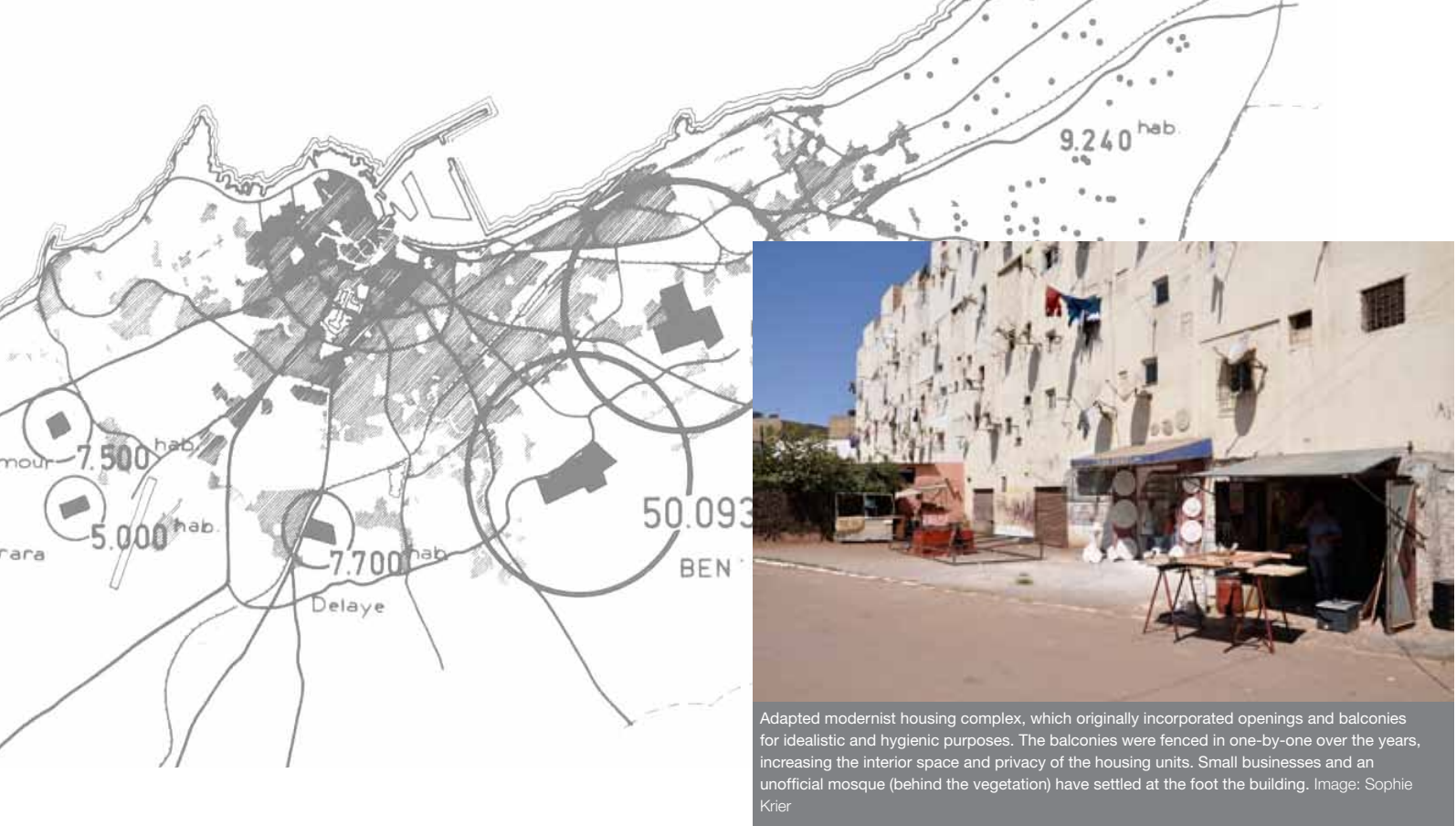
Casa Laboratoire de la Modernité (Laboratory of Modernity), Casa Page de Brouillon (Casa the Scratch Paper), Casa Ville Nouvelle (Casa the New City), Casa La Débrouillarde (Casa the Resourceful): Casablanca's many nicknames are hints of its moving history. Originally a Berber settlement carrying the Amazigh name of Anfa (hill), over time it has been destroyed, rebuilt and occupied, and these days is simply known as 'Casa' by locals. Once a small independent kingdom ruled by sultans, the city gained value as a port and international stock and trade centre, yet it was only in 1956 that it shrugged off its colonial rulers and gained independence from France. Its population grew exponentially in the course of the 20th century; between 1915 and 1950 alone, rural immigrants moved to the city's peripheral bidonvilles (shanty towns, baptised bidonvilles because they were originally assembled from oil barrels, which could be found in abundance near the port), multiplying the population by 900% from 25,000 to over a 200,000. Today, over 4.5 million people live in what has become one of the largest urban centres of the Maghreb – a potentially explosive situation, as shown by the 2003 and 2007 suicide bombings.



Casablanca was profoundly shaped by experimental modernist urban planning and social housing schemes under the French protectorate period (1912-1956). Its modernity has been (and still is) one shaped by the intersection of (imposed) imported ideas versus local cultural influences. Typical occidental building elements such as balconies were for example juxtaposed with the more oriental, interiorised family housing unit, while the model of the traditional Medina was reproduced in the modern neighbourhood Les Habous. Studies of housing alternatives for the proliferous bidonvilles, which remained theoretical concepts in most of Europe, were tried out in Casablanca, for better and for worse. Conceived by urbanist Henri Prost, a Ville Nouvelle (new town) bearing a modern street plan with buildings affiliated to Mauresque, Neo-Moroccan and art deco styles still shapes the city's main circulation routes.

Logo ICI (top)
Design: Erik Wong

Making Of ICI by Henriette Waal
(above)
Photo: Henriette Waal



Adapted modernist housing complex, which originally incorporated openings and balconies for idealistic and hygienic purposes. The balconies were fenced in one-by-one over the years, increasing the interior space and privacy of the housing units. Small businesses and an unofficial mosque (behind the vegetation) have settled at the foot the building. Image: Sophie Krier



A minivan breaks down. An old crate, a wrinkled paper bag, a small oilcan and a plastic bag are enough to stop access to a main road near the city centre. It's a logic that exemplifies Casablanca's ambivalent dynamics - what may come across as crazy driving habits to the outsider turns out to be governed by very subtle rules and messages. Image: Sophie Krier



Every evening during Ramadan the beach of Aïn Diab filled up with young men playing football. There must have been at least 600 of them, all playing across from one another; two sandals stuck vertically in the sand formed ad hoc goals. Image: Erik Wong



The red signs on the yellow melons: they intrigued us from the start. We thought they were signs of quality, and assumed they were all the same. Later, we found out that every red sign is applied with a differently shaped sponge by a farmer, in order to indicate the origin of the melons. All these variations of red squares thus represent the surrounding farms that supply the city with food. Image: Dawn Ray



I ordered three coffees to go from the café on the corner. 'With or without sugar?' The barman wrapped the cups in aluminium foil for me. He twisted a small fold in the one with sugar. Image: Erik Wong



The magical Sidi Abderrahman site, a tribute to a local saint, only reachable by foot at low tide and located a stone's throw away from the future Morocco Mall. Image: Erik Wong



Advertising itself with the slogan 'All for you' with luxury entertainment such as a 3D spa and Imax cinemas, Morocco Mall will be the largest one built in North Africa so far. It is a recurring topic of conversation, on which few Casaouis agree. www.moroccomall.net



Image: Sophie Krier



Mural advertisement for a pressing service. Notice the shiny waves on the three buttons of the right sleeve. Image: Dawn Ray

So what kind of modernity does a place like Casablanca need? Which qualities have the potential to foster Casablanca's multiple identities for the future? How can the city's cultural agents be equipped to help enable such a movement, and how can its inhabitants be mobilised to identify themselves with the city at large? These questions were addressed in a heated debate with the cultural network of Casamémoire on 6 October 2010. To begin to answer these ambitious questions, it is necessary to look at some elements that render fragile Moroccan society at large and the patchwork population of Casablanca in particular.

The image of Casablanca, which insiders and outsiders have, constitutes a first dilemma. To outsiders, Casablanca is still largely synonymous with the 1942 wartime film (which ironically was shot entirely in a studio with no local cast except for Abdul, a doorman with a marginal role). Contemporary filmmakers and musicians have turned to the street life of Casablanca in an effort to break through prevailing taboos - an ambition baptised La Movida Marocaine (the Moroccan movement) by the cultural press.

To some Casaouis, Casablanca is a hard working, pragmatic city that lacks humanity and should be more in touch with its Moroccan roots. To others, Casablanca holds the promise of a multilingual and multiracial hub on the verge of the Western world. Ambitious entertainment, transport and real estate projects are currently under construction throughout the city: the Anfa Resort project, a high-end business and living centre on the coast; the Casablanca Tramway, a line which aims to link up the centre to the peripheral neighbourhoods (but struggles with stigmatisation issues and infrastructural delays); and the giant Morocco Mall shopping centre, located at the very southern end of a renovated coastal walkway. The question is, if these projects will shape the kind of modernity that a city like Casa needs and deserves.

Every day, the streets are congested with traffic - sustainable modes of public transport haven't yet taken root. The bureaucracy is of a disheartening muddle-headedness. There is no substantial middle class and the large unschooled working class, for the largest part of rural origin, caters to the needs of the relatively powerful elite through an informal (and thus unsecured)



Mr. Emballage Rapide wraps anything in a custom-made box, using old cardboard and official tape from the Post Office, for whom he unofficially works. Image: Erik Wong



The man in grey with the yellow turban sits in the corner of his grey garden, recently added on to the yellow facade of his apartment building in the neighbourhood Carrières Centrales. The application of the law remains a human process, leaving room for negotiation, interpretation and appropriation. Image: Sophie Krier



During Ramadan, entire families take to the streets to spend time together. The public gardens are turned into domestic scenes. The ease with which this happens points to the need for functional green spaces in the city. Image: Sophie Krier



A mobile plant shop; the man clearly tends his garden well. What if public parks were approached in this way, through a system of private adoption of green areas? Image: Erik Wong

economy of personal services, the so-called petits métiers. For basic cultural facilities such as museums and libraries, one needs to travel to the neighbouring capital of Rabat. The artistic mindset, inherent to Moroccan culture, remains mostly confined to the indoors and hasn't reached the public domain yet. Professional artistic education isn't equipped to meet international standards. The - largely unacknowledged - architectural heritage suffers from a lack of maintenance and is threatened by the surge of the aforementioned real estate speculation.

On a positive note, the city is home to artistic initiatives such as LBoulevard, Festimode, KHK Extramuros, Casamémoire and La Fabrique Culturelle des Abattoirs. These initiatives have the potential to reinvigorate the cultural climate of Casa, provided the city would invest in them. On a more personal level, the Casaouis are very generous in sharing their social networks (a holdover from tribal ways of life?), which makes these interlinked networks trustworthy and prompt. A unique asset in the age of digitisation, exemplified by the popularity of Facebook among the young generation.

Language-wise, Casablanca is home to three main languages: Moroccan Arabic, French (the unofficial second language) and Berber - which is increasingly being used in schools. During the Protectorate, Arabic street signs were translated to French. Recently, these names have become Arabised again. The translation happens both phonetically and literally, which produces a fascinating go-between language that bridges Arabic lyricism and French precision. As an illustration, shop signs all over Casa bear beautiful calligraphed names such as Le Salon des Amis (a hairdresser), Les Centres de la Forme (a gym) or Messagerie Vers L'Europe (a travel agent).

An undervalued quality is the widespread talent for improvisation, which produces smart add-ons, plug-ins and other alternatives to the city's official rules, and generates a potentially fruitful climate for innovation. Due to a lack of public sporting facilities, temporary football fields are for instance set up on the spot in the middle of a street or on a stretch of beach. Thanks to interpretation margins in the law, private gardens have the tendency to grow year by year, taking over pavements and even small squares, and producing a characteristic type of urban nature.



Rachid is a car guardian in the chic Gauthier neighbourhood. About 50 tenants make use of his services, which include parking and washing. Rachid's expert knowledge of his clients allows him to make very efficient use of the limited parking space in the narrow streets. One client, who always returns home at 5pm, doesn't like to see the parking space in front of his house taken by another car. Rachid knows that, and makes sure that the space is vacated by the time Mr. X comes home. Rachid tackles by himself what three Western systems often fail to do well: the parking garage, the car wash and the civil police. Image: Amine



Waste retriever. Every waste collector makes different sounds to catch the attention of the inhabitants, which sound like variations on Biiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii-rèèè. Some collect second-hand goods, others collect and repair metal utensils. They say the call is an adaptation of the original Haaaaaaaaa-bits (clothes). Casablanca doesn't have a deposit system on plastic bottles, nor a centralised recycling system. It would be a challenge to valorise and synchronise these petits métiers. Image: Sophie Krier



The roof of the former Église du Sacré-Coeur, recently repainted from top to bottom. Image: Sophie Krier



During a three-day workshop Erik Wong and Dawn Ray worked with students of l'École Supérieure de Design Art'Com Sup de Casablanca on spreading the word about ICI in the city - an exercise in guerrilla communication. Images: Erik Wong

Traditional Moroccan habits are said to still be alive in popular neighbourhoods, where family and group life still prevail, as opposed to the individualistic 'chacun pour soi' (self-interested) mode of living in the modern city centre. The Friday couscous (home made and distributed for free to the poor via the local mosque), the freely available drinking water for all (traditionally available through fountains), and the recycling of old bread (put to dry on the side of the streets, so that farmers on their way out of the city can feed their cattle with it) are permeated by notions of solidarity, generosity and sustainability. Structures, which could ground and enrich contemporary citizenship.

The challenge for Casablanca is to recognise and invest in those cultural assets, which are embedded in the socio-economic fabric of the city, and to prioritise these above generic values of modernity, which one can find in any other modern city. The social systems of Casa have the potential to be harbingers of another modernity, one that will be inventive, human and just, while celebrating the many identities of the city. For this to happen, Casablanca's qualities need to be researched in



depth, mapped and documented, so as to fully understand their potential value for the city. The unofficial petits métiers mentioned before – jobs outside of the social security circuit such as house cleaner, waste retriever, parking guardian and runner – deserve priority, because their dynamics could inform another modernity: one that is more human than the system-driven, European one – if, and only if, they are recognised as valuable structures to build on.



Arabic flyer in a petit taxi. The petit taxi (small taxi) can hold up to four passengers, which are taken on board if their destination is more or less on the planned route. Destination and amount of passengers are communicated swiftly on the side of the road, through an array of manual signs. Taxi drivers have the reputation of being enthusiastic conversation makers but you're just as likely to end up with a long-winded blabbermouth, as you are an extremely grumpy one. Casa counts 8500 red petit taxis in total, which provide a metered cab service in the central metropolitan areas, while the grand taxis, older Mercedes-Benz Sedans nicknamed 'les vaches folles' (mad cows) by the locals, provide a shared minibus-like service between centre and periphery on pre-defined routes, or shared inter-city service. The petit taxi system allows for informal encounters, of which the beginning and the end remain open and the topic is usually fed by the news of the day - such as the implementation of the red traffic light fine last October. It's a smart and social system, which has the potential to link up the different worlds of Casa. The documentary A La Recherche Du Taxi Numéro 1 (Pascal Renaud) made use of the sharing system to film chance encounters. Image: Erik Wong



Calligrapher Abde Samad Doumi at work on the exhibition titles, taken from shop signs all over the city and applied to the works produced on site. Image: Jamal Abdennasser (left) Casablanca's pavements show a rich variation of tiles; David van der Veldt designed flooring for the exhibition based on modular patterns found in the city. Image: Jamal Abdennasser (right)



For the workshop 'On Se Pose' David van der Veldt teamed up with Khadija Kabbaj of KHK Extramuros. Of diverse origins, the participants reinterpreted the Rietveld Crate Chair in relation to the monumental space of the former slaughterhouse complex Les Abattoirs. Image: Jamal Abdennasser



Installation view (above), image: Erik Wong Details of the installation signage (below), images: Hicham Zemmar



Here is the only Thing we have...

Epilogue

I try to survive. I bluff my way through. I find ways around the rules. I work things out, one way or another. In hindsight, it seems that we took over the very dynamics of the city in the production of ICI.... They say beauty is a subjective notion, which prompts us to perpetuate it - ICI turned out to be an exercise in mimesis as a mode of cultural reproduction.

We wanted the exhibition to be experienced as a city in a city. Visitors would encounter a world under construction that referred to everyday elements of the city – studies of another Casa: a Casa built from qualities that we had encountered during our stay.

The exhibition was to be held in the former Église du Sacré-Coeur near the city centre. A loaded place pointing to French Catholic influences, unavoidable by its sheer size and whiteness, and yet wilfully unknown to most taxi drivers. For our process driven approach, this location seemed a dead end at first, mainly because of its elitist image – boys play football on the square in front of the entrance, but will never go inside.

Here you are

After having walked through a long alley, filled with sounds from street merchants, visitors arrive on a main square (situated at the back of the church). Modified



Kiosk
Image: Dawn Ray



Kiosks, reconstructed from refuse metal collected in Derb Korea and Mohammedia, and recalling different typologies such as the butcher, the café, and the small riad.
Blacksmith: Lamjid Rourak; design & image: Sophie Krier



'Le Salon des Amis' (the friends' living room), a series of adjustable sofa families inspired by the traditional Moroccan Salon, which is an affair of taste, money and craftsmanship. The double-sided textile used for the upholstery is normally covered.
Upholsterer: Bourga Décor; design: Sophie Krier & Khadija Kabbaj; images: Jamal Abdennasser and Erik Wong



'Au dernier cri, Qualité 1ère Reproduction': a blue horse designed to seduce an audience to be portrayed with it. Part of the 'spray-cast fiction series', a technique developed by Ray.
Design, realisation & images: Dawn Ray

street signs, see-through kiosks assembled from refuse metal and dispersed sofas – stripped down versions of the Moroccan Salon – frame the temporary square.

On the night of the opening, local food merchants take over the exhibition and prepare their snails, chickpeas, pancakes, mint tea and cardamom coffee just like they do every day at the market. A one-day jazz gnaoua rock slam fusion band, baptised Mystic Session, plays on the public square in front of the former Eglise, whose cement steps had been upholstered with scotch-taped pillows. Passers-by, attracted by the music, are invited in.

In two weeks' time, ICI is gradually adopted by its neighbouring students, who use it as a resting and meeting place. It's a big compliment to us.

Here to stay

ICI wants to stay in Casa. Therefore we've donated all scenographic elements to the Fabrique Culturelle des Abattoirs for future use in cultural events. Plans are underway for further collaborations, such as art directing a streetwise version of the high end Festimode event, and producing prototypes of urban playing environments with La Fabrique Culturelle des Abattoirs. #



Lutte
Design: David van der Veldt; images: Meryem Aboulafa and Hicham Zemmar



Hand-knotted carpet from industrial rope named 'our', usually used to fill up the corner pieces of mattresses.
Upholsterer: Bourga Décor; design: Sjoerd Jonkers; images: Hicham Zemmar



A Moroccan version of the Crate Chair Junior by Rietveld that uses local engraving techniques.
Engraver: Mohssine Elyounssi; carpenter: Abdellah Lebchina; concept: David van der Veldt & Bas van Beek; image: Meryem Aboulafa



Decrochage
Image: Sophie Krier

Credits

ICI was initiated by the Dutch Embassy of Rabat in the context of the celebration in 2010 of 400 years of economic relations between The Netherlands and Morocco.

The Dutch design team was composed of established practices (Sophie Krier, Bas van Beek, Erik Wong) and upcoming talent (David van der Veldt, Sjoerd Jonkers, Dawn Ray), all affiliated through teaching and studying with the Gerrit Rietveld Academy, Amsterdam.

In the course of the project the team was enriched with designer Khadija Kabbaj, producer and photographer Jamal Abdennasser, and assistant producer Meryem Aboulouafa, as well as many artisans and students. Towards the end, almost 50 were involved in the realisation of ICI. Local partners include La Fabrique Culturelle des Abattoirs, Casamémoire, KHK Extramuros, and L'École Artcom.

ICI logo & identity: Erik Wong
Scenography: Sophie Krier
Communication: Erik Wong & Dawn Ray
Co-curator: Khadija Kabbaj
Object and Installations: David van der Veldt, Sjoerd Jonkers & Dawn Ray
Assistant producer: Meryem Aboulouafa
Producer & installation: Jamal Abdennasser
Press Photography: Hicham Zemmar
Mystic Session Musicians: Hamam, Saddik Ngoumi, Mostapha, Jamaal Nouaman, Mahmoud Bassou, Rezki Amine, Martin, Abdesamad Rizki & Benoît Martiny. (Manager: Tarek Boual, technician: Joe Hani.)

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ICI

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www.basvanbeek.com / www.sophiekrier.com
www.wongema.nl / www.sjoerdjonkers.com
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