



The Women's House of Ouled Merzoug



In Ouled Merzoug, a small earthen village near the Atlas Mountains of Morocco, a piece of land was offered by the community to the recently founded women's association AFOM (Association des Femmes d'Ouled Merzoug). Within the postgraduate certificate Building Beyond Borders, organized by UHasselt SEE, the participants designed and built in close collaboration with local women and workers. The end result of this participatory process is a Women's House: a meeting, working and learning place in the centre of the village.



In this project, the limits of the sustainable buildings were challenged by maximizing the use of local and regenerative materials and the confrontation between traditional and contemporary building techniques.

The features of the site were taken as starting points for the implementation and design of the Women's House. The house is not built in the center of the gully but along the ridge of the hill.



Following the natural topography of the site, the Women's House consists of two volumes, each positioned in a slightly different direction. In its specific positioning, the House seeks connection with both sides of the village. The main façades at the ends of the building capture two beautiful panoramic views: sunrise over the mountains and sunset over the river. The public character of the Women's House is emphasized by placing the building on the crossing of the two informal paths. The main path leads the villagers directly to the heart of the building.



From center to end, from public to private. The Women's House is entered through a central meeting place, a public heart, the 'cour'. The 'cour' connects the two volumes of the house: a workshop space, the 'atelier des femmes' and a communal baking house, the 'boulangerie commune'. The 'atelier' is a place for meeting, teaching and learning, spinning and weaving. In the 'boulangerie' the women can enjoy sharing meals together, bake and sell homemade bread and pastries. Whereas the center of the building is the most public, the ends are the most private.

Each volume gives access to an intimate garden. Apart from being areas for leisure and resting, the gardens are designed and furnished to enhance the program of the adjacent spaces. The large sink on the bench of the ‘atelier’ garden makes it possible for the women to wash and color wool. In the cob oven in the ‘boulangerie’ garden, women can experiment with new recipes.



Building with natural materials — pushing the limits. Maximizing the use of local and natural materials and minimizing the amount of construction waste, were taken as base principles in this project. For the envelope of the building, pieces of granite rock were dug out from the surrounding hills.

The inner walls are made out of adobe bricks. While the roof span of the building is based upon the maximum length of the eucalyptus beams that can be found on the local market, the ceiling is made out of a reed that grows in the 'Palmeraie'.



As for the finishing of the walls and floors, different mixes of local earth, river sand, lime, and straw are used. By the virtue of the close collaboration between skilled local workers and foreign architects, and thereby the confrontation of traditional and new building techniques, it was possible to reinvent and explore new construction details during the building process.

CREDITS

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