Object lessons

Jacques Chirac School

RABAT, MOROCCO

In the bright, early morning sun, MONOCLE drives down one of Rabat's broad, palm-lined avenues among the embassies and villas of the city's Souissi neighbourhood. Guiding the way is the architectural team behind the city's newly finished, modernist-inspired Jacques Chirac School.

As with many capital cities, Rabat's structures lean towards the impressively monumental. However, architect Driss Kettani explains that he and his associates wanted to contribute to the fabric of the city by creating a civic building with "a sense of presence and its own identity" that was decidedly not a monument. "You have to try to create a space that has a kind of soul, that conveys lightness and joy," Kettani says of his collaborations on school design with fellow architects Saad El Kabbaj and Mohamed Amine Siana, who all met while attending the National School of Architecture in Rabat.

The trio designed notable Moroccan institutions such as the Higher School of Technology in Guelmim, which was influenced by the mud-brick constructions typical of the country's southern regions. In 2018 they were invited by a group of private investors to submit a proposal to design a new academy. Though Kettani, El Kabbaj and Siana each maintain individual offices within a broader shared studio in nearby Casablanca, the team has made a habit of joining forces on larger commissions over the past 18 years.

"We sit around the table and sketch together," says Kettani. "We all get involved in every part of the design process; none of us is limited to a particular task. Any idea we present to the group has to be rational and very well justified. If the idea is weak, it won't convince the other two. At the end of the road, only the best ideas survive this process." The team feels that their ability to draw on the power of collective thinking while retaining each member's individuality added to the strength of their winning proposal.

As we arrive at the school gates, Kettani further contextualises the building's bold geometric forms within the cityscape. "We tried to create a sculptural feeling," he says. "We adopted features from Rabat's schools from the 1960s and 1970s, such as the use of white stucco, sober forms, horizontal lines and a ground floor made from stone." The team believes that combining traditional Moroccan architectural features with more modern influences, such as striking angular elements inspired by the work of French-Moroccan architect Jean-François Zevaco, leads to designs that create a heightened sense of belonging for the school's pupils.

The Jacques Chirac School is a private institution that is part of Agency for French Education Abroad, an international network. Its lead investor, Princess Lalla Soukaina, granddaughter of the late King Hassan II of Morroco, felt that it was essential that the school reflected the country's culture – and for good reason. Even though the institution operates as a multicultural and multilingual learning environment, the bulk of the school's students are Moroccan. Within a space the size of two football pitches, the three-storey building comprises a primary and secondary school for 1,100 pupils.

We enter the campus via the southwest entrance, which is used by the younger children. Wide rectangular columns covered in light-blue *zellige* tiles, a type of colourful mosaic, punctuate the entrance with their shine and texture. It was important for the team of Moroccan architects to include the hand-moulded, glazed clay tiles to highlight the use of traditional local materials. "People were quite astonished when we decided to use *zellige*," says Kettani. "But then they saw how the touch of colour brought balance. In the end, it's one of the features that they love the most."

Though children from the ages of two to 16 share the building, the creation of separate entrances for primary and secondary-school pupils facilitates the management of traffic flows at peak times. The school's interior unfolds a bit like a riad, the traditional Moroccan house built around a central courtyard. Kettani explains that the building's courtyard is a large, flexible, "non-space" that opens to the sky. Children's laughter fills the air. Fabric strung across this outdoor space provides shade during the day's hottest hours, while also continuing the architectural play of light and shadow.

Headteacher Carole Soulagnes gives MONOCLE a warm welcome in the courtyard. She leads us up one of the school's airy staircases to a large terrace on the first floor. As we overlook the institution's grounds from this higher vantage point, Soulagnes explains how the architectural "precision" of the school has made it into a "living space".

"When I walk through the school, on any given day, sometimes I'll just stop and marvel," she says. "I'll look up and find a new perspective that is so striking that I feel the need to take a picture. It's always different; the white against the blue sky is always shifting," she adds, before explaining that the building has a peaceful atmosphere. "Parents respond to that equilibrium when they visit. They feel that the children are in a safe space, like a cocoon. Not too big and not too tight of a space."

The architectural team is relieved to receive this feedback. "A huge issue for us was the density, because we had a lot of spaces to include in this project," says Kettani. In addition to classrooms, the design had to accommodate a 250-seat auditorium, indoor and outdoor sports facilities, a cafeteria, a library and administrative offices. "Luckily, we received a very precise brief," says Kettani. "The client did a thorough job in advance of the call for competition entries and we ended up having a very positive collaboration. They were very respectful and would listen to our opinions."

(From left) Architects Saad El Kabbaj, Mohamed Amine Siana and Driss Kettani

Outdoor areas reflect the school's 'openness'

The 250-seat auditorium

In developing a vision for the school, the architects also carefully considered the teaching objectives. In response to a desire expressed by the Jacques Chirac School's team to have a technologically connected school, projectors were included in the design for classrooms along with brise-soleils on exterior windows for managing light and acoustics. A wish to have an "open" school was achieved by including lots of windows and outdoor areas. Cross-ventilation systems were developed to help to regulate temperatures without consuming large amounts of energy.

Architects Kettani, El Kabbaj and Siana are also educators themselves. They teach at university level and find it an activity that enriches their architectural practice. "Teaching forces you to deconstruct the mechanisms behind your work," says Kettani. "You learn a lot yourself from having to redo the process in your head."

But perhaps the biggest testament to the team's ability to successfully distil its design vision, has come in the form of a repeat commission. The Jacques Chirac School recently purchased a plot of land next to the current site and has entrusted Kettani, El Kabbaj and Amine Siana with the task of designing a new *lycée* (secondary school), which will be fully independent from the original structure and allow for a further 300 pupils to attend. "It's important to have continuity," says Soulagnes. "The educational project is a continuum and so the physical school has to be a continuum as well."

Before heading off, we ask Soulagnes whether she believes that the children have been influenced in some way by studying in what she refers to as "the most beautiful school I've seen". She smiles mischievously. "A lot of them want to become designers," she says. "My 10-year-old son, who also attends the school, told me yesterday, 'I'd like to become an architect.'"

What better legacy could the school and its architectural team hope for? Not only have they added to the fabric of Rabat but they have motivated several of its youngest minds to aim one day to do the same.

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