

Post-War Modern Architecture in Tunisia

BY ELISA PEGORIN AND LUCA EULA

At the end of the spring of 1943, the German forces were finally defeated in Northern Tunisia and had to leave the country. This allowed the French protectorate to take power and in the years that followed, thanks to massive American economic aid, undertake a very important project of architectural construction and reconstruction. All of Tunisia was involved but the four main cities (Tunis, Bizerte, Sousse and Sfax), whose populations were expanding, saw entire parts of themselves reconstructed. Today, a unique experience of modernity still remains in the tissue of all these cities, but with big issues of conservation.

Una tradizione è un passato che altera il presente¹.

Tunisie, 1943

La Tunisie est le seul des trois pays d'Afrique du nord qui doit être considéré, après la guerre, comme un territoire sinistré. Les opérations militaires qui se sont déroulées dans les Régences et les destructions systématiques auxquelles elles ont donné lieu avaient durement atteint les installations de toutes sortes: les habitations, le matériel et les divers moyens dont disposait la Tunisie avant la guerre².

With these words starts the 1948 special issue of the famous review *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* dedicated to Tunisia, clearly outlining the difficult circumstances in which the country found itself at the end of the WWII. Allies in fact landed in Morocco in 1942 (during the so-called Operation Torch) while General Rommel lost the battle in El-Alamein in Egypt and retreated to Tunisia, fortifying the southern part near Gabes. In May of 1943 the Allied forces, through a heavy bombing campaign, broke the defenses of the axis and hunted the Nazis at the decisive battle of Cap Bon. They would move on to Sicily within the next year, but in the meantime what they had before their eyes was a disheartening picture: about 120 connecting roads, bridges and viaducts destroyed (235 km of roads and 69 bridges), the main electric stations in the country torn down, and more than 16,000 buildings bombed. For these main reasons, the four years from 1943 to 1947, following release from the Axis forces, were called the Years of Reconstruction.

Bernard Zehrfuss (1911-1996) arrived in Tunis, from Algiers, when he was 32 years old. In 1939 he had been awarded a Grand Prix de Rome and obtained an official position in the French government to assess the damage that the long war had inflicted on the Tunisian

territory. His role was initially as an advisor, but almost immediately it turned into something different. His arrival coincided with the death of the Director of the Department of Architecture, for which no-one was quite prepared. Given the already critical situation, the Prefect Roger Gromand (1905-1986) immediately promoted Bernard Zehrfuss to head of the department. This was something which would fundamentally change the history of the country and the post-war reconstruction.

In a short time, Bernard Zehrfuss created a young and capable team, dividing the country into four zones and instituting pyramidal management of the territory. Every zone had its reference architect, in particular Claude Blanchecotte (1911-1996) in Tunis, Jean Le Couteur (1916-2010) in Bizerte, Robert Greco in Sousse, and Paul Laingui in Sfax. Then the group – directed by Bernard Zehrfuss himself – was assisted by Paul Herbe (1903-1963) (along with Jacques Marmey, the only senior architect with field experience) and Jean Drieu La Rochelle (1903-1986).

This division turned out to be remarkably important because these architects were not limited only to bureaucratic management and advisory roles, but would be the names that recurred on all major projects of the following years. They had their chance to operate in absolute freedom from centralized bureaucracies or departments due to the fact that Tunisia was never a colony, only a protectorate. As France became increasingly committed to greater efforts in Morocco and Algeria, this strategically important but enormously problematic land was left in the background.

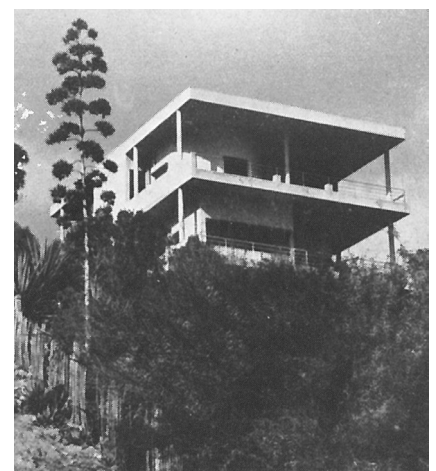
The "Reconstruction"

The first months were spent carrying out important preliminary steps: the architects traveled all over the country familiarizing themselves with the traditional architecture

and with the situation of Tunisia at the end of the WWII. They visited the *menzels* in Djerba and the *Ksour* of Medenine and Tataouine, the brick buildings typical of Tozeur (that Jean Le Coteur (1916-2010) reused in the neighborhood *Les Andalou* in the city of Bizerte), and the great mosques in Kairouan. They saw the *medinas* and unlike the other myopic European architects before them, understood that this cluster of houses and souk was not only a traditional building, but a brilliant functional solution for climate problems of places that are very hot in the summer.

The problems of climate and sun exposure were two of the important points on which they built their thinking when it came to design. The lessons learned by those who lived there proved useful when it came to building in scorched and barren territories.

The department lasted for four years, during which the foundations were laid for a fundamental renewal for the whole country. Public infrastructure and fundamental re-housing interventions were created, in addition to the structures put to the test by the bombs. The urban projects really began only in 1945, and with the expansion of urban Bizerte (which provided for a "new town" that almost doubled the city itself on the other side of the bridge, over the last stretch of the lake of the same name) the first problems began to arise: the large number of expropriations and other uncertainties related to the creation of Bizerte-Zarzoune gave the department a bad name. Then a few years later, Habib Bourguiba (1903-2000) led



01 Le Corbusier, House Baizeau, Carthage, Tunis, 1928. © *L'Architecture D'Aujourd'hui*, 1948.



02 Traditional houses, Medenine, Tunis. © *L'Architecture D'Aujourd'hui*, 1948.

the liberation of the country; difficult years in which feelings against the occupying power were in themselves already intense and problematic.

The characteristics of Reconstruction, 1943-47

Generally speaking, the situation of the Regency cities was astonishingly confused. No administration, no collectivity had concerned itself with the question of urbanism, and the metropolitan areas had developed in the most disastrous disorder, with the speed characteristic of Northern Africa. Bernard Zehrfuss immediately noticed the difficult sit-

uation in which he found Tunisia. Just under three million people were living in a situation of constant emergency that threatened to block the country and which worsened from month to month. They had to act relatively quickly and simultaneously find a pragmatic solution to the widespread lack of building materials and the shortage of suitable workers. Tunisia is a very fertile land, but primary resources for the construction industry are in short supply: in fact, one of the reasons for the trips made by the architects of the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning was also to understand the construction techniques and the ways in which the various architectures were developed. A search

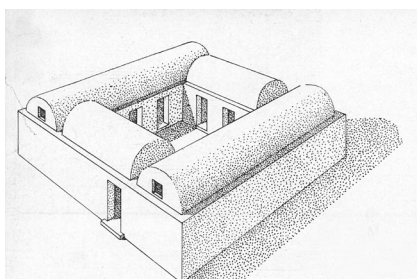
determining guidelines for the many projects that the country needed was fundamental for designers. The answer came precisely from these trips.

In addition to the link with the local tradition, the architects of the team, all relatively young, had studied at the *Écoles des Beaux-Arts* in Paris and Marseille, and during their training had come in contact with the theories of the Modern Movement. When they arrived in Tunisia they demonstrated familiarity with the principles of the Athens Charter and a distance from French academicism, which saw colonial architecture still in terms of "Arabisation".

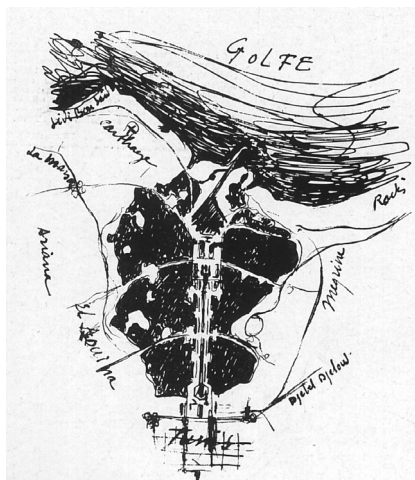
Le Corbusier himself was very much present in the memory of the architects that worked in Tunisia in those years. They were influenced by the publication in 1926 or, in 1938, by the French translation of the Athens Charter (resulted from the IV CIAM held in 1933). Le Corbusier had worked in Tunisia in 1928-29 on a house project, Villa Baizeau, located in Carthage. At the same time the architects who worked in the country in the 1940s, such as Bernard Zehrfuss, participated in CIAM and thus entered into direct contact with the main protagonists of modern architecture. Therefore, we can risk saying that their reading of tradition is both partial and mainly interested in the pragmatic aspect.

Tradition and modernity

In which traditions were the architects based? Tunisia has particular regional differences, especially depending on the geographical position, nearer or further from the sea, and more or less to the south (from the coast to the desert). Furthermore, what adds to



03 Bernard Zehrfuss and Jason Kyruacopoulos, La "maison minima tunisienne", 1943. © *L'Architecture D'Aujourd'hui*, 1948.



04 Paul Herbé, Drawing about the possibility to expansion Tunis in the lake, Tunis, undated. © *L'Architecture D'Aujourd'hui*, 1948.

these differences is the presence or not of particular construction materials. Throughout the coast, olive trees are plentiful and their wood is important for the structures of all the *medinas* of major cities. In Tozeur for example, building blocks are fundamental, while in the mid-900s houses carved into the rock of Matmata (already in full desert territory) were still inhabited. In all this, we cannot discount the importance of religious architecture, such as the mosques and *madrassas* (Coranic schools), into which the community poured its major constructive efforts. This is an important point because – as Marc Breitman also wrote in *Rationalisme, tradition, Tunisie 1943-1949: Jacques Marmey* (1986) – the fortuitous language developed by Bernard Zehrfuss and the research team owes much to their ability to select some of the traditional elements over others, and put them together in a modern language. Twenty years before, in 1923, the Tunisian architect and urbanist Victor Valensi (1883-1977) wrote *L'Habitation Tunisienne*, one of the first essays on traditional architecture. While it may still be considered to fit the orientalist mould, we are already faced with those elements that fascinated architects of the Department of Architecture and Urbanism of 1943: the white plastered walls, pure volumes, the roof-terrace and the absence of ornament.

The deep pragmatism of French architects allowed the typology to be summarized briefly with simple variables with which to re-build across the country. The same Bernard Zehrfuss would later attempt to prevent Tunisia from becoming so “big”, so they could safely use types common throughout the territory. The types were applied to houses both private and public, and to public buildings such as schools, not only to better manage the large number of projects but also for the clarity and recognition of its language and its link with the past architecture. We must not forget that Tunisia was not a colony but a protectorate, and this meant that French investment also had “other” purposes as suggested by Edward W. Said (2003): “Every empire, however, tells itself and the world that it is unlike all other empires, that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate”³.

All these new projects were related in language but distinguishable from the pre-existing history. This occurred for strategic reasons as well; often the public buildings were outside the towns to be equidistant from agglomerations which they were to serve. This meant that they became, in connotative meaning, tracks that while strongly integrating the modern, manifested the might of the occupying power.



05 Jacques Marmey, Control civil-regional, Bizerte-Zarzouna, Tunis, 1947. © *L'Architecture D'Aujourd'hui*, 1948.

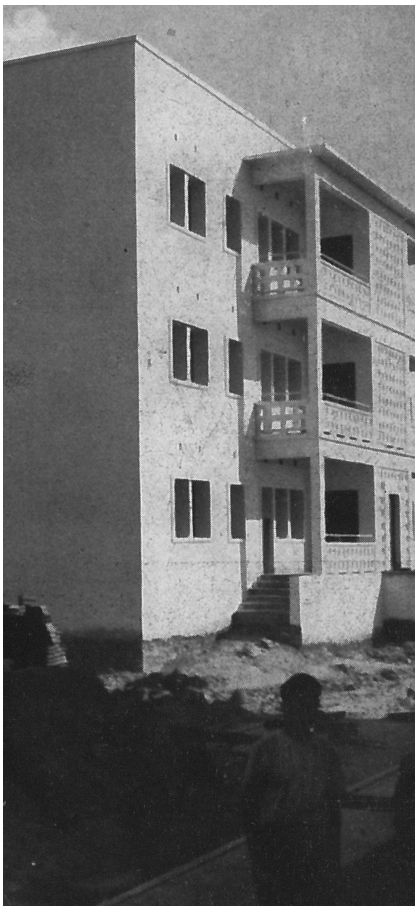
The other big reason why these architects turned to Islamic Mediterranean local tradition can be explained by the lack of materials and skilled laborers that plagued Tunisia at the time of the WWII – in fact, a school of building was created for this purpose early on, to teach builders and professionals. Using widely-known and simple construction systems was one reason why it was able to start work quickly in an area troubled by urban-housing emergencies. These projects, produced in the 1940s, spread out from the north to the south of Tunisia, stand out for their consistency, despite the many technicians and engineers involved in the reconstruction.

Another element is the great importance given to the climate issue; the architects were always looking for forms that would allow a greater degree of energy performance, with a preference for natural methods of cooling and ventilation, already an established tradition. However, what most markedly characterizes the work of the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning under the direction of Bernard Zehrfuss was the great freedom with which they acted, without suffering the dogmatism that Europe was increasingly codifying in the actions of many architects. They had no prejudice against using what was rooted in the architectural traditions of Tunisia, discarding the excessively decorative-formalistic. The architects did not impose typically European models of living-matrix, but maintained easily recognizable forms, offering a chance of immediate physical and cultural appropriation by the locals. They tried to take advantage of the simple forms of tradition in their modern taste, integrating it with their training in the modern European style. A tangible example of continuity is the new markets built in the 1940s, for example

that of Sidi Bou Zid, where the square is the central element and the portico serves as a rhythmic architectural element.

The effects of this design effort lasted four years, from 1943 to 1947. In contemporary Tunisia, it is clear how the architecture of the time, through its coherent language, inspired the years following the revolution. If the actual results achieved by Bernard Zehrfuss's team were significant, so is the component that this conceptual approach developed in those years. It is difficult to consistently trace the individual paths of the architects who worked there, and still more their training courses. Those of the European scene of the period and of Auguste Perret (1874-1954), for his theories on the structure and form of architecture, were fundamental. First, in all their designs are the presence and a tendency to purity through the use of simple shapes, figures easier to read that would allow immediate recognition of the typology. These forms can be identified by the use of the barrel vault (at the school or in the market), in the dome (often small), and the use of space and geometry, as well as the color white, typical of the Mediterranean tradition.

The actions of the Department of Architecture and Urbanism were divided into three main types, depending on their scale and directly following the contingent needs of reconstruction. The main projects involved the residential sector, as well as the construction and re-construction of public buildings (schools, clinics, markets, hospitals, roads and bridges). Working on the city with major urban projects that would respond rationally to the needs of expansion and reconstruction of the urban grid was still stuck in the orientalist dichotomy between the old town (*medina*) and new town (European). The building systems

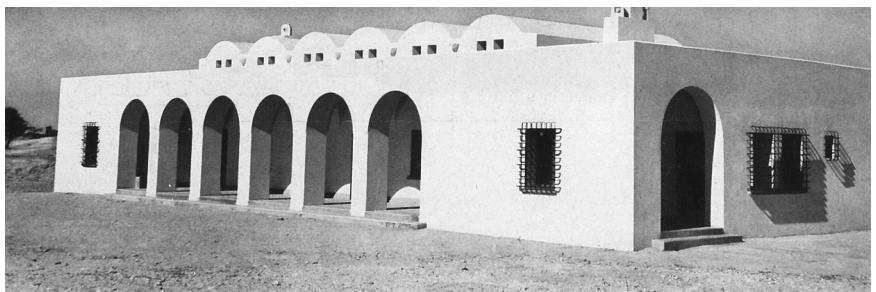
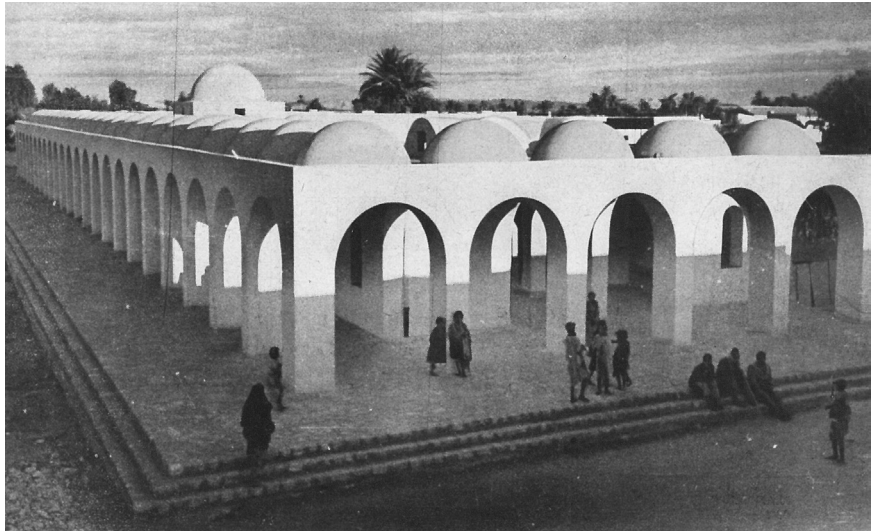


06 Bernard Zehrfuss, Jean Drieu and J. Kyriacopoulos, E. Laingui, Apartments, Moulinville, Sfax, Tunis, 1947.
© L'Architecture D'Aujourd'hui, 1948.

were to remain similar to those that were in the individual areas, in order to make the most of the locally available materials. The “minima house” was organized as the traditional one around a central courtyard, but unlike its predecessor allowed the addition of new parts over time to meet the needs of the inhabitants. Thanks to this and certain bureaucratic actions, it was possible to issue around 4,000 building permits between 1944 and 1946.

After 1947 there were political pressures and Bernard Zehrfuss had to leave the department and until 1953, moved to work in Algeria with some of the architects of the old department. In 1955 Habib Bourguiba returned to Tunis and in 1956 the declaration of the country's independence was signed. In this way all the great projects undertaken by the protectorate were blocked for lack of funds, as well by the radical changes that the country was set to face. The important thing that remains in Tunisian architecture from the 1940s, in continuum with a sort of “African modernism” which spread in the 1950s and 1960s (for example the works in Tunisia of architect Olivier Clément Cacoub), can be summarized in these words already written by Jean Cotereau in 1930:

07 Bernard Zehrfuss, Jean Drieu and J. Kyriacopoulos, 1947, Cover Market, Sidi Bou Zid, Tunis.
© L'Architecture D'Aujourd'hui, 1948.



08 Bernard Zehrfuss, J. Drieu and J. Kyriacopoulos, 1943, School “type 2 classes”, Nakta, Tunis.
© L'Architecture D'Aujourd'hui, 1948.

I settle for drawing lessons from history, in the increasingly deep conviction that there is nothing new under the sun. Perhaps I might throw out some ideas that would be interesting for the architects, remind some at least that wisdom consists neither in ignoring the architects of the past, nor in following them to the letter, to the point of pastiche, but in understanding their spirit so as to borrow from it freely for inspiration⁴.

Following this long and complex history of modern Tunisian architecture, there is a conservation problem today: modern heritage is recognized and preserved with great difficulty, with the risk of losing a part of the country's history that saw the formation of a group of modern architects.

Notes

- 1 Albert Camus, “La Nouvelle Culture Méditerranéenne”, *Jeune Méditerranée*, bulletin mensuel de la Maison de la Culture d'Alger, n. 1, April 1937.
- 2 Jean Mons, “Les Problèmes de Reconstruction en Tunisie”, *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, Paris, n. 20, October 1948, 2.
- 3 Edward W. Said, “Blind Imperial Arrogance”, *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 2003.
- 4 Jean Cotereau, “Vers une Architecture Méditerranéenne”, *Chantiers Nord-Africains*, n. 1, February 1930, 19-21.

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