

Exporting French-style “sustainable cities” to Morocco

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In Morocco, environmental urban projects are the order of the day. For these projects, French expertise is being held up as a Western model for “sustainable cities” that is centred on values, principles and methodologies – a model that is both a resource and an example to learn from for the Moroccan planners, despite some uncertainties regarding its implementation...

In emerging countries, a new generation of major projects – typically prefixed with “green”, “eco-” or “sustainable” (to use the vocabulary employed by decision-makers and designers) – are making their appearance. Among the Arab Mediterranean countries, Morocco has been leading the way in terms of the number of urban projects with environmental certifications since the late 2000s (Barthel *et al.* 2013).¹ Because of a lack of engineering know-how in the field of sustainable urban planning and development in Morocco, and in order to respond to a desire to produce urban development of an international standard, the kingdom’s planners have called upon expertise from overseas, and above all from France. But do the approaches, project references, values, and standardised costs and procedures in place in France all survive the import process? What solutions are proposed by French experts in order to adapt the “sustainable city” to the Moroccan context? And what are the effects of importing French-style “sustainable cities” to Morocco? Our study seeks to answer these questions on the basis of interviews with designers and project managers in Morocco and studies of technical documentation from the country’s first urban eco-projects.

Morocco looks to French expertise

Two projects for new towns – Sahel Lahyiata and Chrafate – coordinated by the private group Al Omrane, under the direct supervision of the Moroccan ministry for housing, planning and urban policy, have shared a common aim since 2010, namely to be dubbed “green” or “sustainable” towns, to which can be added a number of projects by CDG Développement (a private holding equivalent to the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations² in France), such as “Rabat Al Boustane”, “Éco-Cité Zénata” and “Casa Green Town”, together with projects led by the private developer Alliances, including “Bab Drâa” and “Casa-Sindibad”. Lastly, urban development projects coordinated by the Office Chérifien des Phosphates (the world’s leading producer of phosphate rock and phosphoric acid) – and in particular the “Ville Verte” (“Green City”) project in Ben Guerir – complete this rapid overview of the initial case studies.

Studies of the foreign expertise mobilised and the types of assignments commissioned by Moroccan planners and developers reveal that it is mainly the services of French design offices and urban planning agencies that are engaged, including a number of well-known names (e.g. Philippe Madec, Bernard Reichen, Franck Boutté, Yves Lion), many of whom are winners of the Grand Prix

¹ For a genealogical analysis of sustainable urban development, see Philifert (2011). This contribution clearly shows the fragility and the still highly fragmented and emergent nature of “sustainable” urban policies in Morocco.

² The Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations is a public financial organisation and a government institution under the control of the French parliament that funds numerous activities and projects in the public interest (e.g. social housing, public transport, urban development) on behalf of central government and local authorities.

d'Urbanisme in France. On the project management side of things, the service providers selected tend to be the “heavyweights” of the Moroccan property development industry, and are generally private firms. The types of studies commissioned are varied: designs leading to development plans, bioclimatic planning consulting, environmental project management, and sector-based environmental engineering studies (landscaping and corridors, integrated and alternative water management, energy efficiency and renewable energy, environmental and social management). Moroccan planning laws require any foreign service providers to work in tandem with Moroccan professionals when it comes to transforming urban designs into development plans and regulations.

The dominance of French expertise can be explained by the existence of at least three preferential channels: direct funding of French design offices by the French treasury (via the Fonds d'étude et d'aide au secteur privé – Private-Sector Support and Aid Fund – or FASEP); the international activities of French public operators such as ADEME (Agence de l'environnement et de la maîtrise de l'énergie – Environment and Energy Management Agency), which seeks to adapt an approach known as AEU (Approche environnementale de l'urbanisme – Environmental Approach to Urban Planning) to Morocco; and finally, decentralised cooperation that allows a French local authority to provide technical support for an urban project in Morocco. With respect to local demand in Morocco, the use of foreign consultants can be explained because, to date, “their Moroccan counterparts do not have sufficient experience in sustainable urban planning,” according to the project manager for Rabat Al Boustane. In turning to overseas expertise, Moroccan developers aim to bring urban projects “up to standard”, a concern which reflects a belief in an international model for sustainable urban planning (composed of best practices and “recipes for success” in particular) of which they seem nevertheless to have a more or less clear representation.

Contextualised, low-tech cities... that are not always linked to residents' everyday needs

While in China some European eco-projects (from Germany and Sweden) are clearly models in their own right to be reproduced in its entirety, the idea of transposing entire eco-neighbourhoods – such as Bonne in Grenoble or Bottière-Chénaie in Nantes – to Morocco is not a notion that is entertained. Accordingly, we should highlight here the efforts made to adapt know-how in the field of sustainable urban planning tested in France, without these French experiments really being mentioned in the references presented in the context of Moroccan projects.

First of all, French experts seek primarily to adopt a contextualisation approach based on what exists already that makes use of the resources of the local project area. This approach is arguably one of the hallmarks of “French-style” urban planning in the 2000s, and indeed was made a principle of the recently developed French ministerial guide for “eco-neighbourhoods”. Rabat Al Boustane is a good example of this. The planner and designer of this project, Hind Tricha, who trained in Morocco and France and joined Yves Lion's practice in 2006 before creating her own agency in Morocco in 2008, plays a role akin to a “broker of ideas”. She defends principles of composition such as respecting the boundaries of former agricultural parcels, block-planning future construction zones, and including “green corridors” and “blue corridors” (of vegetation and waterways respectively). With Franck Boutté, an “urban ecology for the Global South” has just been tested as part of the Éco-Cité Zénata project, based on an “aeraulic corridor” whereby the orientation of future elements of the built environment is determined according to the prevailing winds in order to create cool areas within the urban fabric.

Second, experts working in the French agencies disseminate values and above all try to justify their proposals by adapting them to the project, the (often limited) capacity of the developer and the local authority and/or the end users of the project. The words of Philippe Madec illustrate this intention: “Foreign procedures must be acclimatised, in the same way as I might adapt the German concept of ‘passive’ construction to a project in Bordeaux. Sustainable development is an ongoing negotiation between needs and limitations, in accordance with specific situations” (Madec 2011). To this end, proposals made by French design offices call for little in the way of expensive

eco-technologies. Their contribution remains primarily methodological and procedural, focused on paying attention to the territory, identifying local resources and proposing simple technological solutions: swales and filter drains, pedestrian route plans, and recycling banks, for example. The elements of the French experts' discourse taken on board by the developer in the Éco-Cité Zénata project indicate its priorities: the aim is to “create a low-cost bioclimatic city” that targets “the emerging middle class” rather than some sort of “eco-bourgeoisie”, the existence of which, moreover, is yet to be proved.

Finally, the proposals reflect a degree of “forcing” with respect to certain choices. The network of cycle paths in the Rabat Al Boustane project is quite generous and dimensioned as if it were for an urban project in a French city with a significant existing cycle network. However, this kind of “carbon-copy” measure would have benefited from a study of demand and surveys of local lifestyles, none of which were found in this research. Ironically, this somewhat contradicts Bernard Reichen's definition of an eco-city: “a dynamic equation linking the geography of a place, its urban culture, the requirements of a population and the demands of an era”. Another limitation is the fact that the proposals of experts working in France focus a great deal on the upstream design phase, and far less on the implementation, appropriation and operation phases. Furthermore, there are still very few expert studies undertaken into the future management of built or open spaces. Lastly, the social and participatory dimension of the development of these pioneering projects is still far too underdeveloped.

A useful resource despite some uncertainties regarding implementation

French expertise in the creation of sustainable cities is a resource for Moroccan planners and developers, as it allows them to follow an international trend for sustainable urban planning. This “followership” is profitable for several reasons. First, once the study phase is completed, the marketing of this new type of “green” urban offer diversifies their project portfolio. In addition, “this kind of ‘green’ offer also attracts foreigners who come to buy, and if foreigners are buying, then the Moroccans will follow” (interview with a design office project manager, April 2014). Second, importing the idea of sustainable cities opens the way to obtaining funding for development operations. In the case of the Éco-Cité Zénata project, the eco-city concept was formalised through studies conducted between 2010 and 2013. This, in turn, allowed backers such as the ADF (Agence française de développement – French Development Agency) to decide, in 2013, to issue a loan to the developer (€50 million for the first phase) to finance the construction of certain elements of the project. The programme, the communication materials and the visuals co-produced by the developer and the French experts provided the guarantees necessary to convince the ADF to “support” the urban project.

However, that is not to say that the only purpose of the French model is to create links between a French backer and a Moroccan developer. As a result of the studies that this model imposes, Moroccan developers are beginning to incorporate new ways of thinking about and managing the city.³ And, indeed, the priority of the French experts commissioned is to provide solutions that are adapted to the capacities – financial and technical – of users, managers and local authorities, rather than to “sell” costly certifications such as HQE (Haute Qualité Environnemental – High Environmental Quality) or achieve certain quantitative performance levels for the buildings constructed. Nevertheless, this idea of adapting the “sustainable city” in a low-tech, low-key fashion that some experts propose conflicts with developers' desire to meet “standards” and not design what could be perceived as a “cut-price” sustainable city. For example, French planners strive to adapt eco-projects to sites with a relative economy of means, in cases where developers sometimes expect something more spectacular and high-tech. Leaving aside this contradiction, we shall conclude by considering the uncertainties regarding the implementation of these projects. In the words of a

³ This example of the way lessons can be learned in urban planning circles in the south of the Mediterranean chimes with the pioneering work on this subject by Taoufik Souami and Éric Verdeil (2006).

project manager at CDG Development (October 2013): “We don’t have access to the necessary channels for construction or for obtaining eco-materials. And when it comes to managing green work sites, we don’t have a waste recycling sector.” This lack of specialist firms and channels has also been highlighted by the Agence d’urbanisme du Grand Lyon (Greater Lyon Urban Planning Agency), which supported a pilot AEU experiment in Morocco between 2010 and 2012.

This mobilisation of foreign expertise in eco-projects is still in its infancy and, in operational terms, remains limited to a few experts working mostly in organisations in France. It opens up a new field of observation for researchers, in particular given that, to date, none of these projects have been built, and still very much represent a small minority of all formal and informal urban planning operations in Moroccan cities.

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