The High Atlas mountain chain once divided Morocco into two distinct parts. The area of ample rainfall, bountiful agriculture and placid village life to the north was called bled al-makhzan, the land of imperial governance. To the south, a rocky, sandy and sun-baked expanse stretched into the Sahara. This was bled al-siba, the land of disorder.

This geographical dichotomy did not always hold, however, as the great fourteenth-century Arab thinker Ibn Khaldun noted. Often called the father of modern sociology, Ibn Khaldun saw fundamental differences in the organizing principles and cultural bases of city life and desert life, but he also found ample evidence of parallels, and indeed of a symbiotic relationship of such intensity that the unfolding of history itself depended on it. As he saw it, the seeds of urban culture's highest artistic and political achievements, reached only through co-operative enterprise, were buried somewhere deep in the soul of the lone desert horseman. Whenever nomads rode together in bands of even five or ten men, they incorporated a collective spirit and a joint purpose pushing inexorably towards a larger design.

The Moroccan desert is rich in examples writ small of what were to be the seeds of dynastic urban grandeur. The southern oases along the lush green river valleys are cultivated with the same intensity and ingenuity as the north's fertile plains. Clan loyalties once radiated from the southern strongholds of the local saint in much the same way that dynastic loyalties later spread from the imperial cities of Meknes, Fez and Rabat.

Perhaps nowhere are these parallels between desert and urban Moroccan culture more striking than in a comparison of Ait Ben Haddou, a hauntingly quiet fortified farming village south of the High Atlas, with the teeming, labyrinthine, cacophonous kasbah of old Fez. Both are on Unesco's World Heritage List, and one can visit neither without recalling the lessons taught by Ibn Khaldun.

**ROOFTOP NOMADS**

While Fez has a recorded history, a host of founding dynasts known by name, and precise construction dates for its earliest architecture, we know little of Ait Ben Haddou's Berber past. Its age as a human settlement, we can safely assume, is less than the geological age of the rock upon which it is built, but its proximity to known prehistoric sites in the Sahara indicates quite plausibly that it is centuries, if not millennia, older than Fez.

But we do know that it, like Fez, represents the acme of its own particular school of high-density, multi-use, environmentally-adapted architecture and town planning. Ait Ben Haddou's desert-born model for urban design, applied with such stunning success to the Fez kasbah, dramatically illustrates Ibn Khaldun's unified theory of civilization.

For in Ait Ben Haddou city and desert living habits meet in unusual concord. Densely-packed, multi-storey dwellings create an utterly urban atmosphere, yet their inhabitants still live something of a nomadic existence. In response to changing temperatures, they "migrate" from room to room, from rooftops where they sleep at night to ground-level chambers where they escape the midday heat, just as pastoralists move about in response to climate-induced changes in grazing and watering conditions.

Ait Ben Haddou is by no means southern Morocco's only fortified village constructed of stone, rammed earth, adobe brick and mud plaster. The valleys of the Dra, Dades, Gheria and Ziz rivers and their tributaries are studded with such settlements in all shapes and sizes. One stretch of the Dades is in fact known in the tourist guides as the "Route of the..."
CASTLES AND KASBAHS

To describe the full range of southern Moroccan architecture, one needs to be familiar with two Berber words, agadir and tighremt, which refer respectively to fortified granaries and the multi-towered castles occupied by village headmen, as well as with the Arabic words kelaa and kasr, which refer to mountain citadel villages and to walled oasis settlements.

The so-called "kasbah" of rural Morocco is often in fact a tighremt, constructed usually in the midst of the village. But since village housing is built contingously and shares party walls, it becomes impossible over time to tell where the tighremt ends and the kasr begins. Separate construction thus takes on the look of an organic whole.

Ait Ben Haddou has at least four tighremt-like structures. Because the village is built for defensive purposes up the flank of a steep hill, the fairly rectilinear grid pattern of the typical kasr has here been abandoned in favour of a more fluid layout following the contour lines. As a result it exhibits even more than the usual amount of spatial disorientation.

The view looking down upon the multi-level flat roofs from the ruined hilltop agadir that overlooks Aït Ben Haddou takes in the overall plan of the village and the flow of its passageways. From this perspective the settlement calls to mind a geode, a geological formation with which the region is rife, but a convex rather than a concave geode, with the massed, crystal-like cubic forms of its architecture jutting up from the dull regularity of the surrounding landscape.

Village housing displays a perfect marriage of form, function, material and climate. In view of the latitude and the heat of the Sun, the ratio of habitable volume to exposed exterior surface is maximized by the networks of irregularly oriented walls shadowing courtyards and second-storey family quarters. Flat overhead roofs provide ample work space and an area where grain and dates can be spread out to dry. Fresh animal fodder is consumed with the Mellah, the village is bifurcated by running water. To the east is old Aït Ben Haddou, the village of mud brick and high walls; on the Ounila’s western bank is the new town, built of cinder block and concrete slab—cubical too in its own modern way, but so much the poorer for it.

The new town looks as if it has been hastily erected to serve the needs of the busloads of tourists arriving on two-hour visits. As such, it serves a necessary purpose. One hesitates to think how the old village’s increasingly delicate sociological and physical condition could withstand the tourist shock—not to mention that caused by the many Hollywood film crews which have worked here—should the tourist traffic not to mention that caused by the many Hollywood film crews which have worked here.

The new town’s piped water and electricity have been abandoned by families who prefer the new town’s piped water and electricity. Only six families remain today.

FACING THE FUTURE

In order to attract the old village’s occupants back from the other side, a new organization, the Centre for the Conservation and Rehabilitation of the Architectural Heritage in the Atlas and Sub-Atlas Zones (Centre de Conservation et de Rehabilitation du Patrimoine Architectural des Zones Atlasiques et Sub-Atlasiques) has undertaken a project to rebuild Aït Ben Haddou’s mosque and involve the community in long-range planning.

The village needs to offer a balanced, low-impact array of tourist services, but also to maintain its traditional agricultural base. The problem is whether, as the village leader puts it, the sheep stabled in his kasbah’s lower enclosure are compatible with paying overnight guests upstairs. As for the already abandoned housing, how can mixed-use stables, granaries and domestic quarters be “retro-fitted” with the physical facilities—electricity, plumbing, larger rooms—expected by both foreign tourists and Moroccan home-owners accustomed to more modern accommodation? This is the question that the Centre’s architects and sociologists are now trying to answer.

When the Centre asked the new town’s residents what improvements would be most likely to draw them back to their original homes, the mosque’s repair was near the top of their list. And since the project is now near completion, time will tell if it will in itself be sufficient to spark a revitalization. But since the mosque is without question the village’s architectural and spiritual centrepiece, it is fitting that it should be restored first.

Over the past few centuries Aït Ben Haddou has survived flooding, siege and drought. In the future it faces perhaps even more daunting challenges—heavy tourist traffic, agricultural obsolescence and physical abandonment. But there is still hope. Its designation by UNESCO as a World Heritage site has brought it to the attention of the wider world. And its townspeople have taken a stand to protect it from reckless change.

Above, towers of the fortified village of Aït Ben Haddou.

Opposite page, the Ounila valley seen from the village.

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