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URBAN DESIGN



Paesaggio Urbano – Urban Design is a bimonthly magazine on architecture and urban design, founded in 1989 and is published by the Maggioli Group. The magazine has a multidisciplinary approach, ranging from design and survey issues to urban morphology, architectural design and local and international cultural trends.

Paesaggio Urbano – Urban Design è una rivista semestrale di architettura e urbanistica fondata nel 1989 ed edita dal Gruppo Maggioli. La rivista ha un approccio multidisciplinare che spazia dalle tematiche del disegno e rilievo a quelle relative alla morfologia urbana, al progetto di architettura e trend culturali locali e internazionali.

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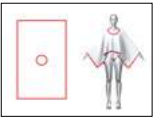
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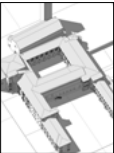
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"You must know
that talking to oneself
is the purpose of language
and that wandering thoughts
are the very meaning of poetry."

Gao Xingjian from "Wandering Spirit, Meditative Thoughts. All the Poems",
La nave di Teseo, Milan 2024

The oxymoron *Urban/Nomadic* opens up the opportunity for a comparison between what can be defined in contemporary terms as *urbanus*, established and structured, networked and connected, and what is *wandering spirit* and *meditative thought*, *vagabond language*, but also adapted, changeable and related, intersecting and interacting, tangible and intangible heritage (the latter often nomadic by definition and in some ways elusive). *Urban vs Nomadic* leads to comparisons such as: standardised/adaptive, concentration/distraction, identity/inclusive, superfluous/necessary. Furthermore, between Urban and Nomadic, a change of landscape also takes place and develops: dynamic and moving processes as opposed to stable and defined configurations in which conservative actions take place. Recalling the work of Bruce Chatwin as a critical example, we could identify in his nomadic alternative a vision of history as a dialectical cultural continuity between civilisation and natural alternatives: nomadism and settlement, city and *wild loneliness*, society and tribe. Thirty years after their publication, these approaches could be a starting point for innovative interpretative models.

Paesaggio Urbano publishes the results of the call for this 'Unione Italiana Designo' Symposium, jointly proposed by the *Innovation and Third Mission Commission* and the *Internationalisation Commission*, which is part of the first edition of the "Restoration and Cultural Heritage Days". These days took place at the end of March at the Department of Architecture of the University of Ferrara. The UID Symposium aimed to promote the internationalisation of research and its constant innovation in continuity with previous years' events, starting with a discussion on strategic areas of research development, including the themes of digitisation, visualisation and social innovation for the enhancement of cultural heritage, the

Urbano / Nomade

"Devi sapere
che parlare a se stessi
è il fine del linguaggio
e che il pensiero vagabondo
è il senso stesso della poesia."

Gao Xingjian da "Spirito errante pensiero meditativo. Tutte le poesie",
La nave di Teseo, Milano 2024

L'ossimoro *Urbano/Nomade* apre all'opportunità di un confronto tra ciò che può essere definito nella contemporaneità come *urbanus*, fondato e strutturato, in rete e connesso, e ciò che è *spirito errante* e *pensiero meditativo*, *linguaggio vagabondo*, ma anche adattato, mutevole e correlato, intersecando e interagendo, patrimonio tangibile e intangibile (quest'ultimo spesso nomade per definizione e in alcuni tratti sfuggente). *Urbano vs Nomade*, induce a sviluppare confronti come: standardizzato/adattativo, concentrazione/distrazione, identitario/inclusivo, superfluo/necessario. Inoltre tra Urbano e Nomade si viene a collocare e sviluppare anche un cambiamento di paesaggio: processi dinamici e in movimento rispetto a configurazioni stabili e definite in cui agiscono azioni conservative. Ricordando l'opera di Bruce Chatwin, come esemplificazione critica, si potrebbe individuare nella sua *alternativa nomade*, una visione della storia come continuità dialettica culturale tra civiltà e *alternative naturali*: nomadismo e insediamento, città e *selvaggia solitudine*, società e tribù. Approcci che dopo trent'anni dalla loro pubblicazione potrebbero essere da spunto per modelli interpretativi innovativi.

Paesaggio Urbano pubblica gli esiti della call di questo Simposio "Unione Italiana Designo" proposto congiuntamente dalla *Commissione Innovazione e Terza Missione* e dalla *Commissione Internazionalizzazione*, che si inserisce all'interno della prima edizione delle "Giornate del Restauro e del Patrimonio Culturale". Giornate svolte a fine marzo scorso presso il Dipartimento di Architettura dell'Università degli Studi di Ferrara. Il Simposio UID ha avuto l'obiettivo di promuovere l'internazionalizzazione della ricerca e la sua costante innovazione in una continuità agli eventi degli anni precedenti, a partire dal confronto sulle aree strategiche di sviluppo della ricerca, che comprendono i temi della digitalizzazione,

conservation of built, historical and artistic heritage, and the contexts of cities, territory, landscape and environment.

The topic of *Urban/Nomadic* has been addressed from multiple perspectives, including stories of places, buildings and cities, landscapes and territories, design and fashion objects, describing tangible and intangible cultural heritage with innovative techniques, and highlighting *minor case studies* that are nonetheless of interest to the scientific community. These are examples of urban experiments connected with identity and nomadic experiments, in partial contrast, as differences as well as insights between technological nomadism and established practices of cultural heritage documentation, which feed into the selected contributions, reviewed according to academic procedure and published in this issue of *Paesaggio Urbano*.

della visualizzazione e della *sociali Innovation* per la valorizzazione dei beni culturali, la conservazione del patrimonio costruito, storico e artistico, e i contesti di città, territorio, paesaggio e ambiente.

La tematica *Urbano/Nomade* è stata affrontata con molteplici approcci, tra storie di luoghi, di edifici e città, paesaggi e territori, oggetti di design e della moda, descrivendo il patrimonio culturale materiale e immateriale con tecniche innovative, rendendo noti anche *casi studio minori*, ma non per questi meno interessanti per la comunità scientifica. Sono esempi di sperimentazioni urbane in connessione con identità e sperimentazioni nomadi, in parziale contrapposizione, come difformità così come approfondimenti tra il nomadismo tecnologico e le prassi consolidate di documentazione dei beni culturali, che alimentano i contributi selezionati, revisionati secondo procedura e pubblicati su questo numero di *Paesaggio Urbano*.



Detail of a painting by Luiz Zerbini exhibited at the MASP in São Paulo, Brazil, in 2022 in an exhibition entitled "The same story is never the same", curated by Adriano Pedrosa with the assistance of Guilherme Giufrida. (Photo by Marcello Balzani)



Dettaglio di un'opera pittorica di Luiz Zerbini esposta al MASP di San Paolo del Brasile nel 2022 in una mostra dal titolo "The same story is never the same", curata da Adriano Pedrosa con l'assistenza di Guilherme Giufrida. (Foto di Marcello Balzani)



The *drawing* of Berber Architecture in pre-Saharan Morocco

Il *disegno* delle architetture berbere nel Marocco presahariano

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Berber earthen architecture is rooted in the pre-Saharan landscape, defining a precarious balance between built environment and natural space. While the nomad inhabits the infinite space of the desert with the ephemeral lightness of their tents, the oasis and the settlement represent rootedness, defence, and permanence. These settlements, persisting despite their vulnerability, are at once refuges and vital nodes along the caravan routes that connected the Maghreb with the Sahel, guardians of trade, culture, and knowledge transmitted orally and manifested in architecture and decorative artefacts. Earthen architectures emerge as expressions of a fragile balance between protection and openness, bearing witness to ancestral building wisdom. Their fascination is manifested in the material remains and numerous earthen ruins that vanish alongside new urban expansions, evoking centuries of commercial and cultural wealth in their connection to the landscape. The possibilities offered by digital documentation represent a powerful evocative and communicative tool, capable of codifying and conveying the features and complexities of an architecture destined to disappear, opposing the cultural and formal disintegration unfortunately imposed by this time.

00.

Earthen architecture on the edge of a pre-Saharan oasis. The built environment adapts to the landscape, reflecting its rhythms and materials. Ait Ben Haddou complex, 2024. Photo by A.Pettineo.

Le architetture berbere in terra cruda si radicano nel paesaggio presahariano, definendo un precario equilibrio tra ambiente costruito e spazio naturale. Se il nomade abita lo spazio infinito del deserto con la leggerezza effimera della tenda, l'oasi e l'insediamento rappresentano il radicamento, la difesa e la permanenza. Questi insediamenti, che persistono pur nella loro vulnerabilità, sono al tempo stesso rifugi e snodi vitali disposti lungo le vie carovaniere che collegavano il Maghreb al Sahel, custodi di commerci, culture e saperi tramandati oralmente e impressi nelle architetture e nelle decorazioni dei manufatti. Le costruzioni in terra emergono come espressioni di un equilibrio delicato tra protezione e apertura, testimoniando un'ancestrale sapienza costruttiva. Il loro fascino si manifesta nei resti materiali e nelle numerose rovine che svaniscono al lato delle nuove espansioni urbane, evocando nel loro legame con il paesaggio secoli di ricchezza commerciale e culturale. Le possibilità offerte dalla documentazione digitale sono un potente strumento evocativo e comunicativo in grado di codificare e restituire i caratteri e le complessità di un'architettura destinata a scomparire, opponendosi alla disgregazione culturale e formale imposta purtroppo da questo tempo.

ON THE EDGE OF THE DESERT, BETWEEN NOMADIC LIFE AND SETTLEDNESS

In the heart of pre-Saharan Morocco, between the last spurs of the High Atlas Mountains and the edges of the desert, stretches a territory marked by ancient caravan routes that reach as far as the Sahel regions and have, for centuries, connected the Mediterranean coasts to sub-Saharan Africa. These routes followed the contours of the major river valleys, such as Draa, Dades, and Ziz, facilitating human settlement, agriculture, and the development of complex social structures.

The *Amazigh*⁰¹ communities – the term by which the Berbers refer to themselves, asserting an autonomous and plural identity – traditionally organised into tribal clans, both nomadic and sedentary, have contributed to shaping this landscape where movement has never been merely transit, but the very foundation of dwelling.

Far from being solely commercial paths, the caravan routes were corridors of cultural exchange and transmission of material knowledge, technical skills, and ritual practices. Along these trajectories, earthen settlements took form, serving as anchoring nodes within a spatial logic still deeply influenced by mobility. In this framework, sedentarisation represents not a rupture with nomadic traditions, rather a transformation of them – a shift whereby the fluidity of movement takes shape in built form. Berber architecture reveals a habitual engagement with impermanence, expressed through ephemeral materials, recurring morphological patterns, and ongoing practices of repair and care [1].

This inherent mobility, in the Saharan geography, is complemented by the social complexity of the southern Moroccan oases, which have been shaped over centuries by invasions, migrations, and cultural intermixing⁰². To Arab geographers, the Sahara appeared as an ocean, its surface traversed by camels – the so-called “ships of the desert” [2]. This metaphor, recurring throughout their writings, shaped the desert as a space of movement, defined by vast distances and punctuated by oasis-islands: nodal points of interaction and cultural dynamism. It is a vision echoed in Fernand Braudel's description of the desert as an extension of the *mer intérieure*, the Mediterranean, a space of interconnection rather than separation⁰³.



01.

At the edge of the desert. A nomadic encampment on the desert's margins, awaiting favourable conditions to resume the journey. Northwestern Sahara, near Merzouga, 2024. Photo by A. Pettineo.

EARTHEN LANDSCAPES ALONG THE BROAD PRE-SAHARAN VALLEYS

In the fertile pre-Saharan valleys of Morocco, raw earth, used as pisé or adobe, transforms from a mere construction material into a symbolic medium on which signs and ornamental motifs take shape. In this context, the *ksour* (pl. *ksar*), or *ighrem* in the *Amazigh* language, arise as a compact, defensive settlement within high walls and corner towers, their rectangular layouts often moulded by the land's contours.

Each *ksar* is governed by practical, symbolic, and social logics: its enclosure marks the boundary between community and outside world, while homes cluster around courtyards in two- or three-story blocks with flat, usable roofs. In this same setting, related architectural types emerge, most notably the *tighremt*, a fortified Berber residence that commands a central position, especially in Dades and Draa valley villages, and the *kasbah*⁰⁴, a monumental evolution of the same vernacular array and associated with hierarchical or authoritarian power structures [3] [4].

Ksar, *kasbah*, and *tighremt* represent three complementary manifestations of a single residential logic. Each shares the same constructive grammar and addresses defensive, climatic, and social needs, embodying architecture as a continuous, collective process.

These forms are often seen as pristine remnants of a mythical past, but such a view breaks before the evidence of the material itself, since what one sees today is the product of additions, collapses, reconstructions, and stratifications. Although the oldest structures date from the eighteenth century, most have been extensively rebuilt, modified, and redefined.

The immutable condition ascribed to vernacular architecture is merely an illusion: mud does not



02.

Panoramic view of the Tamnougalt settlement. Drawing by S. Parrinello, 2024.

endure but regenerates. The Romantic, Giedionian idea of an “eternal present” associated with these buildings proves fallacious; their longevity relies on continuous transformations and adaptations rather than immutability. In this sense, permanence is not ensured by absolute durability but by the material’s capacity to renew over time through maintenance and repair [5] [6].

Many of these structures, abandoned over time in favour of new urban developments, are slowly disintegrating under weather and time, while others, restored for tourism or museum purposes, lose their original function and are removed from communal life. This dual loss is physical, in the collapse of the buildings, and symbolic, in the erosion of the practices and meanings tied to inhabitation.

In this framework, the DARWIN Experimental Research and Teaching Laboratory of the University of Florence has, since November 2023, been systematically surveying and documenting the principal earthen settlements along the major pre-Saharan river valleys of the Draa, Dades, Ziz, and their tributaries.

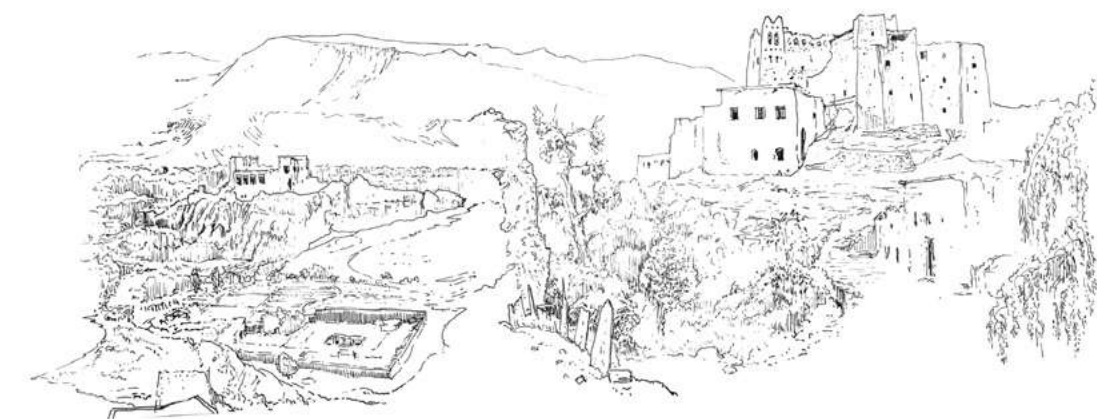
This initial phase was followed in May 2024 by an intensive digital documentation campaign focused on the *ksour* of Aït Ben Haddou in the Ounila Valley near Ouarzazate and of Tamnougalt in the Draa Valley, with the aim of extending the research to additional sites. Both complexes exemplify the transformations affecting the vernacular architectural heritage of the pre-Saharan valleys. Once vital nodes along caravan routes and mediation sites between mobility and settlement, Aït Ben Haddou and Tamnougalt today embody two opposite yet complementary dynamics of functional loss. Aït Ben Haddou has gradually been repurposed for tourism, becoming a musealised and idealised set [7]; while Tamnougalt has entered a slow abandonment and neglect that erodes its material integrity and communal dimension.

In each case, the interplay of construction and deconstruction, permanence and precarity, memory and transformation points to a different notion of duration: not the timeless monument, but the more fragile and complex continuity of communal practices over time.



03.

The material remains of the Ksar of Tamnougalt. Drawing by S. Parrinello, 2024.



04.

Sequence of ksour and earthen settlements along the Dades Valley. The drawing serves as a tool to reassemble the inhabited landscape’s layers along cultivated fields, landforms, and traditional architecture. Drawing by S. Parrinello, 2024



05.

Three-dimensional database of the Ksar of Ait Ben Haddou, illustrating the overall settlement morphology and its relationship with the surrounding topography.

THE LANGUAGE OF VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE IN THE DIGITAL DIMENSION

Understanding vernacular architecture means engaging with a heritage that escapes the grids of standardisation, born out of ever-shifting relationships. It goes beyond merely observing forms and construction techniques; it requires grasping a complex web of spatial logics, technical knowledge, symbolic codes, and practices layered over time. Vernacular architecture uses an implicit language of unwritten rules, adaptive models, settlement archetypes, and local variations. Over time, each addition respects the foundational matrix while reconfiguring the overall layout of the settlement, producing an urban fabric that is regular in its underlying rules and irregular in its contingent adaptations. Decoding this language, subdividing built forms into identifiable elements, reveals the cultural contexts and underlying logics from which they emerged. This offers the rare opportunity, akin to that of an explorer or an anthropologist, to occupy multiple vantage points simultaneously and observe an event, or in this case, a complex architectural language, as it undergoes a series of reflective permutations rather than being confined to a single, fixed perspective [8] [9].

Architecture is not presented as a closed totality but as a fragmented and hybrid ensemble in which meanings emerge from interacting its parts and the layering of possible readings [10].

The techniques of documentation and restitution of models and synthetic information systems, from drawing to digital modelling processes, act as epistemic filters that select, isolate, and organise information. Thus, every act of graphic restitution, as well as every survey, is inevitably shaped by the interpretive choices of its creator, in relation to the object and the meaning attributed to its form and composition [11]. In the contemporary digital environment, the interpretive character of graphic representation is reformulated into a relational paradigm, where text and image engage in a shared semantic structure: writing provides the structural framework, while drawing articulates the meaningful dynamics of knowledge [12].

It is within this perspective that the outlined methodological path, developed in this research, is situated, in which data acquisition, carried out through fast-survey campaigns based on the integrated



06.

Three-dimensional database of the Ksar of Tamnougalt, highlighting the dense aggregation of residential structures within the historic core.

application of terrestrial laser scanning and aerial photogrammetry techniques, provides the metric basis for the elaboration of digital models. These are never simple geometric transpositions but are filtered through the interpretative choices of the operator, who, during the modelling process, defines the relationships and dependencies among the constituent elements. Work on the coding and definition of repeatable elements has led to the use of BIM software, which facilitates the hierarchical structuring of geometric objects and the management of associated information. On the other hand, using parametric modelling tools inevitably impacts the geometric particularities of these architectures, characterised by highly irregular forms.

This makes it necessary to experiment with solutions capable of mediating between parametric rigour and morphological complexity, exploring possible solutions such as using adaptive components within Revit's BIM environment [13]. Alongside geometry, the terminological definition of elements plays a crucial role, enabling linguistic transpositions that make local variations intelligible while valuing the original terms. To this end, a dedicated digital ontology is currently being developed for this architectural heritage, aimed at mapping, extending, and connecting the standard vocabularies and thesauri currently available, ensuring their interoperability with the modelled geometries and their adaptation to local specificities. Typological and semantic classification of constituent elements allows to build a shared repository that makes it possible to compare different cases, recognise recurring patterns, and identify forms of continuity and transformation – thereby highlighting and valorising the constructive knowledge of the communities that inhabited these places [14]. Conservation thus concerns the physical object and the practices that sustain it: maintenance logics, building gestures, and the oral passing down of expertise. In this sense, every digital model becomes both a document and a narrative instrument, as well as a cognitive system and analytical tool [15]. The aim is to give shape and voice to a vulnerable heritage, threatened by the erosion of materials and oblivion of the practices, gestures, and knowledge that produced it.

CLOSING THOUGHTS: BETWEEN PERMANENCE AND TRANSFORMATION

Faced with the current material collapse and the gradual disappearance of the construction practices that once sustained these places, documentation takes on an ethical dimension. While digital technologies offer valuable tools to meet these challenges, the critical and interpretive stance transforms them into a powerful medium for conveying significance.

Far from mere containers of function, the buildings that punctuate the pre-Saharan valleys present themselves as true palimpsests – products of long equilibria among natural resources, construction know-how, and forms of social organisation.

Therefore, the challenge is simultaneously scientific, technical, cultural, and decolonial. Transposing and codifying do not mean divesting the "other" of its defining features or imposing reductive readings; instead, it is an exercise in building an interpretive bridge that allows the outsider, often approaching from a "Western" perspective, to engage with a culturally distant architectural language. It is precisely within this distance that the digital rendering of these architectures operates: not to subsume the "other" into oneself but to facilitate genuine understanding.

Yet, as Edward Said reminds us [16], every representation is *eo ipso* intertwined with intentions, ideologies, prejudices, and cultural projections. Accordingly, the act of documenting and formalising architecture cannot be dissociated from a critical reflection on how it is framed and narrated. To move beyond forms of orientalism – even those that arise within the same cultural context – means abandoning the view of *Berber* culture as archaic or marginal and instead embracing a more complex, plural, and layered reading of Moroccan history. It means recognising the pre-Saharan landscape not as a forgotten periphery but as a nexus of relationships, memory, and meaning.

NOTES

01| The term Amazigh (plural: Imazighen) is used by the native populations of North Africa – commonly referred to as "Berbers" – as a self-designation, and is commonly interpreted to mean "noble" or "free person." The adoption of this name reflects a growing awareness of cultural identity that encompasses language, traditions, and material heritage, including vernacular architecture. On this topic, see: Maddy-Weitzman, 2011; Boubekeur, 2022.

02| Cf. Curtis, 1983, pp. 182–183; Lee, 2020, pp. 21–22.

03| In his portrayal of the Mediterranean, Braudel acknowledges the Sahara's role as an extension of this realm, emphasising its function as a bridge between sub-Saharan Africa and the Mediterranean regions, and as an integral component of a historical network of exchanges and relations, cf. Braudel (1949), *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*. Paris: Armand Colin, p. 168; Casajus, (2011), *Sahara en mouvement*. L'année du Maghreb, (VII), 5–23.

04| Many structures now identified as *kasbahs* are, in fact, *tighremts* in their origins and architectural form. This terminological shift reflects an evolution in their functional and political significance – particularly when these buildings were adopted by local leaders aligned with central power, as in the case of the Glawa in the Dades Valley (Curtis 1983, p. 201–202).

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