

“Solving Daily-life Architecture Problems: The Architectural Intelligence Behind Moroccan Interiors in Brussels”

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to define, analyse and thus prove the existence of an architectural skill, innate in every human being, but nonetheless refined through their life-long experience of inhabiting. According to the definition of the word ‘architecture’ given by the Mediationist Theory of Architecture (Pleitinx, 2019), an accurate definition of ‘architecture’ stands away from ‘the architect’s profession’ (De l’Orme, 1567; Grassi, 1980; Vitruvius, 1914 [1st century BCE]) and closer to an anthropological work frame. Considered as a rational fact, the adopted definition of architecture refers to the intellectual moment of assigning forms to things (Pleitinx, 2019).

Exploring the evolution of the concept of architecture, through first, professional and academic architecture, and second, vernacular architecture, this article develops a third type, inspired by the MTA, daily architecture.

This last type, considered as the application of humans’ capacity to produce their habitat, to adapt, rearrange and transform it, is revealed in this article, through a corpus-based study of Moroccan immigrants’ housing in Brussels. Presenting a specific case in which the inhabitant furnishes their mid 19th century maison bourgeoise using a foreign furniture, the sedari, a traditional Moroccan furniture, this article aims to analyse the architectural adaptations and inventions, both formal and functional, that result from the meeting and hybridization of initially foreign dwelling habits and housing types.

Through the scope of an architectural analysis chart drawn by the MTA, the case study aims not only to reveal the obvious aspects of the architectural adaptations, i.e the forms invented by the inhabitant, but to report on the rational operations related to their intellectual production, i.e the existing and potential formulations.

Keywords: Architecture Theory, Mediationist Theory of Architecture, Daily Architecture, Dwelling, Moroccan Immigration.

1 INTRODUCTION

As used today, the word ‘architecture’ refers almost strictly to the architect’s profession. Throughout the history of architectural theory, it has often been classified in the category of trades, alongside magistracy, medicine, engineering, etc. (Pleitinx, 2019)

From a methodological point of view, such a definition does not allow studying architecture as a human artefact, as it limits the scope of architectural research exclusively to the work of licensed architects. In line with the ever-increasing work division of our times, this limitation significantly reduces the researchers’ field of study. It also overlooks the non-pedigree forms of architecture: vernacular, spontaneous, and informal settlements.

In dissent to this conception, an ‘anthropological’ definition of architecture, proposed by Renaud Pleitinx in his Mediationist Theory of Architecture (Pleitinx, 2019) identifies architecture with a rational moment, proceeding from a specialisation of the ability to produce artefacts, where the forms and things of the habitat are synthesized. Architecture, as the rational skill of habitat formulation, is characteristic to human beings and thus differs from the animals’ capacity of building shelter. (Pleitinx, 2019)

The research developed in this article is based on the hypothesis that every inhabitant every inhabitant possesses a technical-industrial rationality (Gagnepain, 1990; Le Gall, 1998; Pleitinx 2012, 2019; Jarry, Le Gall and Osiurak, 2016) that allows them to produce their own habitat, either by furnishing or transforming the premises, or by defining the uses and defining the location of the domestic activities.

To further investigate on this hypothesis, this research takes immigration as a testing ground and focuses on the architectural adaptations that result from the meeting of initially foreign habitats and lifestyles. In the particular case of architectural exchange, as home country interior layouts are hardly feasible, the architectural skills of the inhabitant, as well as their ability to adapt and invent, are the most observable

2 THEORY : (RE)DEFINING ARCHITECTURE

This research is inscribed under the theoretical and methodological framework of a Mediationist Theory of Architecture (Pleitinx, 2012, 2017, 2019). It considers architecture, not as a profession, but as a technical skill, comparable to language, making it common to most human beings.

According to the definition of the word ‘architecture’ given by the Mediationist Theory of Architecture (Pleitinx, 2019), an accurate definition of ‘architecture’ stands away from ‘the architect’s profession’ (De l’Orme, 1567; Grassi, 1980; Vitruvius, 1914 [1st century BCE]) and closer to an anthropological framework. Considered as a rational fact, the adopted definition of architecture refers to the intellectual moment of assigning forms to things (Pleitinx, 2019).

This article focuses on the non-professional practice of this skill and is distinct from other research in architecture that exclusively studies the works of licensed architects. It is thus similar to research on vernacular or informal architecture (Bourdieu, 1970 ; Pétonnet, 1972 ; Pinson, 1992), but takes a more architectural than ethnological point of view for the study of habitat.

In this regard, the article will first be developing the conceptions (and misconceptions) of different “types” of architecture (‘academic’ and ‘vernacular’), to eventually put forward a third type of architectural practice that falls in none of the stated categories: daily architecture.

2.1 Academic or Vernacular: A Hollow Debate

There is a so-called “savant” architecture, immediately referring to a professional practice, that finds its distinction in its opposition to a “vernacular” architecture. The latter intended “without architects”, includes all vernacular, popular and even informal buildings. Although in theory both are equally conditioned by the same constraints and influence factors (Chiva & Dubost, 1990), the former follows standard procedures, from planning to execution and graphic representation, while the latter follows a more spontaneous approach.

Throughout history, as stated in Concepts of vernacular architecture (Brown & Maudlin, 2012), the profession established itself as the gatekeeper of not only who enters into the profession, but also of what constitutes ‘architecture’. The conception of ‘what is architecture’ is rooted deep in the public imagination and has been sustained by a self-referential architectural press and the architectural awards system (Brown & Maudlin, 2012, page 6).

Also in the public imaginary, the term ‘vernacular architecture’ often refers to rural buildings. From European cottages, to mud huts in Africa or adobe Kasbahs in Southern Morocco, vernacular architecture covers a large span of things from the rural past and things from foreign places that are associated with the identity of the people who built and live, or lived, in them (Brown & Maudlin, 2012).

Vernacular architecture is sometimes also used to refer to contemporary architecture that are built using traditional building techniques and materials. In this context, traditional is intended as ancient and authentic, specific to a region or group of people, ancestral knowledge that has passed through generations of ‘non-experts’.

In 1970s France, for example, ethnologists reported on what they called ‘vernacular architecture’ in Paris countryside, as “produced by masons who draw inspiration from the classical models of architecture”. In this (mis)conception, vernacular architecture is considered only as a reproduction of the academic architecture.

If the term ‘architecture’ refers to either the product of professional architects, or the result of an ancestral non-expert foreign building tradition, endless other architectural manifestations, that fit in none of those boxes remain outside the circle of the studied architectural creations, thus excluding an important (and fertile) area for architecture researchers.

2.2 The Mediationist Theory of Architecture

Starting from an anthropological definition of the term architecture that considers architecture as a rational moment, proceeding from a specialisation of the ability to produce artefacts, every inhabitant consequently has a technical and industrial rationality (Gagnepain 1990, Jarry, Le Gall and Osiurak 2016, Le Gall 1998, Pleitinx 2017) that enables them to produce their own habitat, either by furnishing or even transforming the premises, or by defining their use and delimiting the location of their activities. Although asserting that ‘architecture’ is a human skill may seem controversial, and overall reductive to the work of licensed architects and other architecture-related professionals, it is to be considered in its larger context, of architecture being the production of ‘habitat’. The theoretical advantage of such a definition relies in the broadening of the architectural research field to include every kind of built work designed for inhabiting (Pleitinx, 2019a).

Based on the Theory of Mediation, a model of the rationality developed by Jean Gagnepain to describe the instinctive functions and rational faculties involved in the production of anthropic facts, ‘architecture’ is a specialisation of our artistic faculty, dealing specifically with the production of habitat (dwelling). In Gagnepain’s vocabulary, the word production does not refer to the effective manufacturing of an artefact, but rather to the rational process

of its intellection. The word habitat, for its part, refers to all kinds of artefacts intended for housing people, including furniture, rooms, buildings, city, landscape and even vehicles. (Pleitinx & Barkouch, 2020)

The strong anthropological hypotheses and accurate concepts of the TM inspired a Mediationist Theory of Architecture (MTA) developed by Renaud Pleitinx to explain the rational and specific operations involved in the production of habitat. The MTA's first assumption is that architectural forms are the products of our artistic rational faculty, of our own authentic invention (Pleitinx, 2012, 2018, 2019a, 2019b).

As rational beings, humans are in constant invention, in their daily life, for example, when producing their habitat. In this case, another type of architecture deserves to be brought to light, daily architecture.

Just like architects, the occupants of a residential building tackle “architectural problems” on a daily basis. By designing and affecting the premises, they modify, adapt, and sometimes even reinvent their homes.

3 METHOD

The case presented in this article is part of a doctoral research conducted in the faculty of architecture of UCLouvain, in Belgium, with funding from the Fonds Spécial de Recherche of the University.

The research takes immigration as a testing ground for the hypotheses presented in the first part. and focuses on the architectural adaptations that result from the meeting of initially foreign habitats and lifestyles. In the particular case of architectural exchange, as home country interior layouts are hardly feasible, the architectural skills of the inhabitant, as well as their ability to adapt and invent, are the most observable.

3.1 Case Study :

The context of immigration allows a clear observation of the architectural skill as it is challenged in the process of adjusting to the local culture, of adapting dwelling habits to forms, and forms to dwelling habits.

The doubling of spaces: the double kitchen for the Portuguese, the oriental-style living room doubled by the European-style living room for Turkish immigrants, or on the contrary their contraction: the swimming pool in the patio of a riad for Europeans in the Maghreb are phenomena of spatial acculturation. The displacement experienced in all migration situations leads to attempts to formal, functional, and lifestyle adaptations.

This article proposes to analyse the ways in which the Moroccan living room, also known as a Sedari (typical furniture, originally laid out following the contours of the room), is arranged in a Brussel's traditional bourgeoisie house (a typology of bourgeois single-family house, with rooms placed in a row). It thus highlights the architectural skill of the inhabitants through the modifications they make to both the home country furniture and the living environment. As stated earlier, it aims to reveal the architectural invention and innovation that results from the meeting of initially foreign lifestyles and architectural types.

Through data collected in the forms of architectural documents, pictures, interviews, 3D photogrammetric images, the research intends to inventory, for a given population, the architectural forms used, the formulas adopted, the alternative formulas considered and, further on, the architectural ideas that have emerged.

Moroccan living (Sedari)

What is commonly referred to as ‘the moroccan living’ or Sedari is broadly present in the arab world and beyond, from Morocco to Irak, the tradition of sitting on the floor or on carpets got increasingly replaced by low banquettes running along three sides of the room. (Hibbits, 2009). From light mattresses on the floor to thick ones supported by a decorated wooden frame, with a round table in the center or small ones all over the room, Sedaris exist in different compositions. As they usually come with no back, they are put directly against the wall. Historically, in Morocco, the living room or ‘salon’ is a « disproportionately long » and narrow room around which mattresses are put. (Ben El Khadir & Lahbabi, 1989). It is, at the same time, a living room for family or larger gatherings, a bedroom, for children or guests, and a dining room. (Fig. 1)

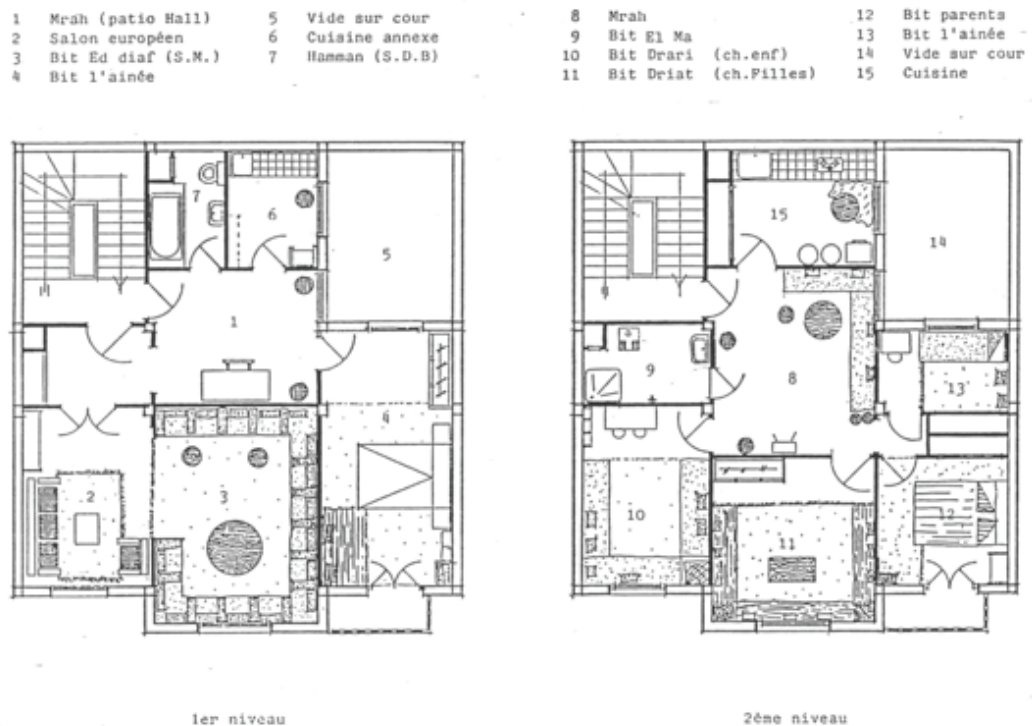


Figure 1: Depicted by Daniel Pinson and Mohamed Zekrani, the rooms 3 Bit Ed Diaf, 10 Bit Drari and 11 Bit Driat, all furnished in traditional Sedaris, correspondingly mean guest room, boys bedroom and girls bedroom. (Pinson & Zekrani, 1987) [1]

Brussels' traditional houses

In 19th century Brussels, as society undergoes great changes, domestic habits are deeply affected. Within the bourgeoisie, family is the core of the society and the family house guarantees its unity (Ledent, 2014). The traditional “maison bourgeoise” features two families of spaces, main and secondary, arranged in two separate spans in a 2/3-1/3 ratio. The main rooms are large and have high ceilings, the secondary ones usually come as corridors.

The ground floor - called “*bel étage*” (prestigious floor) - is generally elevated above the street level, allowing the semi-basement spaces to get sunlight (Ananian & Declève, 2015 ; Ledent, 2014). It usually hosts reception and family living areas. The infamous “*pièces enfilade*” (suite of rooms) traditionally come as living room/dining room/veranda. (Fig. 2)

The living room is a visibly important room by its position on the street front, its large window and its rich decoration. Traditionally, it opens through large glass doors to the dining room. Both rooms hold a fireplace. Finally, the veranda, a major invention of the end of the 19th century, (Ledent, 2014) opens the interior of the house on the garden and allows direct sunlight into the middle room (dining room).



Figure 2: Ground floors of traditional houses all over Brussels, showing the 2/3-1/3 ratio in the space division and the rooms Salon-Salle à manger-Véranda en enfilade. After Salmain F.,

L'album de la maison bruxelloise, 1908-1913.

The Brussels traditional house is formally characterized, among other things, by the association of at least two rooms, known as “en enfilade”. The two rooms of the ground floor conventionally hold the living room and the dining room. The “Moroccan living room” formally consists of several benches (commonly called sedari) wide and low, usually arranged in a “U” shape.

With such traditional layouts, the question of adaptations is quite inevitable. For a space originally designed to be used with specific local furniture, what are the architectural operations carried out by the Moroccan inhabitants in order to install their home furniture? To what extent do their architectural adaptations deviate from the traditional layouts of both the houses of their host country and the lifestyles of their home country?

For a Brussels use, the Moroccan living room combines, in one location, the living room and the dining room. The combination of the Brussels type and the Moroccan sedari raises architectural problems that call on the architectural skills of the inhabitants and challenge them to find sometimes original solutions.

For instance, the use of the Moroccan living room (where the inhabitants receive their guests and take their meals) in a Brussels house frees the room traditionally dedicated to the dining room, which is thus made available for other uses.

4 CASE :

The particular case presented in this article is probably one of the most outstanding cases collected.

The house is located in the neighbourhood of Schaerbeek, known both for its important Moroccan immigrant population and for its maisons bourgeoises. It was built in the late 19th century, with manifest neoclassical inspirations, large entrance and windows and the asymmetric blue stone façade. Inhabited since 2015 by a Moroccan family, the house holds all the characteristics required for the case study. This case revealed the existence of a double living room furnished in two types of sedari. Where the Belgian traditional layout would host a living room and a dining room, the inhabitants chose to install an open double living room (Fig.3). The integration of the two elements, even if they seem to be similar, required different formal and functional adaptations.



Figure 3: The living room and the dining room, both furnished in Sedaris. (Photo credits of the author)

4.1 Formal adaptations:

In both rooms, architectural choices were made in order to integrate the Moroccan Sedaris into the house, sometimes favouring the integrity of the sedaris, other times, of the house. In the house, elements that blocked the installation or use of the *sédari* were removed. As illustrated in red in the plan below, a fireplace was demolished, and a door was walled up. To support the back of the L shaped sedaris, a low wall was built to guarantee both the formal continuity of the furniture and the direct sunlight coming from the veranda. (Fig. 4)

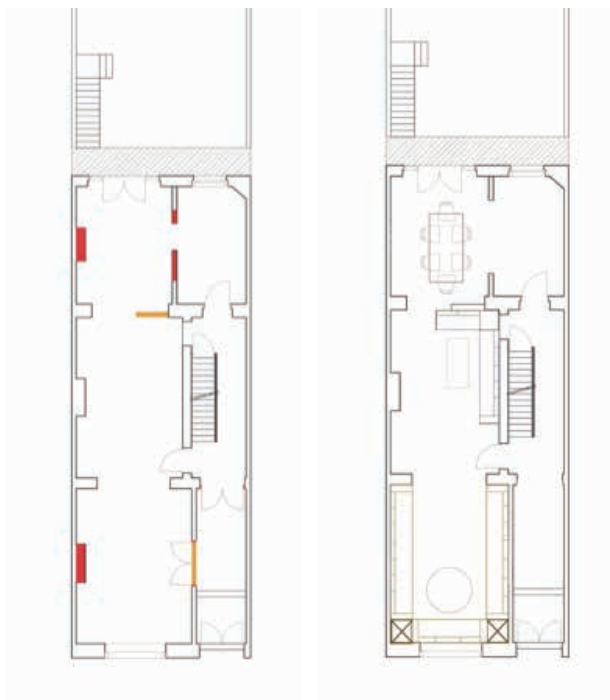


Figure 4 : Left : original ground floor plan, showing, in red, the demolished parts, and in yellow, the built ones, Right : Architectural modifications and the final adopted layouts.

As for, the Sedaris, structural elements were added in order to guarantee their perfect integration in the house. Where no wall could maintain the banquettes, a wooden back and armrest were added to the frame. (Fig 4, right ; Fig 5) The dimensions of the banquettes, their height, their colour, the size of their pillows were decided accordingly with the width of the wall, the sizes of the mouldings (Fig 6) and the height of the window. As the Sedaris were custom-made, the inhabitants had the possibility to take into consideration all of these architectural constraints.



Fig. 5: Structural elements added to the sedaris.

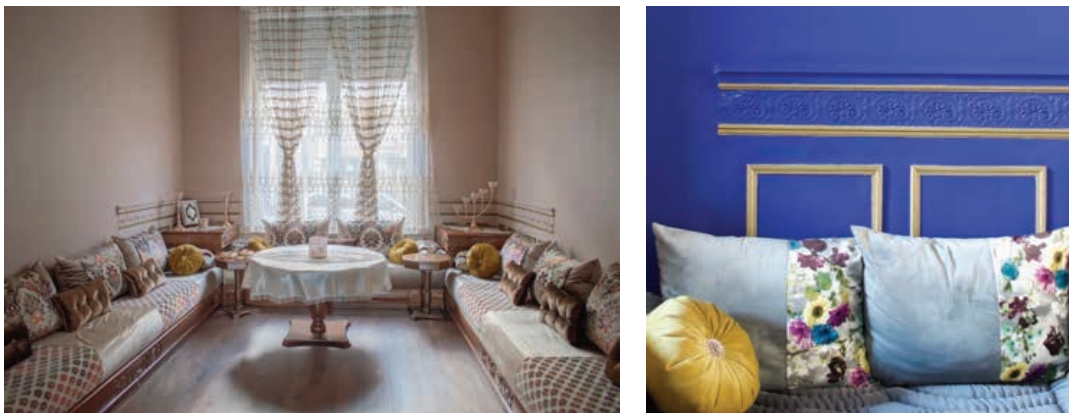


Fig. 6 : Different scale architectural integration in the living room and the dining room.

In the layout, the inhabitants chose two different types of Sedaris. The first, in the living room, is dedicated to receptions. Like a traditional Moroccan living room, it follows the shape of the room, is richly decorated and fits for a large number of people. The second, a less conventional L shape, stands closer to a European couch or sofa. It is oriented towards to the television and offers less sitting space, as it is more daily-use room. In fact, the uses are almost completely different from one room to another, even if technically, they both can host the same activities. The main living room is hardly used and dedicated to big family reunions and celebrations. The dining room is used daily, for taking meals, watching the tv, reading, etc.

The two rooms being open one to another and the freedom of movement in between offer the impression of one unique bigger living room (Fig.7), and are, as the inhabitants explain it, used at the same time when hosting large family celebrations.

As for the Veranda, the inhabitants chose to furnish it with a European style dining room. Being directly connected to the kitchen, it offers a certain convenience for quick meals, as the inhabitants report it.



Fig. 7: The complete layout being processed in a photogrammetry software.

5 CONCLUSION

The aim of this research, and more specifically this paper, is to report on the architectural intelligence of the inhabitants. Through a particular case of how immigrants reinvent local architecture, their architectural skill is revealed in the solutions they adopt to every constraint. Just like architects, inhabitants invent, or reinvent, their homes by modifying, adapting and adjusting both the buildings and the lifestyles. The point of view developed in this paper is not any way reductive to the work of licensed architects. The anthropological definition of architecture inspired by the Mediationist Theory of Architecture and included early in the paper states that ‘architecture’ and ‘architectural ideas’ are not only to be found in the great built works but also in the fine lines of the most “ordinary” architectural realisations, as they remain manifestations of the production of habitat, in its broadest meaning. Another goal, probably implicit in the text, is to suggest new ways of studying immigrant habitat, through a strictly architectural point of view, which would highlight the forms and their intelligence rather than the social circumstances that would have generated them.

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