

# Tradition Reimagined:

## Neo-Moorish Influence on Moroccan Architecture

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### Abstract

The neo-Moorish architecture style emerged during the 19th and 20th century. Representing a hybrid of traditional Moroccan design and European reinterpretations. This thesis aims to explore the impact of this architectural style on the evolution of Moroccan architecture. The focus lies on the connection between cultural identity, colonial influence and the aesthetics of revivalist design. By tracing the political and cultural motivations behind the neo-Moorish movement, the study investigates the impact on Moroccan architectural developments. It also explores how these factors continue to influence Moroccan identity in a globalized context.

### Keywords

Colonial influence, Hassan II Mosque, Moroccan architecture, Neo-Moorish, Post-colonial identity.

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## 1 Introduction

Neo-Moorish architecture occupies a complex place within Morocco's architectural history. It first emerged under colonial rule, combining elements of traditional Moroccan design with European reinterpretations. While at first glance it might appear as a romantic revival, its use was often strategic. Colonial powers adopted it to signal cultural sensitivity while simultaneously asserting political control. In the decades following independence this same style was reclaimed and redefined by Moroccan architects and state figures. They used it to express national pride and cultural continuity<sup>1</sup>.

This thesis explores the trajectory of Neo-Moorish architecture in Morocco, with particular attention to its ideological functions. It examines how this architectural style has been influenced by, and has helped shaped, discourses of identity, heritage and power. Rather than treating Neo-Moorish design as a fixed aesthetic category, this thesis explores how it

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

was used to articulate competing visions of identity, from colonial representations of authority to postcolonial expressions of nationhood and cultural memory.

My interest in this subject is also shaped by my personal background. As someone with Moroccan roots, I have been fascinated by the way architecture reflects both personal memory and broader national narratives. That awareness of layered meaning, where a single architecture form can represent multiple histories is what initially drew me to this topic.

Various scholars have explored the political dimensions of architecture during the colonial period. Lamzah, for instance, argues that urban planning in Morocco was a central instrument of colonial authority<sup>2</sup>. It was carefully calibrated to give the impression of cultural respect while maintaining a hierarchical order. Kassab's study of the Habous district in Casablanca shows how the colonial administration employed Neo-Moorish aesthetics to construct a stylized and controlled version of Moroccan urban life<sup>3</sup>. In the postcolonial period, this visual language remained in use, but its meaning changed. Projects such as the Hassan II Mosque demonstrate how traditional forms were now used to communicate national unity, Islamic heritage, and sovereign identity<sup>4</sup>.

Contemporary colonial writings, such as Léandre Vaillat's *Le visage français du Maroc*, also reveal the ideological ambitions of the time. In his account of Casablanca, Vaillat describes it as a "city of conquerors" that deserved a monumental skyline to reflect its colonial ambition. His vision of order and verticality exemplifies how French writers used architecture to express power and vision<sup>5</sup>.

This thesis focuses on how Neo-Moorish architecture was framed and interpreted through colonial and postcolonial discourse. It analyzes how the style was discussed in French architectural magazines such as *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, treating these publications as ideological texts that shaped professional and public perceptions of Moroccan architecture. In addition, the thesis considers the Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca as a key reference project in the post-independence reappropriation of Neo-Moorish aesthetics, examining how its design and public reception illustrate shifts in meaning attributed to the style. This approach is supported by a close reading of relevant secondary literature on colonial planning, postcolonial identity, and architectural heritage.

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<sup>2</sup> Assia Lamzah, "Urban Design and Architecture in the Service of Colonialism in Morocco," (2015), <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/274298066>.

<sup>3</sup> Rim Yassine Kassab, *Unveiling the Neo-Moroccan City: A Historical Exploration of Casablanca's Habous District (1917–1926)* (2024), <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/377167104>.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Louis Cohen, "Architectural History and the Colonial Question: Casablanca, Algiers and Beyond," *Architectural History* 49 (2006): 349–72.

<sup>5</sup> Léandre Vaillat, *Le visage français du Maroc* (Paris: Horizons de France, 1931).

Concepts such as postcolonial desire<sup>6</sup>, critical regionalism, and the cultural politics of memory and representation help to frame the analysis<sup>7</sup>.

Rather than presenting a linear historical overview, this study views Neo-Moorish architecture as a dynamic and contested field. The style was shaped by the vision of colonial planners such as Henri Prost and later reinterpreted by Moroccan state actors and architects. The thesis argues that architecture in this context became a medium through which Moroccan identity was debated, asserted, and reshaped, both in response to colonial authority and in the development of postcolonial nationhood<sup>8</sup>.



Fig.1 Mosque square, Casablanca drawn by Henri Prost in 1915

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<sup>6</sup> Simon During, “Postmodernism or Postcolonialism Today,” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Diana Wylie, “Part of Who We Are: Using Old Buildings to Foster Citizenship in North Africa,” *Buildings & Landscapes* 25, no. 1 (2018): 44–69.

<sup>8</sup> Youssef El Kaidi, “The Post-colonial Novel and the Re-construction of National Identity in Morocco,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 28, no. 4 (2022): 915–30.

## 2 Historical context of Neo-Moorish architecture

### 2.1 origin and historical context

The emergence of Neo-Moorish architecture is closely linked to the colonial period in Morocco. Particularly under French and Spanish rule from late 19<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>9</sup>. During this time, European powers sought to modernize Morocco while simultaneously preserving and showcasing the “authentic” essence of Moroccan culture. The resulting Neo-Moorish style blended traditional Moroccan design elements with European interpretations, creating an architectural language that simultaneously appropriated and romanticized Moroccan heritage. The resulting style drew inspiration from historic Moroccan architectural traditions. Incorporating features such as horseshoe arches, zellige tilework, stucco decoration and spacious courtyards.

This architectural approach was not only aesthetic but deeply institutional. Architecture and heritage initiatives were coordinated through powerful colonial bodies, particularly the Service des Beaux-Arts and the Direction Générale des Travaux Publics. These institutions dictated the stylistic norms applied across key cities and public buildings, shaping how Moroccan identity would be spatially represented<sup>10</sup>. The Service des Beaux-Arts, established in 1912 under Maurice Tranchant de Lunel, was central to Lyautey’s vision (the first French Resident-General in Morocco)<sup>11</sup>. Lyautey promoted a *modernité couleur locale*, an approach that sought to modernize the country while preserving and romanticizing its architectural traditions. More than preservation, it helped define a colonial aesthetic<sup>12</sup>.

By selectively reviving and reinterpreting these traditional elements through a European lens, colonial authorities sought to establish a sense of continuity with Morocco’s architectural heritage. This reinterpretation was not neutral. As Çelik notes, it reduced Moroccan heritage to an aesthetic category, allowing colonial powers to control how space was designed, experienced and understood<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> “French And Spanish Protectorates”. z.d. EMBASSY OF THE KINGDOM OF MOROCCO IN THE UNITED STATES. <https://us.diplomatie.ma/en/node/1910>.

<sup>10</sup> Théliot, Mylène. 2011. “Le Service Des Beaux-arts, Antiquités Et Monuments Historiques, Clef de Voûte de La Politique Patrimoniale Française Au Maroc Sous La Résidence de Lyautey (1912-1925)”. *Outre-mers* 98 (370): 185–93. <https://doi.org/10.3406/outre.2011.4545>.

<sup>11</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. 1998. “Louis-Hubert-Gonzalve Lyautey | Colonial Administrator, Military Leader & Strategist”. Encyclopedia Britannica. 20 juli 1998. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Louis-Hubert-Gonzalve-Lyautey>.

<sup>12</sup> Baudoui, Rémi, Saïd Mouline, en WWW.MAROCPLURIEL.COM. 2004. “Lyautey Et L’aménagement Des Villes Marocaines 1912-1925”.

<sup>13</sup> Zeynep Çelik, “Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations,” n.d. <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft8c6009jk/>.

## 2.2 Key figures and Platforms

The development of Neo-Moorish architecture in Morocco was significantly influenced by European architects and urban planners who worked under the colonial administrations. Henri Prost, appointed as the chief urban planner of Morocco in 1914 played a key role in shaping big cities like Rabat and Casablanca.<sup>14</sup> Prost's urban plans sought to balance modern Europeans infrastructure with a controlled representation of Moroccan architectural heritage. This resulted in what Rabinow describes as a "picturesque" yet regulated aesthetic<sup>15</sup>.

Albert Laprade, a French architect, who contributed to the design of the new medina of Casablanca, showcased a deliberate integration of traditional Moroccan elements such as; zellige, carved plaster and woodwork into modern construction techniques. His publications, as noted by Jean-Louis Cohen, reflect a detailed engagement with Moroccan architecture and craftsmanship<sup>16</sup>. Yet, rather than reading this solely as an act of appreciation, this study interprets Laprade's work as part of a broader colonial discourse in which Moroccan heritage was curated for visuals and ideological purposes. A similar dynamic is visible in the design of the Habous Quarter by Auguste Cadet and Edmond Brion, two French architects. The project envisioned to accommodate rural migrant to the city while presenting an idealized version of Moroccan urban life to European residents<sup>17</sup>. These projects did not simply reflect architectural decisions, but helped institutionalize a curated version of Moroccan identity. They show how architecture was used to construct a visible narrative of tradition that aligned with colonial policy. As Çelik argues, such interventions reframed architecture as cultural spectacle rather than a lived and adaptive practice<sup>18</sup>.

The circulation of Neo-Moorish architectural ideas was facilitated by colonial exhibitions, architectural journals and official reports. Exhibitions such as the Colonial Exposition held in Paris in 1931 displayed architectural models, photographs and drawings that emphasized traditional Moroccan forms reinterpreted through modern techniques. These exhibitions were not neutral showcases.

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<sup>14</sup> Staff, Afikra. 2024. "Who Built Casablanca? — Afikra | عنكرة". Afikra | 13. عنكرة. juni 2024.

<https://www.afikra.com/daftarjournal/casablanca-architecture>.

<sup>15</sup> Rabinow, Paul. French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment. The MIT Press, 1989.

[https://shekhar.cc/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/rabinow\\_norms\\_forms.pdf](https://shekhar.cc/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/rabinow_norms_forms.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Cohen, Jean-Louis. 2022. "Casablanca La Juive: Public And Private Architecture 1912-1960". QUEST 19 – FOCUS.

<sup>17</sup> Meffre, Gislhaine, en Bernard Delgado. 2019. Quartier Habous À Casablanca: Une Nouvelle Médina Dans La Métropole.

<sup>18</sup> Zeynep Çelik, "Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations," n.d.  
<http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft8c6009jk/>.

They staged a colonial narrative of preservation and progress, presenting Moroccan heritage as something to be managed and reframed by European expertise<sup>19</sup>.



Fig. 2: 1931 Exposition Coloniale Paris Morocco Pavilion

Publications such as *Bulletin de la Société des Architectes du Maroc* documented and analyzed Moroccan architectural heritage while promoting a curated interpretation of Moroccan culture<sup>20</sup>. These platforms did not just circulate ideas but defined which forms of architecture were deemed legitimate. By prioritizing traditional motifs and visual continuity, they often sidelined emerging Moroccan modernist voices that explored alternative design expressions<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Morton, Patricia A. 1999. *Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition*, Paris. [https://archive.org/details/hybridmodernitie00mort\\_0/page/n6/mode/1up?q=morocco](https://archive.org/details/hybridmodernitie00mort_0/page/n6/mode/1up?q=morocco).

<sup>20</sup> Stierlin, Henri. 2002. *Islamic Art And Architecture: 650–1250*. Yale University Press eBooks. <https://doi.org/10.37862/aaeportal.00202>.

<sup>21</sup> Morton, Patricia *Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition*, Paris.

## 2.3 Circulation of ideas and Western Influence

The circulation of Neo-Moorish architectural ideas was shaped by European efforts to document and reinterpret Moroccan culture. Particularly through exhibitions and architectural publications. French and Spanish architects extensively studied Moroccan monuments, publishing their findings in journals and colonial reports that circulated colonial journals. While such publications often praised Moroccan craftsmanship, they simultaneously romanticized and aestheticized selected aspects of the past to support colonial visions of authenticity and order. As Rabinow and Çelik have shown, this process framed heritage as continuous and unchanging, while hiding the disruptions brought by colonial rule<sup>22</sup>. This strategy echoes broader practices across the colonial world, where architecture was used to construct “usable pasts”, curated visions of tradition that justified imperial authority, as seen in contexts like Algiers and French Indochina<sup>23</sup>.



Fig. 3: Visualizing “traditional” Morocco: architectural typologies in a 1950s French journal.

## 2.4 Reception by local architects

The reception of Neo-Moorish architecture by local Moroccan architects was mixed. In the years following independence, figures such as Elie Azagury and Abdeslam Faraoui integrated traditional elements like courtyards and carved plaster into modernist

<sup>22</sup> Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); Zeynep Çelik, *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations: Algiers Under French Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>23</sup> Edwards, Jay, en Anne E. Mosher. 1994. “The Politics Of Design in French Colonial Urbanism Gwendolyn Wright”. *Journal Of The Society Of Architectural Historians* 53 (3): 357–59. <https://doi.org/10.2307/990947>.

frameworks. Their aim was not to replicate colonial forms, but to reassert cultural identity while embracing architectural innovation<sup>24</sup>.

Others, particularly younger architects influenced by international modernism, rejected Neo-Moorish aesthetics as colonial residue. They saw it as a decorative language that masked deeper social and spatial transformations<sup>25</sup>. This critique intensified in the 1960s and 1970s, as debates about authenticity and representation gained traction. Journals such as *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* captured this evolving discourse, reflecting tensions between revivalism and reform<sup>26</sup>.

Between these positions, hybrid approaches emerged, blending tradition and innovation according to context. Rather than fixed camps, the architectural field was shaped by ongoing negotiations about the meaning and use of heritage in a changing Morocco.

After Morocco's independence in 1956<sup>27</sup>, the Neo-Moorish style was not discarded as a colonial residue but strategically reclaimed as part of a national identity project. The Moroccan state, through public commissions and symbolic buildings, redefined the style to express sovereignty, Islamic heritage, and cultural continuity. In Rabat, government buildings like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs incorporated traditional elements to visually signal this shift. The Théâtre Mohammed V similarly fused modern structure with Islamic motifs, reflecting a broader attempt to localize modernity. Architects such as Abdeslam Faraoui emphasized traditional craftsmanship, reclaiming techniques once filtered through a colonial lens<sup>28</sup>. This reframing of Neo-Moorish architecture laid the groundwork for later iconic projects like the Hassan II Mosque<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Cohen, Jean-Louis. 2022. "Casablanca La Juive: Public And Private Architecture 1912-1960". QUEST 19 – FOCUS.

<sup>25</sup> Rabinow, Paul. *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment*. The MIT Press, 1989. [https://shekhar.cc/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/rabinow\\_norms\\_forms.pdf](https://shekhar.cc/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/rabinow_norms_forms.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Raymond Duru, "L'habitat urbain et rural au Maroc," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, no. 2 (1950–1951): 314.

<sup>27</sup> "Important Dates | Maroc.ma". 2025. 24 april 2025. <https://www.maroc.ma/en/history-of-morocco/important-dates>.

<sup>28</sup> Houssais, Maud. z.d. "Les Intégrations: Faraoui And Mazières. 1966–1982 - Articles – Bauhaus Imaginista". <https://www.bauhaus-imaginista.org/articles/2387/les-integrations-faraoui-and-mazieres-1966-1982>.

<sup>29</sup> "Islamic Art and Architecture, 650-1250 : Ettinghausen, Richard : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive." 2001. Internet Archive. 2001. [https://archive.org/details/isbn\\_9780300088670](https://archive.org/details/isbn_9780300088670).



### 3 Neo-Moorish design in Morocco: Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca

#### 3.1 Architectural significance

The Hassan II Mosque, completed in 1993<sup>30</sup> is one of the most prominent examples of the Neo-Moorish architecture in Morocco. Designed by French architect Michel Pinseau, the mosque incorporates a fusion of traditional Moroccan craftsmanship with modern engineering. Although a relatively recent project, it is significant because it bridges multiple phases of the Neo-Moorish style; from its colonial appropriation, to post-independence reclamation and to its transformation into a global symbol of national identity. Jean-Louis Cohen argues that “Neo-Moorish architecture in post-colonial Morocco represents a deliberate effort to reclaim indigenous aesthetic traditions that were previously appropriated by colonial authorities”<sup>31</sup>.

Its design draws heavily from classical Moorish and Islamic architectural traditions like zellige tilework, muqarnas (structural and decorative transitional element) and a towering minaret inspired by the Koutoubia Mosque in Marrakech and the Hassan Tower in Rabat. Scholars such as Wagner and Minca have noted that these references serve not only decorative functions but also construct a symbolic lineage that connects contemporary Morocco to a prestigious Islamic architectural past<sup>32</sup>.



Fig. 4: Historic postcard of the Koutoubia Mosque in Marrakech (date unknown)

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<sup>30</sup> Ahmed en Ministre des Habous et des Affaires Islamiques

<sup>31</sup> Cohen, Jean-Louis. 2022. “Casablanca La Juive: Public And Private Architecture 1912-1960

<sup>32</sup> Wagner and Minca, “Rabat Retrospective: Colonial Heritage in a Moroccan Urban Laboratory.”



Fig. 5: Author's photo of the Hassan Tower in Rabat (2021)

Situated on the coast of Casablanca, the mosque was built partly on land with a glass floored prayer hall extending over the Atlantic ocean. This unique site choice, inspired by a verse in the Quran verse referencing God's throne upon the waters<sup>33</sup>, reflects King Hassan II's desire to root spiritual symbolism in monumental architecture<sup>34</sup>. His vision framed the mosque not just as a place of worship but also as a national landmark.

The interior spaces, covered with cedarwood carvings from the Middle Atlas, marble from Agadir and onyx from Tafraoute, were crafted by over 10.000 Moroccan artisans, highlighting the importance of traditional craftsmanship in the project<sup>35</sup>. By employing Moroccan artisans and materials the construction process itself became a statement of national cultural identity. As Malti argues, the use of local materials and techniques transformed the construction process into a performative act of heritage-making. While on the surface this celebrates artisanal heritage, it also reflects how postcolonial architecture can mobilize tradition as a controlled narrative of national identity, framing authenticity through state-sponsored monumentalism<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>33</sup>“Surah Hud - 7 - Quran.com”. z.d. Quran.Com. <https://quran.com/en/hud/7>.

<sup>34</sup> The Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca. “The Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca,” April 7, 2020. <https://hassan2-mosque-casablanca.com/>.

<sup>35</sup> Ahmed, Toufiq en Ministre des Habous et des Affaires Islamiques. z.d. “LA MOSQUEE HASSAN II - VERITABLE CHEF-D’ŒUVRE”.

<sup>36</sup> Malti, Mohammed EL. 1983. THE ARCHITECTURE OF COLONIALISM, MOROCCO, 1912 1932: An inquiry into the determinants of French colonial architecture. <https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4169&context=dissertations>. -

### 3.2 Political and Cultural intentions

As mentioned before the mosque was commissioned by King Hassan II, the mosque served multiple political and cultural functions. As Morocco shaped its post-colonial identity, the king envisioned the mosque as a symbol of national unity and a demonstration of Morocco's commitment to Islam and its architectural heritage<sup>37</sup>.

The mosque's Neo-Moorish design can be seen as a response to how Moroccan architecture was represented and appropriated under colonial rule. During the French protectorate (1912-1956), Neo-Moorish aesthetics were used in administrative buildings to construct an exoticized and controlled image of Moroccan identity<sup>38</sup>. Cohen describes this as a part of a broader orientalist approach, that presented Moroccan architecture as timeless and decorative, rather than as part of a living architectural tradition<sup>39</sup>.

This perception was echoed in contemporary French architectural discourse. In *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* (1950), Odile and Michel Écochard described later Moroccan monumental architecture as having become rigid and repetitive, with plans and forms repeating almost unchanged<sup>40</sup>. Similarly, Raymond Duru emphasized the absence of continuity between rural and urban housing, reinforcing a vision of Moroccan architecture as culturally fixed<sup>41</sup>. While not always explicitly political, these views contributed to a colonial narrative in which architectural stagnation justified external intervention.

By reclaiming this architectural style for an explicitly Moroccan structure, the mosque challenges its colonial associations. In doing so, it repositions Neo-Moorish design as an assertion of national pride rather than a colonial spectacle. As Kaidi argues, this recontextualization reflects a postcolonial strategy of reappropriating inherited forms to serve new meanings<sup>42</sup>.

While the Hassan II mosque is widely recognized as a symbol of national identity and religious grandeur, its construction also sparked significant debate. This project, estimated to have cost around 700 million dollars, was largely funded through public contributions. Critics questioned the allocation of resources and raised concerns over social priorities<sup>43</sup>. In response, King Hassan II defended the project by emphasizing the cultural and spiritual value of monumental religious architecture. He compared it to Notre-Dame in Paris<sup>44</sup>. This defense reflects how the mosque's Neo-Moorish design was not merely an aesthetic

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<sup>37</sup> Wagner and Minca, "Rabat Retrospective: Colonial Heritage in a Moroccan Urban Laboratory."

<sup>38</sup> Cohen, Jean-Louis. "Architectural History and the Colonial Question: Casablanca, Algiers and Beyond." *Architectural History* 49 (2006): 349–72. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40033828>

<sup>39</sup> Jean-Louis Cohen, "Architectural History and the Colonial Question: Casablanca, Algiers and Beyond,"

<sup>40</sup> Odile and Michel Écochard, "La vie urbaine et les monuments à l'époque musulmane," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, no. 35 (1950–1951): 285.

<sup>41</sup> Raymond Duru, "Problèmes d'urbanisme au Maroc," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, no. 35 (1950–1951): 9.

<sup>42</sup> Youssef El Kaidi, *The Post-colonial Novel and the Re-construction of National Identity in Morocco*

<sup>43</sup> Khan, Hasan-Uddin. "Identity, Authenticity and Power: The Mosque of Hassan II." *Journal-article. ISIM Newsletter*. Vol. 8, 1999.

<sup>44</sup> King Hassan II, interview with French journalist, Royal Palace, Rabat, December 1989.

choice. It was part of a broader postcolonial aesthetic strategy that positioned the mosque as a national identity project, reclaiming architectural heritage to assert Morocco's sovereignty and continuity within a global tradition of sacred monumentality.

### 3.3 National identity during and after colonial period

The mosque's construction emerged from a postcolonial movement in which architecture became a key medium for expressing sovereignty. While colonial urban planning had used style to impose order, post-independence projects like this mosque reappropriated that visual language for national purposes<sup>45</sup>. The mosque reclaims this aesthetic in a religious and nationalistic context, symbolizing a Moroccan-led reaffirmation of cultural heritage. This aligns with Youssef El Kaidi's argument that post-colonial Moroccan identity has been shaped by competing nationalist and modernist narratives, each seeking to define the country's cultural and historical continuity<sup>46</sup>.

The Hassan II Mosque marks a turning point in the evolving meaning of Neo-Moorish architecture. It reflects a shift in how the style's meaning has evolved from colonial appropriation to postcolonial reappropriation. Under colonial rule, earlier applications of the Neo-Moorish style served to aestheticize control. They helped reinforce a curated image of Moroccan identity, shaped through European urban planning ideals. In contrast, the Hassan II Mosque reclaims these forms within a post-independence framework<sup>47</sup>. Its monumental scale and reliance on Moroccan artisanship signal a shift from externally imposed representation to internally defined expression. In this context, Simon During's assertion that "post-colonial desire is the desire of decolonized communities for an identity" is particularly relevant<sup>48</sup>. The mosque's magnificence and explicitly Moroccan design can be understood as a manifestation of this post-colonial desire. It articulates Morocco's effort to reclaim its architectural and cultural heritage on its own terms. This desire is rooted in a historical context where, during the French protectorate, Moroccan identity was spatially and symbolically controlled through segregated urban planning and aesthetic regulation<sup>49</sup>. The mosque redefines those colonial structures by reasserting indigenous aesthetics in a monumental, state-led expression of cultural sovereignty.

Rather than breaking entirely with past forms, the mosque integrates traditional aesthetics with modern engineering to articulate Morocco's evolving role on the global stage. As Youssef El Kaidi notes, postcolonial Moroccan identity is shaped by the intersection of

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<sup>45</sup> Wagner, Lauren, and Claudio Minca. "Rabat Retrospective: Colonial Heritage in a Moroccan Urban Laboratory." *Urban Studies* 51, no. 14 (2014): 3011–25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26145924>.

<sup>46</sup> Youssef El Kaidi, *The Post-colonial Novel and the Re-construction of National Identity in Morocco*

<sup>47</sup> Jean-Louis Cohen, "Architectural History and the Colonial Question: Casablanca, Algiers and Beyond,"

<sup>48</sup> Simon During, *Postmodernism or Postcolonialism Today*

<sup>49</sup> Janet Abu-Lughod, *Rabat: Urban Apartheid in Morocco* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 105–110.

nationalism, Islam, and modernization<sup>50</sup>. The mosque embodies this intersection, not only by reaffirming cultural heritage, but by projecting an image of continuity and confidence. Its influence is visible in contemporary Moroccan architecture, where historical motifs continue to be reinterpreted in new urban and civic projects<sup>51</sup>.



Fig. 6: Author's photo of the Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca (2023)

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<sup>50</sup> Youssef El Kaidi, *The Post-colonial Novel and the Re-construction of National Identity in Morocco*

<sup>51</sup> Wagner and Minca, "Rabat Retrospective: Colonial Heritage in a Moroccan Urban Laboratory,"

## 4 Relevance

### 4.1 Contemporary influence of Neo-Moorish architecture

The legacy of Neo-Moorish architecture continues to shape Morocco's built environment, blending historical motifs with modern urban and architectural developments. While initially a colonial construct, the style has been reappropriated in the post-colonial period to reflect national identity and cultural continuity<sup>52</sup>. As discussed before, the Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca exemplifies this transition. It illustrates how Neo-Moorish aesthetics function as a post-colonial affirmation of Moroccan heritage rather than merely a vestige of colonial urbanism<sup>53</sup>. Today many civic, religious and governmental structures incorporate Neo-Moorish elements such as horseshoe arches, stucco work and zellige tilework as a continuation Morocco's architectural tradition<sup>54</sup>.

Public buildings such as Rabat's Bank Al-Maghrib headquarters and the Moroccan Parliament integrate Moorish ornamentation with contemporary construction techniques. This fusion of tradition and modernity mirrors Morocco's broader effort to project itself as a nation rooted in its cultural past while embracing globalization<sup>55</sup>. Similarly, luxury hotels and urban developments including those in Marrakech often adopt Neo-Moorish aesthetics to appeal to both domestic and international audiences. This reinforces the visual identity Moroccan heritage in global tourism.

### 4.2 Current trends in Moroccan architecture

Contemporary Moroccan architecture is defined by negotiation between preservation and innovation. While Neo-Moorish elements remain visually present, there has been a notable shift toward modernist and environmentally conscious design. Rather than simply rejecting the past, architects such as Tarik Oualalou and Aziza Chaouni propose new ways of engaging with Morocco's architectural legacy. They do this through material choice, spatial ethics and ecological strategies<sup>56</sup>. This shift replaces static revivalism with a more flexible approach, where sustainability and adaption continue cultural traditions. The Grand Theatre of Rabat, designed by Zaha Hadid Architects, exemplifies this trend by blending fluid, futuristic forms with subtle references to traditional Islamic Architecture<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> Jean-Louis Cohen, "Architectural History and the Colonial Question: Casablanca, Algiers and Beyond,"

<sup>53</sup> Khan, Hasan-Uddin. "Identity, Authenticity and Power: The Mosque of Hassan II."

<sup>54</sup> Youssef El Kaidi, *The Post-colonial Novel and the Re-construction of National Identity in Morocco*

<sup>55</sup> Miller and Minca, "Making Moroccan 'Heritage'"

<sup>56</sup> detailmagazine. "DETAIL Interview L Tarik Oualalou Zum Marokkanischen Expo-Pavillon in Dubai," March 31, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oq04FON8p1E>.

<sup>57</sup> Sara, Mahmoud Ahmed Fouad, Alaa Mandour Mohammed, and Sahar Morsy Mohammed. "The Revival of Islamic Architecture Using Parametric Algorithms." *Engineering Research Journal* 170, no. 0 (June 1, 2021): 123–46. <https://doi.org/10.21608/erj.2021.177304>.





Fig. 7: Author's photo of the Grand Theatre of Rabat and Mohammed VI Tower(2025).

Moroccan cities are experiencing rapid urban expansion, leading to the construction of new infrastructure projects that often diverge from traditional aesthetics. In Casablanca, the CasArts complex and the Finance City Tower reflect an embrace of glass-and-steel modernism, which contrasts sharply with older Neo-Moorish cityscapes (Miller and Minca 2017, 10). Despite this, developers frequently incorporate decorative elements inspired by Moroccan heritage, ensuring that even hypermodern structures maintain a connection to the country's architectural legacy.

The CasArts complex, designed by Mecanoo, exemplifies this blend of tradition and modernity. Its hexagonal façade openings, inspired by traditional North African designs, function both as solar shading and as a visual link to pre-modern Islamic geometry<sup>58</sup>. While such gestures may appear decorative, they reflect a deeper tension in contemporary Moroccan architecture, the desire to assert global relevance while retaining cultural specificity. In this sense, even highly modern projects participate in the broader postcolonial project of rearticulating national identity through the built environment.

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<sup>58</sup> "CasArts Theatre Complex," n.d. <https://www.mecanoo.nl/Projects/project/115/CasArts-Theatre-Complex>.

## 5. Conclusion

This thesis has explored the layered history of Neo-Moorish architecture in Morocco, tracing its transformation from a colonial tool to a postcolonial medium of cultural expression. Rather than viewing the style as a fixed aesthetic, the research has shown how it has been continually reframed to serve shifting political and symbolic agendas.

Through critical analysis of architectural projects, colonial discourse and postcolonial theory, it became clear that architecture in Morocco has long functioned as both a visual marker of power and a space of negotiation. The Habous Quarter illustrated how colonial authorities shaped idealized urban forms to legitimize imperial control. In contrast, the Hassan II Mosque has demonstrated how similar forms were later reappropriated to express sovereignty, spiritual continuity and national pride.

Today, Neo-Moorish influences persist alongside modernist and sustainable trends, reflecting an ongoing dialogue between heritage and innovation. Architects and planners continue to reinterpret traditional motifs as tools to anchor cultural identity. Architecture in Morocco thus remains a living field through which historical trajectories are contested, reimagined and projected into the future. Ultimately, this study has shown that Neo-Moorish architecture is more than a stylistic category. It is a narrative, one that tells the story of colonial imposition, cultural resilience and the evolving search for identity through the built space.

Growing up, I spent my summers in Morocco, surrounded by the architecture that shaped my memories long before I understood its meaning. Through this thesis, I've learned to see those spaces not just as familiar, but as part of a larger story about identity, history and how we give form to belonging. It is also a quiet tribute to the many Moroccans whose lives and legacies were overshadowed by the violence of the colonial period, but whose presence still lives on in the spaces they helped shape.



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