

Threshold of Evanescence

Thesis Reflection

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Methods and Analysis

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Introduction

While establishing a clear division between research and design is oftentimes the most common approach in architectural practices, the chair of Methods and Analysis acknowledges the entirety of an architectural project as research with each phase informing different aspect of an architectural question. The graduation studio of Methods and Analysis chair “Positions in Practice: Analysis and Intervention in the Afropolis” challenges the students to develop individual research and design theme, methodology and position within the context of Casablanca. The studio also responds to the larger investigation theme of the chair “Constructing the Commons”.

Due to the limited information about Casablanca available, the graduation studio began with two-week long fieldwork- an opportunity for the students to investigate this foreign territory in depth and collecting sufficient information from which we could work with in further development of our personal projects. I faced my biggest obstacle in the very beginning as the duration of fieldwork was cut short to 3 days for me as the result of a series of unfortunate events. However, this extremely inconvenient situation turned out to be the one event that helped launch me onto a fruitful and dynamic research trajectory. This paper is a reflection on the process and methods of my final thesis project.

Parallel Fascination

(Pre- Methods and Analysis)

Prior and parallel to the Methods and Analysis graduation studio, I have developed a personal fascination in looking into the social and political structure of religious cults or a religious dystopia. The fascination derived directly from my personal journey of growing up in a strict, religious and extremely sheltered family, and the personally significant and difficult journey of self- exploration and realisation I have experienced when I left home as a teenager. Throughout the years I have not abandoned my faith, but what has changed in me was that I gained the ability to think independently and critically, and no longer restricted by some of the ideas implanted in me. The feeling of escaping the old and entering the new is a process I very much celebrate.

Through re-reading *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, the fascination and curiosity intensified in me, where I developed the idea of one day combining this fascination with architectural research. However, the possibility of an opportunity for me to do so seemed very slim.

I. Fieldwork: Morphotypological study of Ecochard Grid

(Up to P1 exam, in collaboration with Türker Naci Şaylan)

Casablanca struck us as a city clad in layers of adaptation and appropriation. From this, we started looking at Casablanca through the lens of “inherited culture”, and attempted to understand the underlying logics of “mediation” and “adaptation”. We began our investigation by studying the history of the 8x8 Ecochard housing grid, understanding the project in its political, social and economic context. We found that Ecochard’s 8x8 housing grid is a product of negotiation between the booming urbanisation and the Moroccan culture. Having foreseen the rapid densification, the structure proposed was not only his interpretation of Islamic courtyard housing, but also a base for future vertical development of the neighbourhood. In comparison with the original development, we recognise the drastic change in built form, character and atmosphere, and understood that we are witnessing a typological shift of a neighbourhood transforming from Padovan’s introverted “courtyard” to extroverted “pavilion”¹. The complexity of this transformation motivated us to look into the rationality behind the change. In overcoming the limitation of my short stay in the city, we decided to carry out in depth plan analysis of one single housing unit in the New Medina in closely studying the transformation of architectural mechanism. During our research we have carried out various exercises, enabling us to research through different angles and achieving multilayer understanding of the unit.

As an abstraction of the research, we concluded that the transformation is actually directly affected by the attitude towards the collective memory, which can also be seen as “the commons” in response to the year theme of the Methods and Analysis chair. Through the use of architectural mechanism and treatment to the collective (sacred), individual (profane), and buffer spaces, one could manipulate and control the relationship (threshold) between different territories and collective memories. Specifically in the case of our chosen target, we identified the preservation and enhancement of the collective memory through the transformation. However, in other scenarios where attitude towards the memory was changed, the inherited structure could also face complete destruction, resulting in “memory loss”.

Based on the abstraction, we developed two different points where the agency of architect comes to play, from which I have chosen the latter to further develop my individual project upon:

1. Positioning him/herself in the beginning of the timeline and create a frame work that could accommodate many different memories, in avoiding complete destruction and achieving long lifespan of a building. (E.g. designing a ruin)
2. Dealing with the relation between two specific memories (rituals/settings) and territories of a specific moment in the timeline.

¹ Padovan, Richard. *Towards Universality: Le Corbusier, Mies and De Stijl* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), Chapter 4

II. Bousbir Quartier Réservé: Architectural Archaeology and Literary Fiction

(P1- P2, individual research)

I came across the colonial red light district of Bousbir through literary research on Casablanca. The district was opened in 1924 and closed in 1955, it was a highly regulated and isolated, walled-off district that came into existence as a rational and modern solution to the problem of colonial prostitution², and satisfying sexual needs of European men. Bousbir was a sex resort and a dreamy, mysterious and picturesque oriental theme park for Western men, where they could freely engage in buying sex along with all the other entertainment the district had in store, yet at the same time, it was a prison for the workers within. The district is now a normal residential neighbourhood with little trace of its past.

Despite the fact that it no longer operates as a red light district, the position I have adopted in the previous phase of my research allows me to work with specific situations at selected time, which lead me to choosing Bousbir (during its most vibrant years) as my target research field and the site of my project, in which I looked to further explore and test the notion extracted from previous investigation.

Conventional investigation on Bousbir was difficult due to the limited existing studies on the district, and it being an ugly past the Moroccan government is intentionally trying to erase. Therefore, in order to achieve a dynamic and multi-layered “architectural archaeology research” of Bousbir, I had to compose a way of research where I utilised multiple different tools and methods in order to further dissect its architecture, social structure and phenomenon. In addition to case studies, analysis of old photographs, and relevant literature and theories, the main methods I used was to analyse Bousbir through the lens of selected literary fiction:

1. (social order) The highly hierarchical social structure, especially the objectified and uniformed sex workers, and the prison quality of the Bousbir could be re-imagined as the religious dystopia in ***The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood***. The Handmaids have little to none freedom, always dressed in uniforms, were not allowed to have names, and their sexuality does not belong to them. Everything were altered in order to prevent them from escaping both physically away from the society, but also from escaping life.
2. (architecture, experience) The blurry boundary between reality and fiction the Bousbir creates, and the experience (visual, sexual, etc.) in Bousbir from a visitor's perspective could be related to the state of delirious ecstasy reached by drug use. From his depiction of the “Interzone”- an extremely bizarre, distorted reality- in the ***Naked Lunch by William S. Burroughs***, we can experience such delirious experience from using external substances.
3. (motivation) The addiction or the purpose of the quest of such an experience, could be understood as a spiritual quest. In ***Jack Kerouac's The Dharma Bums***, we can see the search of spiritual illumination through drug and sex.

2 Staszak, Jean-Francoise. “Planning Prostitution in Colonial Morocco: Bousbir, the Quartier Réservé of Casablanca.” In *(Sub)Urban Sexscapes: Geographies and Regulations of the “Sex Industry”* (London: Routledge, 2014)

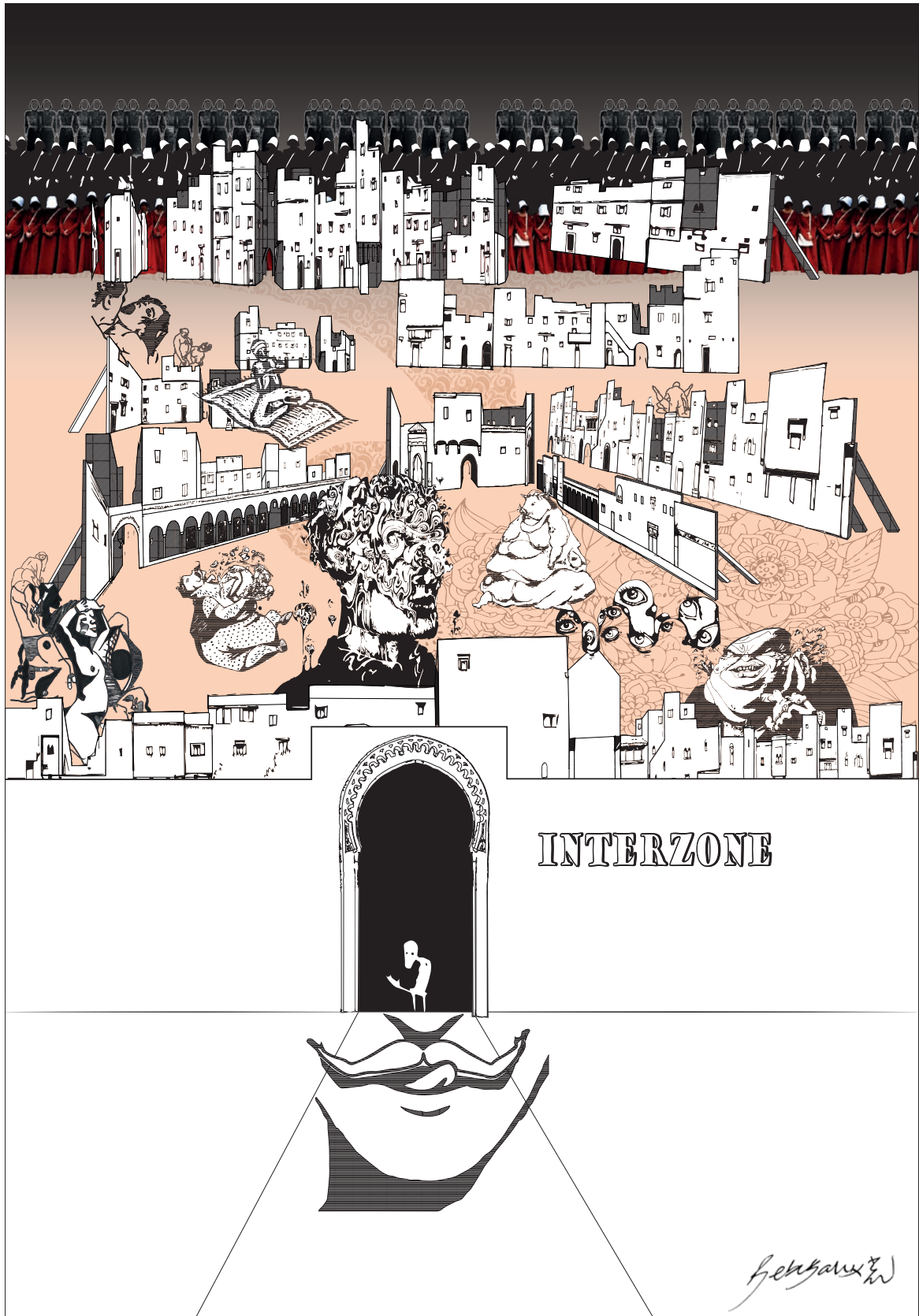
Through the exacerbation of existing scenario through literary fiction, I was able to develop my own theory on the district from which I identified aspects on which I further focused and critiqued:

1. The notion of a **Potemkin city** vividly reveals the distorted nature of Bousbir and how it reflects in its architecture.
2. The two readings of **Religion** allows analysis on the two main social groups: the sex workers (Religare³) and the Western patrons (Relegere⁴).

This phase of the investigation was extremely fruitful. The choice of site and situation allows me to use Casablanca as a testing medium without having to be accurate or responsible for the context of Casablanca. The outcome of the depth of the research far exceeded my expectation and I have explored many new research methods in overcoming the limitations I had against me.

3 Re-linking. To reconnect oneself something bigger than yourself. (sex workers: a sense of identity and dignity)

4 Re-reading. To reread the world through a doctrine. (Western patron rereading their reality through this filter of eroticised oriental filter and sex.)



*"I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, **no shadow unless there is also light.**"*

— Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

*"... Or I would help Rita to make the bread, sinking my hands into that soft resistant warmth which is so much like flesh. **I hunger to touch something, other than cloth or wood. I hunger to commit the act of touch.** But even if I were to ask, even if I were to violate decorum to that extent, Rita would not allow it. She would be too afraid..."*

— Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

III. Intervention: Threshold of Evanescence- Light, Wall, and Opening

[Tools]

(P2-P3, Individual Research)

Despite the fruitful research on the nature of Bousbir, I experienced difficulty in translating my findings into a concrete architectural intervention. I found myself critiquing the social structure and injustice, yet struggle to distill down to certain tangible architectural strategy or elements that I could test on. I therefore challenged myself to once again define the position of an architect. Asking myself this question was an important turning point for me- I realised that based on the power of architects alone, despite all my good intentions and ambition of saving the women, I could never single-handedly subvert the social order.

Upon this realisation, I revisited the notions I have developed in the previous phase of my research, and developed tools with which I could respond to the situation of Bousbir through architecture:

1. **Light.** Upon reflecting on the complex reality of Bousbir, I realised that in such a perpetual prison/ dystopia, what I could introduce to the place is a sense of “temporality”. Light is a common resource that is abundant, present, and cannot be stripped away from the women as their other possessions and freedom. The ever changing quality of light in architecture could be captured, manipulated and revealed in transmitting a sense of evanescence, of transience, of change.
2. **Wall.** In this Potemkin city, I understood the role of wall as merely a façade or a theatre set, surfaces that dress and mask or make unnoticed the darkness behind. I have therefore decided to critique on the role of wall as an architectural element that delineate spaces and reveals light. In other word, a wall not only separate spaces or control movement, but reveals light differently through form, materiality and placement, making it integral to the overall architectural experience.
3. **Opening.** When looking through an opening, one develops personal relationship with the object/ view he connects with visually. Tadao Ando made an example of how one tree could belong to many people looking out from different windows at the same time. I identify this as a tool that could subtly provide a sense of individuality in a collective setting. Therefore, in this wall, aside from the possibility of revealing lights and achieving certain atmosphere, I am going to allow some very controlled openings where multiple perspectives converge in a frame.

The understanding of my position as an architect allows the identification of these tools. The process is something that I have held most valuable throughout the whole project.

[Site]

(P2-P3, Individual Research)

In terms of where the intervention is to take place, I studied Bousbir in its social context as well as urban morphology, and decided on 2 buildings and one gate on the route which all women pass routinely from the walled off district to the dispensary (outside of the wall, but directly adjacent to the district) for mandatory weekly health check and STD control. The buildings where the intervention take place, then, become the threshold between two realities- Bousbir and outside (dispensary).

[Materialisation]

(P2-On going, Individual Research)

I am allowed considerably great freedom when it comes to the design process since there is little documentation on how the buildings' original states were. Therefore besides the shell and some indication on level changes and some public functions, it is pretty much a blank canvas. This has been both a blessing and a challenge for on one hand I am allowed great freedom, and on the other, I have to really closely evaluate the choreography of spaces and the logics behind.

Throughout the design process, I discovered the constant shift in tension between walls and light as one moves through different spaces in the building. I first started reading spaces with different light-wall relation in categories such as: "absence of light and wall" (outdoor, uncontrolled/ uncontained light and space), "abstraction of wall" (strong sculptural lights that move across the wall, "abstraction of light". Through further analysis of the different category of spaces and their mechanisms, I developed 4 main types of wall-light systems on both theoretical and technical levels within the project as design tools.

Type 1:

"Abstraction of walls"- When strong direct light is given shape and revealed by wall. In this system, walls are abstracted on the material level as the light plays a sculptural role. The sculptural form of the wall plays important part on how the light performs. Examples in the design that belong to this system are half circular in-situ concrete wall where the skylight runs across it throughout the day, and the glass cylinder wrapped in translucent curtains.

Type 2:

"Abstraction of light"- When walls are revealed by light, emergence of materiality. In this system, softer, diffused, indirect light hit the walls, revealing in more detail the materiality of the walls. Depending on the specific space, the cladding (material) of the wall varies. The form of the wall also depends on how the material wish to be revealed. Some examples being the slightly curved aluminium cladded wall taking in light from adjacent space, and water wall feature that shimmers in a dark room when light comes in from an opening to a bright space.

Type 3:

"Abstraction of wall and light"- This is when wall and indirect light work together in creating

an optical illusion of another dimension. The walls in this case are of highly reflective materials, and the construction of the wall is hollow, denying access to the solid beneath. The walls are flat, relatively small, and light weight.

Type 4:

Functional walls. Generally load bearing elements that simply plays the role of supporting the structure and delineating necessary spaces.

With these design tools, I look to further strengthen my project on both theoretical and technical levels, as well as help me clearly indicate and control the design of this threshold and the experience within.

As a reflection up to this stage, the process of this project has been very unpredictable yet extremely fruitful. I discovered certain strengths of mine that I didn't know I have, developed a few experimental research methods such as using literary fiction and illustration, which turned out surprisingly helpful in the development of the project. From studying how the transformation of threshold in the Ecochard 8x8 grid leads to typological shift in response to the changing attitude towards collective memories, to proposing a threshold that reveals layers upon layers of the simple common resource-light, in reconnecting memories of temporality and individuality in this bizarre reality, I have discovered various architectural strategies, challenged my position as an architect, gained technical knowledge, and was able to explore my personal fascination.

I enjoy how every phase of the research process somehow subtly suggests and supports the next, as the project slowly comes full circle. Finally, one of my most valuable gains of the project is the understanding of the fact that this project is not to be taken as a solution, but a revelatory intervention in response to the problems identified. I hope to reach illumination in terms of what architecture and the role of an architect could contribute/achieve in facing specific social questions through this project.

At the corner is the store known as Soul Scrolls. It's a franchise: there are Soul Scrolls in every city centre, in every suburb, or so they say. It must make a lot of profit. The window of Soul Scrolls is shatterproof. Behind it are print-out machines, row on row of them; these machines are known as the Holly Rollers, but only among us, it's a disrespectful nickname. What the machines print is prayers, roll upon roll, prayers going out endlessly... Ordering prayers from Soul Scrolls is supposed to be a sign of piety and faithfulness to the regime... There are five different prayers: for health, wealth, a death, a birth, a sin... The machines talk as they print out the prayers; if you like, you can go inside and listen to them, the toneless metallic voices repeating the same thing over and over. Once the prayers have been printed out and said, the paper rolls back through another slot and is recycled into fresh paper again...

*Ofglen and I stand outside Soul Scrolls, **looking through the shatterproof windows**, watching the prayers well out from the machines and disappear again through the slot, back to the realm of the unsaid. **Now I shift my gaze. What I see is not the machines, but Ofglen... We can see into each other's eyes...***

At last Ofglen speaks. "Do you think God listens," she says, "to these prayers?"

In the past this would have been a trivial enough remark, a kind of scholarly speculation. Right now it's treason. I could scream. I could run away. I could turn from her silently, to show her I won't tolerate this kind of talk in my presence. Subversion, sedition, blasphemy, heresy, all rolled into one.

*I steel myself. **"No," I say.***

— Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

IV. To be Naked: Analysis of the Intervention

(Post P4, Individual Research)

[Religion]

The Bousbir now consists of two thresholds linking the two realities, which correspond to the two readings of Religion previously developed:

1. **Re-reading (Relegere):** The first one is that of the main touristic route from the main gate through the market areas, the cafes, shops and big squares. The sceneries were designed in responding to the imaginative geography of Morocco, and the programs (also a part of the scenes) designed to strip the western patrons of guilt as they walk through this threshold between outside and Bousbir.
2. **Re-linking (Religare):** The second threshold, **Threshold of Evanescence**, is the route between the medical dispensary (situated outside of the blind wall) and the Bousbir district. The intervention converted the route the women of Bousbir take on regular basis for STD check-up to a threshold through which one connect with the sense of individuality and find solace.

[Dressing and Undressing]

The first threshold was designed in order to construct a filter through which visitors could re-read the reality, and the main strategy of achieving this in multiple layers is the act of “dressing”. On the contrary, the second threshold can be understood as an act of “undressing”.

The act of dressing and undressing can be understood through the initial morphotypological research of the Ecochard grid housing units. In the Ecochard grid, we saw that the original state was being “cladded” in many layers of different architectural responses, and in order to understand the logic behind, we carried out a series of investigation “unveiling” the layers and found the core value that influenced the transformation of the housing complex - the collective memory of gathering. It was through this act of undressing the dressed that we could connect the Ecochard grid complex of the now with the “soul” of the Ecochard grid and the people living in it. In other words, it was not until we stripped the Ecochard grid naked, that we understood its honest self.

[To be Naked]

I understood the act of undressing, of becoming naked, as a necessary step towards truly coming face to face with the true and honest self of things. Nakedness, however, does not literally mean a completely bare, rough infrastructure. In the **Threshold of Evanescence**, this nakedness of architecture is reached through specific configuration of elements that allows the essence (soul) of resources, material, and form to be revealed in multitude of layers and not be masked and lose their entity in the complexity.

When the filter of Bousbir constructed to enable the re-reading of reality disintegrates, the re-linking of this distant memory of temporality and individuality is made possible. The naked architecture allows one to be in contact of, become aware of the soul of each element (in the case of the **Threshold of Evanescence**: light and walls), and the overall configuration of the nakedness also “undresses” the visitors, where they become conscious and aware of their “self” as they become naked. The enlightenment of Religare (re-linking) for the women, is in the process of coming face to face to the nakedness of self and the nakedness of their reality.

V. Me as her

This thesis project, **Threshold of Evanescence**, is an architectural representation, as well as further exploration, of my own journey. I learnt that to be honest with myself, I first have to learn to be naked. The process of stripping myself of some deeply planted ideas and filters was a very difficult yet significant experience, and it was not until I started doing so, looking at the world through naked eyes, and feeling vulnerable of my naked self, that I reached true understanding of and connect with God, and above all, with myself.

*I am a handmaid, and the Threshold that piece of
shatterproof glass of the Soul Scrolls.*

*I am a handmaid, and Bousbir the gloves I am
obliged to wear at all time.*

*I am a handmaid, I walk through the Threshold. I see
myself reflected in the glass, I take off my gloves, I
can finally touch, and I can finally feel.*

— Rebekah Tien

