

Restructuring the Identity of New York City One Culture at a Time: The Moroccans

NINA COOKE JOHN
Syracuse University

THE IDENTITY OF THE CITY

Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past Stuart Hall¹

According to the 2000 census the white non-Hispanic population of New York City has decreased from 43% in 1990 to 35% in 2000. These figures do not include undocumented aliens living in the five boroughs. Perhaps Muschamp is implying that architects are finally ready to begin the long process towards incorporating the diverse cultural history of New York City in planning the urban landscape. Perhaps they are ready to lay to rest the homogenous identity of the ideal city that has, to date, preserved an image of permanence grounded in the conception of a single linear history. Perhaps they are finally coming to terms with the ideas that, "the past [with a capital P] will at some point become too 'small' to be inhabited and shared by those alive"² and that "the world in which we now live [involves] a general break with all sorts of pasts"³. The past that edited the history of the city, focusing on the 'great works of architecture' while ignoring those who helped to build and shape the entire landscape and who continue to make it their own. Perhaps they now realize that the timeline of the modern experience is different for different groups of people. And that this needs to be recognized through its representation in the built environment.

*Human memory may well be an anthropological given, but closely tied as it is to the ways a culture constructs and lives its temporality, the forms memory will take are invariably contingent and subject to change. Memory and representation, then, figure as key concerns at this fin de siècle when the twilight settles around the memories of this century and their carriers. . . .*⁴

In addressing this problem of representation, the solution lies not in creating new monuments for those who historically have been excluded, but in recognizing the complexity of the make up of the city by understanding the history of the city as constantly evolving as it incorporates histories from around the world. It is no longer just about producing monuments for African Americans in a white dominated country, for example, but about acknowledging the changing face of America, coming to terms with the idea that "[n]o existing conception of Americanness can contain this large variety of transnations."⁵

The new New Yorkers have been claiming communities for themselves in the five boroughs for some time now. To represent their presence we must begin by critically analyzing the ways in which these new cultures carve out spaces of their own in their new host city as they struggle to figure out their new role in this society. They inevitably leave inscriptions on the built environment they occupy, as they attempt to remake their physical neighborhoods into a place that supports their traditions. These tactics of appropriation used in the processes of re-habitation of immigrants in New York can be found through a process of investigative uncovering. These stealthy tactics that insinuate themselves into the dominant orders that govern the city might be brought to light through the critical analysis of their everyday lives. If the new city is to be understood as being made up, and hence formed, more and more by immigrants, this immigrant population will provide the clues to the process of transforming the old image of the city to incorporate its new identity.

*[C]ities have grown through a process of consolidation. . . . That is why archaeology is a profession of digging: it exposes layer after layer of civilization (i.e. city). . . . The archaeologue (=archaeology with more interpretation) of the 20th century needs **unlimited plane tickets, not a shovel.**"⁶*

Koolhaas' reference to "unlimited plane tickets" in understanding the 'archaeologue' of the city is particularly pertinent to New York City having the most diverse population in the country within its five boroughs. The immigrant condition is particularly interesting in studying how new citizens who have long and sustained traditions developed in a different environment navigate new landscapes. These same immigrants have counterparts back in their homelands who face foreign environments in the post-colonial landscape of their own country. Whether in New Delhi, Lagos or Marrakesh, indigenous peoples continue to navigate the 'new cities' of European educated urban visionaries who have imported an ideal that was assumed to be universal.

THE CASE OF THE MOROCCANS

Using the case of the Moroccans, I will explore the place-making techniques, as an evolving process, and the resulting hybrid conditions as applied to the different urban conditions encountered in their native country. I will use this as a basis to speculate on how these same quotidian processes may be applied to this group as they encounter the urban conditions of New York City. Bernard Tschumi experimented with his students in London in trying to play out architecturally some of the Situationist ideas of incidents by taking over buildings in London and staging certain spectacles within them. He hoped, through encounters with these new juxtapositions of space and events, to change the relationship between the individual and society by generating a new lifestyle⁷. I, however, propose investigating an existing and sustained lifestyle rooted in long traditions once inserted in the spaces of new host societies. Herein lies the transformative potential. It is at these moments, these places in their everyday lives, that the citizens, whether in Marrakesh or in New York, begin to have control of their new environment at the local level. It is here that they can begin to resist the centralization of the same culture industry that Muschamp refers to. It is as the other that they can subvert the dominant orders that would otherwise tend towards the homogenizing of cultural standards. It is through this process that urban visionaries may truly begin to understand the new urban environment in the increasingly globalized world.

*The diasporic public spheres that such encounters create are no longer small, marginal, or exceptional. They are part of the cultural dynamic of urban life in most countries and continents, in which migration and mass mediation coconstitute a new sense of the global as modern and the modern as global. . . . globalization its itself deeply historical, uneven, and even localizing process. Globalization does not necessarily or even frequently imply homogenization or Americanization. . . . different societies appropriate the materials of modernity. . . .*⁸

The exchange of information back and forth between home and abroad, along with the subjective consumption of the products

of globalization, produce what Arjun Appadurai, in his book *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, calls "vernacular globalization"⁹. This is the place of the subversion of tendencies towards the generic both in their countries of origin and in western metropolises to which they migrate. This is where a snowboard hanging in the desert tent of a Tuareg who uses it on the sand dunes of the Sahara gives competition to the image of "eating oysters with boxing gloves, naked on the nth floor."¹⁰ Instead of being homogenized by the differing media – the media is appropriated, whether broadcast media or built media. This was never clearer to me than while I sat on an heirloom carpet eating breakfast on the concrete floor of a traditionally mud packed kasbah in an oasis of the Sahara desert. I watched early morning MTV with the older children as the younger ones headed off to school wearing their Power Puff Girls backpacks; the older girls preparing the house dressed in traditional tribal wear. Here we must acknowledge the subjectivity of the consumer, as products are used outside of the context that they were initially designed for. All this considered, globalization can be understood as a multi-layered migration of both media and people. "Persons and images meet unpredictably outside of the certainties of home"¹¹ producing a *bricolage* of histories and stories from home and of America through immigrants and media.

In developing nations, the phenomena of post-colonialism and globalization, in the forms of modern urban planning and state sponsored tourism, among others, impose their own dominating order. In the cities of Morocco one such order materializes itself in the form of the French-built *nouvelles villes* outside of the traditional *medinas*¹² of the city. The French developed new areas in the cities specifically for European settlement in the new colony. Indigenous Moroccans were restricted to the limits of the existing *medinas* whose expansion was limited by the development of the *nouvelles villes* usually encircling the original city. Though the French respect for the existing layout and architecture of the *medinas* promoted its preservation, the exoticized understanding of the architecture as a static image of a culture, didn't allow that architectural tradition to evolve along its own trajectory¹³. The locals got increased access to the *nouvelles villes* only after independence once much of the European population had left the country. These 'new cities' acted as the testing ground for modern urban planning ideals. Colonial cities were considered "'de-tribalized communities par excellence"¹⁴. The grand boulevards and constantly re-aligning symmetries, as opposed to the strictly local symmetries of the otherwise asymmetrical network of spaces in Moroccan layouts, reinforced France's colonial dominance. The resulting 'new cities' are a product of modern colonialism; built media selectively consumed by local Moroccans today. The local influences of the physical construct of their cities and the global influences as filtered through its migrant diasporas are the current dominant influences that are appropriated by the Moroccan people in their own country as they navigate



Fig. 1. Modern Household in Bhalil.

the cities and attempt to preserve their cultural traditions and communities.

In developing nations where the poor make up a large majority the engagement with the modern is a recent, and unevenly experienced, phenomenon. In a house that I visited in Bhalil, a small hillside town outside of Fez, the woman of the household lived with her granddaughter in the same house she grew up in built by her grandfather. The close-knit nature of the Moroccan extended family, several generations living together, sustains traditional practices and beliefs; adaptation to the changing needs of day-to-day life allows it to flourish. The result is the formation of hybrids during the production of these local spaces of the societies in a tradition of place-making as influenced by the global. In this particular household in Bhalil, the phenomenon is evidenced in the bricolage of the television and dangling light bulb set against the cave wall (fig. 1). These localities¹⁵ can be seen in differing forms in Marrakesh or Fez. It manifests itself in the minor details of placing tile work and vases on the stairs of the modern housing developments of Fez, or putting traditional fabric on the dashboard of a taxi in Marrakesh (fig. 2).

This is where people begin to leave their stamp on the imposed order, in an attempt to maintain their traditions. They are produced through a transformation of the existing order, through manipulations of the basic elements of the constructed order according to the traditional means of space production. These localities are not static, they need to be constantly maintained as the societies progress and their traditions evolve. The concept of locality needs to be understood as a diachronic phenomenon that can be adapted to any physical environment, or layered onto whatever histories are encountered.

The history of the Moroccan people, as well as, the history of Islam, set up an inherent flexibility in the resulting culture

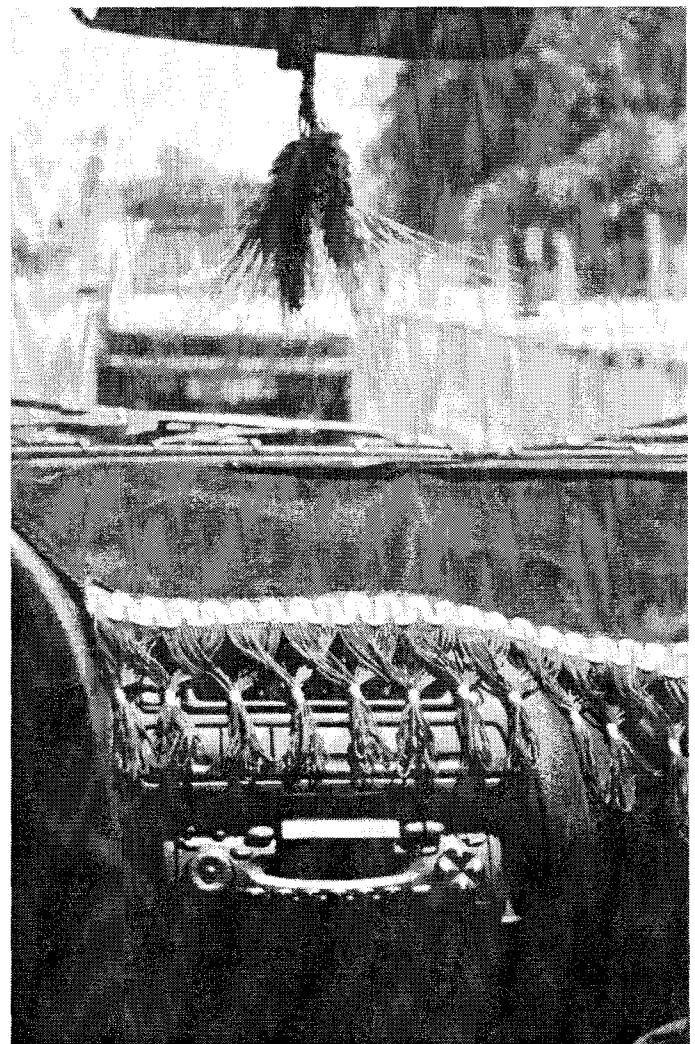


Fig. 2. Dashboard of a taxi in Marrakesh.

allowing for a relative ease in the adaptation of differing conditions, whether social or physical. This flexibility is necessary for adapting to new built conditions, and an important factor in the production of locality. Both the Arabs and Berbers are historically nomadic peoples. They carried their traditions with them wherever they went and were faced with the task of transforming the landscapes they encountered each time they set up in a particular location. The Tuareg of the desert, still today, lay down rugs on the sand of the desert in an act of colonizing the area, no matter how briefly (though they now also use the same plastic chairs that can be seen in many backyards of American suburbs) (fig. 3). Until French colonization, there was no one capital city, the king moved between imperial cities regularly. Along the road of the initial expansion of Islam, the acts of colonization resulted in new cities and great mosques created to secure the new Islamic state and Islam as a way of life.

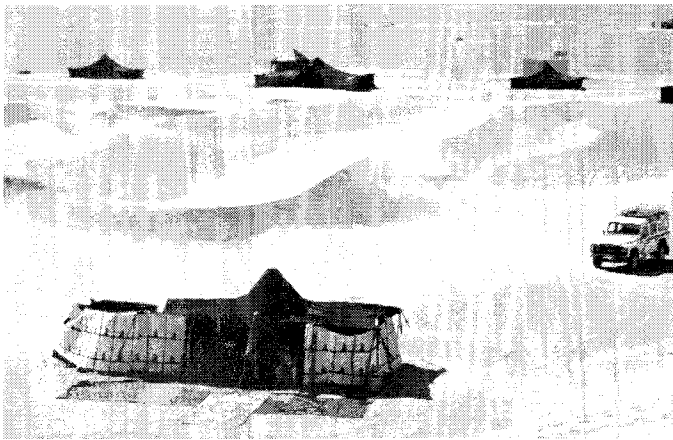


Fig. 3. Tuareg tent in the Sahara Desert.

*'Islamic' unlike 'Christian', refers not only to a faith but also to a whole culture, since – at least in theory – the separation of the realm of Caesar from that of God is not applicable to Islam. Also unlike Christianity, Islam did not develop first as the faith of a few, increasing the numbers of its adherents under the shadow of a huge state alien to it, slowly developing the intellectual and artistic features which were going to characterize it, and, after several centuries, blossoming into an empire and giving birth to an art as well as a philosophy and social doctrine. Rather, these developments were telescoped into a few decades of the seventh and eighth centuries A.D. . . . Islamic art came forth as suddenly as the faith and the state . . . [Islamic monuments] were built for Muslims, to serve purposes which did not exist in quite the same way before Islam.*¹⁶

In the newly created and renovated cities that grew out of the initial expansion, fresh interpretations and new experiences coexisted with old traditions and ancient styles. In Morocco, the style had to incorporate traditions from both Europe and Africa. The influence of the southern Moroccan city of Marrakesh, once the center of the Almoravid Berber Empire, extended into Sub-Saharan Africa and dominated much of Spain. The

Moroccans appropriate Islam itself, as it is overlaid with the local Berber religion of maraboutism¹⁷, resulting in the occasional appearance of white painted tombs within the dense urban fabric of the imperial cities (fig. 4).

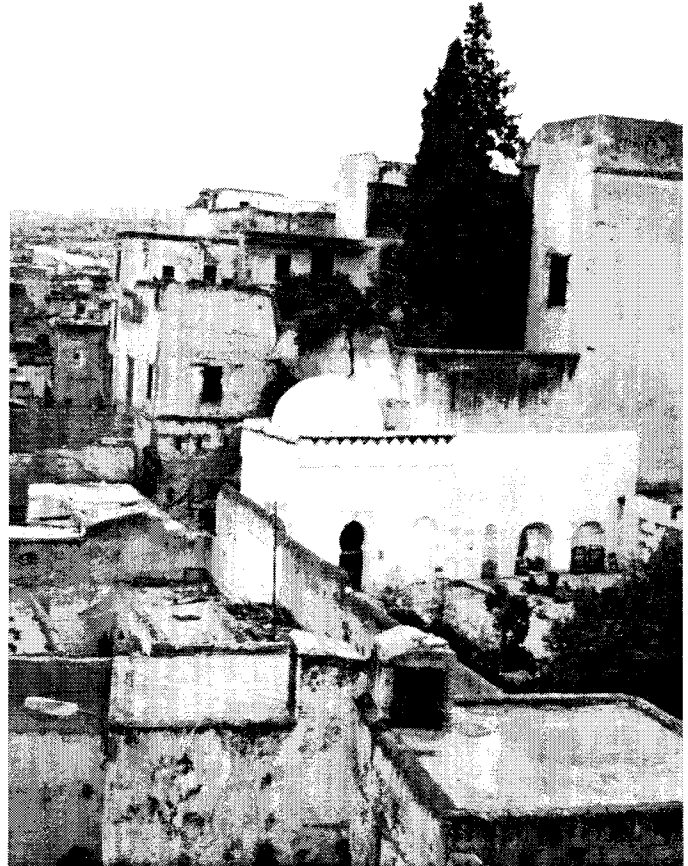


Fig. 4. Marabout tomb in Fez.

This flexibility, needed for the overlay of new and old traditions, is evident in both the religious and secular architecture¹⁸. The *kasbahs* of the desert, a pre-Islamic architectural form, are also inherently flexible for adaptation to extensions of family. The traditionally mud-packed walls of the *kasbah* are now often combined with concrete block construction.

The hot and arid climate of the region, the cultural tradition of maintaining an inwardly focused home life distinct from the public life of the community and the nomadic history are the primary influences on the non-monumental buildings of Morocco, namely dwellings. In keeping with Islamic tradition, little or no adornment exists on the exterior façade of the urban townhouse of the *medina*; occasional elaborate decoration of the entrance door provides the only glimpse of what lies beyond the threshold of the private and public worlds. Doorways on any

given street in the medina would never line up, preventing glimpses from one household into another. The interior of the home, the private realm into which one who is considered a friend is welcomed, is reserved for the intricate tile work, detailed carvings and vivid tapestry.

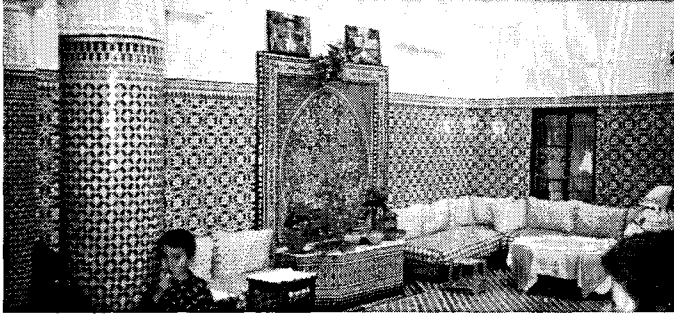


Fig. 5. Interior looking at courtyard in townhouse in the medina of Fez.

It opens up onto a cool internal courtyard where outdoor activities can be performed without sacrificing the privacy that is so important to their culture (fig. 5). The rooms within are used interchangeably for different purposes. There is no distinguishing between a bedroom and living room, a kitchen and a dining room: rugs are often used instead of furniture for their ease of transition similar to how they are used in Berber tents. Even when modern furniture is used, it is usually overlaid with several layers of rugs. Rugs can often be seen on all surfaces, giving them a strong transformative ability. Extended family usually live together and families entertain other visitors within their homes for several days at a time, emphasizing the importance of communal spaces and flexibility. Looking at another housing form, going back to the Berber town of Bhalil, the townhouses look much like the other recently built townhouses in other cities, but many are actually built around caves on the interior. There are no clues given on its exterior of the nature of the interior. The entry and kitchen on the ground level transition into colorfully painted cave walls inside. Most striking is the continuous bed/sofa furniture all throughout the house allowing for the flexibility of use discussed above. Piles of colorful rugs wait to assist in the transformation of the rooms, (figs. 1,6,7 and 8).

The housing developed in the *nouvelles villes* don't reflect the cultural needs of the Moroccans: zoning ordinances specifically required limits to heights of walls in these areas resulting in visibility of the interior of the compound from the street, something that would never happen in traditionally built Moroccan homes. They don't reflect the importance of communal spaces as they accommodate the extended family and other visitors. These are some of the same issues of habitation that Moroccans face as immigrants to New York as they try to fit their lifestyles into the housing types of the city.

The [Arab] immigrants I met felt their values to be threatened in other ways as well. Living in much smaller apartments than



Fig. 6. Bhalil townhouses. Exterior view.



Fig. 7. Living room of household in Bhalil.

those they had back home, for example, made it hard or impossible for them to host another family for an afternoon – let alone for several weeks, as was the custom in their old countries.¹⁹



Fig. 8. Bedroom of household in Bhalil.

They will have to transform these apartments of New York City, built on traditions foreign to their own, much as they have done in the *nouvelles villes*, to allow for the hosting of family and friends. Perhaps they will install partitions beyond their entrance hallways and cover windows with tapestry to maintain privacy. Perhaps they will transform sofas into sleepers and sleepers into sofas through the use of many layers of rugs to allow for a more flexible layout of spaces as is currently done in Morocco. The production of locality goes beyond the private realm of the home into the public sphere. Atlantic Avenue along the southern edge of Brooklyn Heights, clearly demonstrates a strong North African presence embodied in the hallal shops, Arabic bookstores, traditional clothing stores and mosques in the area. These all make up a larger system of a clearly defined neighborhood within the existing fabric of that area of Brooklyn.

CONCLUSION

The drinking of mint tea is very important to the Moroccan people. New friends are often invited to share in this ritual in homes in the cities and in tents in the desert. It extends into the public realm of the city where men drink tea with friends in teashops and vendors reserve a space for this function in the rear of their stalls in the dense fabric of the *souks*. How might this ritual, with all its spatial implications, be reconstituted in the new environment of the Moroccans in New York City? Where do they pour and drink tea with their friends in their homes and throughout the city? Do they lay down rugs in the back of their shops to accommodate this needed space? Does this ritual, once an everyday feature of their lives, become

imbibed with new symbolism once transplanted to a new setting? The sudden confrontation with a consciousness of themselves as 'other' is a common immigrant condition. In an attempt to redefine themselves in their host societies, immigrants often reconstruct their self-image from images excerpted from home²⁰. It is not a far stretch to see the built environment as another form of media to be transformed by immigrants by the overlaying of the symbols of their new *bricolage*-d American selves. What are the material consequences to the urban fabric of the city? Is it that doors will become painted blue in those neighborhoods of New York that now house Moroccans from Chifchaoun²¹? Perhaps. But its implications go far beyond just visual representation, for as design professionals we must recognize and allow for the transformation of any new urban infrastructure. The physical residue of globalization, the hybrids produced, expands the realm of possibilities for architecture and urbanism that Koolhaas talks about. Destabilizing and redefining the way architecture is produced and what it produces and potentially enriching architectural imagination²². The key to reaching some level of inclusion in the contested terrain of the city lies in a deliberate analysis of the daily lives and everyday traditions of its inhabitants. Many oceans will have to be crossed to do so comprehensively. The result will not be many Westin Hotels popping up as cartoons of different cultures living in New York City, but more anonymous urban strategies that address the city as a complex and temporal phenomenon.

NOTES

- ¹ Muschamp, Herbert, "A Latin Jolt to the Skyline", *New York Times*, October 20, 2002, pp1 an 37
- ² Acknowledging the bipolar cultural appropriations between Europe and its neighbors (and its non-neighbors in the case of Marco Polo and Asia).
- ³ From Huyssen, Andreas, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 1
- ⁴ Koolhaas, Rem, "Generic City", Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL*, (New York: Monacelli Press, c1995), p. 1248
- ⁵ Appadurai, Arjun, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 3
- ⁶ Huyssen, p.2
- ⁷ Appadurai, p. 172
- ⁸ Koolhaas, Rem, "Generic City", Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL*, (New York: Monacelli Press, c1995) p. 1263. My emphasis.
- ⁹ Tschumi, Bernard, "De-, Dis-, Ex-". *Architecture and Disjunction*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996)
- ¹⁰ Appadurai, pp. 10 and 17. Original emphasis.
- ¹¹ Appadurai, p. 10
- ¹² Koolhaas, Rem, *Delirious New York*, (New York: Monacelli Press, 1994), p. 155
- ¹³ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996)
- ¹⁴ The *medinas* are the historic center city as built before the French built the *nouvelles villes* on the periphery of the *medinas* maintaining them, but encircling them. The name is derived from Medina in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Muhammed.

¹⁵ For more on French colonial urban planning and policies in Morocco see Wright, Gwendolyn, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991)

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 303

¹⁷ To borrow the term from Appadurai, locality is understood as a phenomenon of place-making.

¹⁸ Ettinghausen, Richard and Oleg Grabar. *The Art and Architecture of Islam: 650-1250*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 17.

¹⁹ The marabout is a shrine to holy men, also called marabouts, and is the site of a yearly pilgrimage.

²⁰ Stan Allen looks at the Great Mosque in Cordoba, Spain in his description of a 'field condition' looking particularly at the varying phases of expansion, and how the open mode of organization inherent in the building allowed for the flexibility of transformation with each new addition, while still maintaining its character. He contrasts it to St. Peter's in Rome, whose additions always tended toward compositional closure. In "Field Conditions" from Allen, Stan,

Points + Lines, Diagrams and Projects for the City. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), pp. 93-94

²¹ Hajar, Paula, "From 'Ready-Made Yankees' to Arab Americans." *Culturefront Online* (<http://www.culturefront.org/culturefront/magazine/99/summer/article.6.html>)

²² The second generation Jamaican youth in London in the 70's looked toward image of the Rastafari, choosing certain aspects of the powerful images to adopt in speech and in dress, concretizing a relationship with an Africa that they never knew through a Jamaica that they had only heard of. See Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1979)

²³ The homes in this northern Moroccan town are whitewashed and all doors are painted an ocean blue.

²⁴ Koolhaas, Rem, "Generic City". Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau. *S.M.L.L.XL*. (New York: Monacelli Press, c1995)