Figure 1: A sketch of Écochard's grid.

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Critical Appropriations of Modernity: Michel Écochard's 8 by 8 Meter Housing Grid, Hay Mohammadi, Casablanca

Abstract   Using an object ethnography approach, in this chapter I focus on an emblematic colonial planning and housing instrument designed by the head of the urban planning service in 1950s Morocco. Combining attention to historical and transnational dimensions with the ethos of ethnographic work, I unravel the conditions behind the grid's design, materialization, transnational circulation, and later appropriation and rich transformation in the hands of its eventual inhabitants. As such, my intention is to explore and illuminate the contributions of multiple actors and to shed light on the complicated entanglements between emblematic colonial materialities and the postcolonial lives grafted onto them.

Keywords   Appropriation, Margins, Morocco, Modernism, Object Ethnography

In the 1950s, Casablanca's *bidonvilles* (slums) became the birthplace of a new architectural wave that caught the imagination of a group of young architects coming out of the *Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne* and transformed the city's margins into a canvas for utopian fantasies that contested the conventional norms of high modernism. Built on the gaping holes of a colonial era quarry, Hay Mohammadi (formerly known as *Carrière Centrale*) played a central part in these developments, and later became known as a mythical neighborhood in the history of Morocco through its association with revolutionary colonial housing schemes and decades of post-independence political abuse and social struggle.

Home to North Africa's oldest and once largest slum, Hay Mohammadi served as a 'laboratory' for this experimentation with new urban planning and architectural forms just as anti-colonial sentiment and local labor unions were exerting increasing pressure on the French authorities (Rabinow 1989). One of several celebrated projects, the 8 by 8 meter grid designed by Michel Écochard as an urban planning concept for the re-organization of the growing *bidonvilles* was widely acclaimed at the time for the way it addressed a "problem of technique and of conscience for France" (Écochard 1950, 6). Each plot would replace the slum dwellings with a standard two-room home arranged around an open patio projected to accommodate one family.

This essay takes an object ethnography (▸**Object ethnographies**) approach in unraveling the conditions behind the grid's design, materialization, transnational circulation, and later appropriation (▸**Appropriation**) and transformation in the hands of its eventual inhabitants. As such, the intention in the brief space allowed is to explore and illuminate the contributions of multiple actors—local and transnational—and to shed light on the complicated entanglements between emblematic colonial materialities and the postcolonial lives grafted onto them (▸**Decolonizing**).

Born in France at the turn of the twentieth century, Michel Écochard (1905–1985) was a prolific architect and urban planner, practicing in places like Syria and Lebanon (1931–1944), Pakistan (1953–1954), and French West Africa (1959–1963), before and after his Moroccan post. His life and work have been the subject of several studies (see Verdeil 2012; de Mazieres 1985), the most thorough of which argues that Écochard was a representative figure of a new class of international 'urban experts' that was formed on the African continent between the 1950s and 1970s (Avermaete 2010a).

During his brief tenure in Morocco (1947–1953), Écochard experimented with a new approach to urban planning that led to the large-scale creation of new housing estates based on his standard 8 by 8 meter *trame* (grid). Elaborating on Le Corbusier's principle of "housing for the greatest number," Écochard rejected the mechanistic concept of "*machine à habiter*" and instead proposed a design for an "urban tissue" that would "invite appropriation," allow for transformations, foresee demographic growth, and evolve into a community over time (Écochard 1955b; Avermaete 2010b, 155).

Drawing on ethnological research about Moroccan settlements that had been gathered by the colonial apparatus but also from qualitative studies of the existing slums (cf. Berque 1959), Écochard advocated a solution based on 'neighborhood units,' each of which could house up to 1,800 inhabitants—a significant number for an administration that was trying to deal with a growing *bidonville* population. This was a particularly acute problem in Hay Mohammadi, whose population of 56,667 made it the densest *bidonville* in the country at the time (Écochard 1955a). Each neighborhood unit would be contained inside the housing grid composed of 8 by 8 meter plots or 'cells' (see Fig. 1), which could theoretically allow for multiple arrangements and combinations (Eleb 2000, 57). Loosely inspired in this way by the vernacular architecture of rural Moroccan homes,[1] this design can also be seen as an oblique way of helping 'mediate' the transition from a rural mode of life to an industrial urban existence, and making it easier for Moroccans to "acclimate to modernity" (cf. Cohen and Eleb 2002, 320–321).

Écochard's grid became widely celebrated at the time in international forums such as *Architecture Moderne* for the manner in which it was seen to incorporate local typologies with what were considered modern, universal standards of space, hygiene, rest, education, and work (Smithson and Smithson 1955; Cohen and Eleb 2002). Many commentators at the time hoped the concepts developed in Morocco would travel to France where they could invigorate ideas about urban life and its organization, and it could be argued that the architecture of the French *banlieues* indeed owes much to these early colonial experiments (von Osten 2010). Écochard did, in fact, export the conceptual ideas of "housing for the greatest number" and the formal design of the grid as part of later commissions for developing refugee housing in Karachi (1953) and a master plan for a 'modernized' Dakar (1963) (Avermaete 2010a).

As these later uses of the grid demonstrate, the ability of the design to articulate solutions to 'potentially volatile' populations such as slum dwellers or refugees was a central feature of its popularity. Developed at a time of growing anti-colonial unrest in Morocco, the grid and its power to order and control both space and people cannot be divorced from its local political context. Although Écochard never mentioned the political situation in his writings, he could not have been oblivious to it, and architecture historians argue that he rather saw his role as that of a humanist technocrat, paving the way for further development (Eleb 2000; Avermaete 2010b). Moroccan architect Aziza Chaouni seems to agree with this evaluation, emphasizing the fact that it was Écochard himself who pushed the colonial administration to act on the issue of housing for the local population (2011,

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1   The vernacular movement in architecture garnered international attention in 1964 with Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture without Architects,* which glorified the genius of builders who knew how to translate the "traditional" circumstances of their communities into built form. See also Sibyl Moholy-Nagy 1957, and John F. C. Turner 1977.

Figure 2: Rooftop view of the appropriated grid.

62–63). It is clear, however, that such humanist ideals existed alongside an increasing depoliticization of urban planning practices, as Écochard and his team never questioned colonialism as such, only its neglect of 'indigenous populations.'

Unanimously hailed as visionary at the time, almost seventy years later the buildings are particularly poised to illuminate questions about transculturation, as they can be seen both figuratively and literally as archives of the rich transformations and accumulations of a unique contact zone (▸**Expanded Contact Zone**). Specifically, the case of the Hay Mohammadi developments is considered to be an exceptional example of a transcultural movement in architecture, or what Tom Avermaete has termed "another modernism" (2005), that, in contrast to the universalist agenda of high modernism, took as its inspiration not only 'traditional' North African built forms but also the messy, contingent architecture of slums. The housing estates the grid gave birth to, it was hoped, could breed a new society, neither French nor African.

As the families originally re-housed in the grid dwellings grew and socio-economic conditions for the working class worsened in the years following independence, the grid began to develop vertically. The spaces above the open patios were gradually covered to allow for the building of further floors, each new level indexing a new generation in the history of the neighborhood's demographic expansion. Colorful window shutters and networks of clotheslines now animate the once sparse (see Fig. 2), blank white walls of Écochard's geometric designs. Interiors have been equally transformed in response to personal and economic necessity (see

Figure 3: Domestic interiors in the appropriated grid.

Fig. 3). Satellite dishes mushroomed on both the roofs and the buildings' façades, as the grid developed into a palimpsest and archive of the community's growth.

However, the recovery of Écochard's legacy and designs during the late twentieth century as part of emerging trans-national heritage-making discourses and practices has moved away from an appreciation of such contingencies and chosen to evade questions about the structural conditions which have led to the complete appropriation (▸**Appropriation**) and transformation of the original grid dwellings. The architectural sketch of the grid and its aura have been and continue to be powerfully deployed and celebrated by various stakeholders as emblems of Casablanca's synonymous relation to modernity, frequently juxtaposed with images of urban informality as a way of pointing towards the city's fall from modernist grace.

Such dichotomous visions often emerge in the efforts of local architectural heritage preservation associations, which describe the area as an 'open-air museum' but are less inclined to give equal weight to the lived-in grid, decrying the material appropriation and transformation of the original dwellings by an historically marginalized and impoverished community (Strava 2016). But it is ultimately by paying attention to these new articulations of everyday uses and transformations of Écochard's grid that we can access deeper understandings of the historical dynamics that continue to animate such contact zones. Current inhabitants are only too aware, and frequently proud, of their neighborhood's history and heritage, yet they must also contend with the enduring effects of structural and

political violence that continues to mark everyday lives and spaces in the area (Strava 2017). As such, these buildings challenge facile understandings of heritage (▸**Heritage**) and foreground crucial issues pertaining to which types of 'contact' and 'exchange' are considered desirable by those with the institutional power to curate such questions and inspire productive approaches towards ongoing appropriations.

Figures

Fig. 1:   Écochard, Michel, 1955b, p. 105. *Casablanca: Le Roman d'une Ville.*
Fig. 2–3:   Collaborative photo-archive generated via a photo-voice exercise with neighbourhood inhabitants, 2014.

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