

Essaouira (Morocco)

No 753rev

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The Medina of Essaouira (ancient Mogador)
<i>Location</i>	Province of Essaouira, Tensift Region
<i>State Party</i>	Kingdom of Morocco
<i>Date</i>	7 September 1995; revised text 21 July 2000

Justification by State Party

Since its foundation in the 18th century and up to the beginning of the 20th century Essaouira has played a fundamental role as an international trading port between Morocco and the rest of the world. A number of consulates and traders from different countries were established there.

Essaouira is a leading example of building inspired by European architecture. It is a town that is unique by virtue of its design: it was created in conformity with a predetermined plan (the Cornut plan). Since the beginning, the medina of Essaouira has been a major place for the peaceable coming together of the architectural and town-planning models of Europe and of Morocco itself. In this way a symbiosis was achieved between building techniques from Morocco and elsewhere which gave birth to some unique architectural masterpieces (the *Sqalas* of the port and of the medina, the Bab Marrakech bastion, the water gate, mosques, synagogues, churches, etc).

Criteria ii and iv

Category of property

In terms of the categories of property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, the town of Essaouira is a *group of buildings*.

History and Description

History

Archaeological excavations have shown that the site of Essaouira was originally a Phoenician trading settlement; they were followed by Cretans, Greeks, and Romans. The earlier name of Mogador derives from Migdol, meaning a small fort. In 1506 it was to become the site of a Portuguese fortress, but this was abandoned soon after.

The present town dates from 1765, when the Alaouite Sultan Sidi Mohamed ben Abdellah decided to build a port that would open Morocco up to the outside world and assist in developing commercial relations with Europe. He sought the help of Nicholas Théodore Cornut, a surveyor specialist in military fortifications from Avignon, who was strongly influenced by Vauban's defences at Saint-Malo. He partially dismantled the Portuguese fortress to build an esplanade with a row of cannons, known as the *Sqala*. He laid out a checkerboard plan for the town with forts of Roussillon type, in the European tradition. The entire town was enclosed by a defensive wall on the Vauban model.

During the reign of this Sultan, Mogador assumed a major commercial and fiscal role. In order to control maritime trade, he closed the southern coast to European traders, obliging the European consuls at Safi, Agadir, and Rabat to move to Mogador, where all southern mercantile activities were concentrated. The new port became one of the country's main commercial centres; it was called "the port of Timbuktu," since it was the destination of caravans bringing a variety of products (including slaves) from black Africa.

The town was made up of three separate districts. The *Kasbah* comprised the old administrative district. The *Medina* was built between the 18th century and the early 20th century. It was crossed by two main axial streets, one running from Bab Doukalla to the harbour and the other from Bab Marrakech to the sea. At their intersection, known as Souk Jdid, there were four markets, for fish, spices, grain, and general goods respectively. Each of the districts bears the name of one of the tribes that were involved in the building of the town.

The *Mellah* is the Jewish quarter; it played a very important role in the history of the town, since the Sultan made use of this community to establish relations with Europe and to organize commercial activities with them. They were given the title of Toujjar Es-Sultan (Royal Merchants), giving them considerable economic and political privileges.

Description

The main features of the town are:

- The ramparts, most of the northern section of which survives.
- The town gates, especially the ornamental Sea Gate (1170–71).
- The bastions and forts (*borjs*), especially the *Sqala* of the Port and the *Sqala* of the Medina and the Bastion of Bab Marrakech.
- The Kasbah, which was originally the seat of power and the military garrison, and now integrated into the town proper.
- The Mellah (Jewish quarter), which retains many of its original special features.
- The prison, located on the offshore island (now a refuge for rare birds, such as hawks).
- The many mosques, in a characteristic style, and especially the Mosques of the Casbah and Ben Yossef.
- The synagogues (in particular the 19th century synagogue of Simon Attias), which preserve the dynamism of the Jewish inhabitants.

- The late 18th century Portuguese church.
- The Dar-Sultan (old Royal Palace).
- The very attractive private houses.

The harbour of Essaouira is approached through a sheltered narrow channel. It is flanked by large expanses of sand dunes, beyond which lie the *argan* (*Argania spinosa*) forests unique to Morocco.

There is at present no detailed survey and inventory of the buildings in the three districts, with descriptions, plans, etc, but this is essential for future restoration and conservation projects.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The only monuments in Essaouira protected by the series of statutes and regulations, the most recent of which is Royal Decree No 22/80, which imposes controls over any work of demolition, alteration, extension, and reconstruction of listed buildings, are the fortifications, which have been legally protected since 1924 as a historic monumental ensemble.

The first urban planning legislation was enacted in 1954. In conformity with Royal Decree No 12/90, there are strict controls on development, based on individual town plans.

Management

Ownership of the elements that make up the historic town of Essaouira is divided between the State, the municipality, the Habous, the Alliance Israélite, cooperatives, and private individuals.

The 1988 urban plan No 4001 provides for a zone round the historic town within which no construction is permitted. Conscious of the threats to the cultural heritage of Essaouira, the provincial and municipal authorities have since 1996 been carrying out a number of studies, some with the support of international bodies (UNESCO, UNICEF, GTZ, CNUEH/Habitat, etc).

Two significant measures of protection and management are currently in the final stages of application. These are the *Schéma Directeur d'Aménagement Urbain de la Ville d'Essaouira* and the *Plan de sauvegarde de la médina d'Essaouira*, both prepared by the Ministère de l'Aménagement du Territoire, de l'Environnement, de l'Urbanisation et de l'Habitat. These fully conform with the requirement of the Committee relating to management plans (*Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, paragraph 39.b.2).

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

There appears to have been little, if any, conscious conservation policy in Essaouira until recently.

Authenticity

The authenticity of the ensemble is high: the original street plan and the defences survive virtually intact. However, some measure of authenticity has been lost owing to repair

and reconstruction work involving modern materials, especially concrete.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

ICOMOS consulted its International Scientific Committee on Historic Towns and Villages on the cultural significance of the site. An ICOMOS expert mission visited Essaouira in February 1996. A second ICOMOS mission visited the town in April 1997 and a third in May 2001.

Qualities

Essaouira is an excellent example of the translation of the urban design and fortification principles of 18th century Europe to the Moslem world.

ICOMOS observations

When it first evaluated the property in 1996, ICOMOS was concerned that there was no programme for the restoration and preservation of this town, and in particular for its fortifications, or for the survey and inventory of the existing stock of buildings and monuments. It was also not convinced that the town possesses the "outstanding universal value" needed for inscription on the World Heritage List.

It accordingly recommended to the Bureau of the World Heritage Committee at its 20th session in Paris in June 1996 that the property should not be inscribed on the World Heritage List. The Bureau decided, however, to defer the examination of the nomination until its 21st session, so that the Moroccan authorities might submit additional information concerning the site. Following receipt of this additional information by ICOMOS, the second mission took place in April 1997.

Whilst the 1997 mission confirmed the ICOMOS reservations expressed above regarding the conservation and management of Essaouira, it dissented from the view that the property does not possess "outstanding universal value." It stressed the fact that the fortifications are of outstanding quality, and also that the urban fabric and the traditional way of life survive intact.

At the 21st session of the Bureau in Paris in June 1997 further consideration of this nomination was deferred, to enable the State Party to formulate and implement a management plan.

A revised nomination was received in July 2000 and a third ICOMOS expert mission visited Essaouira. The report of this mission was favourable: adequate legal protection was now in force and a conservation management plan was in course of implementation.

Statement of Significance

Essaouira is an exceptional example of a late 18th century fortified town, constructed according to the principles of contemporary European military architecture, in a North African context. Since its foundation it has been a major international trading seaport, linking Morocco and its Saharan hinterland with Europe and the rest of the world.

ICOMOS Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii and iv*:

Criterion ii Essaouira is an outstanding and well preserved example of a late 18th century European fortified seaport town translated to a North African context.

Criterion iv With the opening up of Morocco to the rest of the world in the later 17th century Essaouira was laid out by a French architect who had been profoundly

influenced by the work of Vauban at Saint-Malo. It has retained its European appearance to a substantial extent.

Bureau Recommendation

That the Medina of Essaouira be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii and iv*.

ICOMOS, September 2001