

Chabâa's Concept of the "3 As"



Mohammed Chabâa, *Composition*, 1975, Laque sur bois, 249 x 360 cm Courtesy Fondation ONA.

“Architecture is one expression of the fine arts”

(Mohamed Chabâa, in: *Alam Attarbia*, No. 1, p. 36, 2001.)

Mohamed Chabâa's consciousness of his national heritage and his interest in architecture both emerged at a young age. His concept of the “3 A's”—art, architecture and the arts and crafts—grew out of his discovery both of the Italian Renaissance and the Bauhaus School during a period of study in Rome in the early 1960s. From then on, bringing together the “3 A's” would become a central interest, a concept Chabâa would apply in various ways and fiercely defend throughout his long and varied career.

Architecture: A Love Story

Son of a master mason and site manager, Chabâa was born with a

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highly developed sense of space. His interest in architecture took shape with his first job after leaving the École des Beaux-Arts Tétouan, in the architecture department of the Ministry of Youth and Sport. Although he was originally employed as a designer-draftsman to work alongside the French architect in charge of building projects, he was rapidly promoted to the role of manager of ongoing works. In this position he soon learned the basics of architectural design and developed a taste for it. During his employment, Chabâa gained an understanding of the complexity of the architect's role: imagining a building, sketching it out, drawing up plans, working out the technical problems linked to its realization without neglecting the aesthetic aspect. A few years later he obtained a place to study at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Roma, choosing interior design as his specialty. It was at this point that his interest in spatiality came properly to the fore.

In addition to the introductory course on the Bauhaus Chabâa attended after beginning his studies in Rome, he was also exposed to the architecture of the Italian Renaissance—which had retained an elevated status, its superiority to the other arts being based on its incorporating all forms of plastic expression within a single unity, as Vitruvius had noted long ago. To his delight, Chabâa discovered Rome was an open-air museum: sculptures, paintings, engravings, and many other forms of artistic expression were openly on display, fully integrated into architecture and urban space: piazzas large and small, churches, avenues, inner courtyards. The architectural lessons of the "Quattrocento" and the Baroque were everywhere. Certain Baroque buildings, where the art of ornamentation might be said to have reached its peak, reminded him of palaces and traditional houses in Morocco, where sculpted and painted wood, carved plaster, multi-colored glass and mosaics made of *zellige* tile (traditionally handcrafted and made of non-refined natural clay from the Fez region in Morocco) are deployed in abundance, enhancing the sensorial impact of manmade space.

Chabâa's discovery of Western art in the new milieu of Rome opened up new avenues of thought, the lesson of Rome architecture as an inter-medial enterprise resonating with his own nascent ideas. Here was one possible model upon which to base his developing interest in exploring the relationship between art, architecture, and the arts and crafts. He quickly realized that for traditional Moroccan art there was no museum where one could admire the artistry of his countrymen. Moroccan creators did not produce work according to an agreed framework, as was the case in Europe or the Americas. Traditional Moroccan arts are integrated into architectonic space, particularly in mosques, religious schools and palaces, serving both functional and aesthetic ends. Chabâa made what was for him an important discovery: Moroccan artists, he thought, should stay close to architecture, since it is in Morocco's architecture that traditional skills and a sense of the *genius loci* have always been and continue to be.

Around this time, Chabâa discovered the work of Pierre Luigi Nervi, an engineer/architect, whose highly technical constructions were

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truly works of art. By chance he managed to obtain an apprenticeship with this famous Italian architect. This led to other significant training positions that would garner him an indispensable experience of the architect's.

Armed with his degree, in 1964 Chabâa returned to Morocco, joining an interior design practice. One project he worked on during this time was an assignment undertaken for the Pavilion of the NIO (National Irrigation Office) at the International Agricultural Fair of Casablanca, for whom he designed a mural clearly referencing urban space. Further opportunity to develop his interest in architecture, which by now considered the "mother of all the arts," came with an unexpected event at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Casablanca, whose teaching staff he joined in 1966.

What happened was this: While preparing an end-of-year exhibition of students' work, Chabâa contacted the office of city planning in Casablanca to obtain a site plan for the Shrine of Sidi Abderrahmane complex. These plans were to serve as the basis of an assignment involving designing murals for an imaginary tourist complex. Bernard Hamborjet, a young architect working at the time for the Franco-Moroccan Cooperation Program, had been tasked with producing the plans. He heard about the students' work, was deeply impressed by the final results, and subsequently talked about it to his friend, the architect Patrice de Mazières. Curious to see the work, de Mazières paid his first visit to the school. Chabâa and de Mazières felt an immediate rapport. De Mazières was captivated by the avant-garde teaching method adopted by the teaching staff, which constituted a total break with the French Beaux-Arts tradition previously followed at the school. He also met Chabâa's colleague Mohamed Melehi, as well as the director of the institute, Farid Belkahi. This was to be a crucial meeting, for it led to a series of collaborations between the architect and the three painters, working together on large public projects. At the time, these painters were working independently of each other on mural panels and artistic projects using existing buildings and architectonic structures. Chabâa sometimes designed ceiling lighting systems inspired by traditional craft motifs, or would write the signage of a place in Arabic calligraphy. The collaboration between Chabâa, his colleagues and the architectural practice Faraoui and De Mazières proved fruitful over a period of years, allowing the artist to realize his dream of working alongside and an architect, within the framework of one of the first attempts in Morocco to integrate art and modern architecture.

Chabâa was soon given a further opportunity to bring together the "3 A's." In 1968 he struck out on his own, creating Studio 400, a general and interior design practice. The firm represented a chance to further apply his concepts in practice. Among the many projects undertaken by the studio, Chabâa was careful to include several murals, for which he often referenced the formal language of traditional arts, as well as exploring how to use traditional materials and techniques when creating furniture and object designs. There are numerous examples of this approach in the Studio 400 archives, including work undertaken for the headquarters of the COMANOV

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company (1968), the National Office of Commerce and Export (1969), the Rabat-Salé Terminal (1969), the offices of RAM in Brussels (1969), and the Hôtel d'Oujda (1970).

Alongside his commercial work, Chabâa launched a series of art shows with a group of painters. Most famous among these is the exhibition he organized at the Place Jamâa El Fna in Marrakech in 1969, and in the Place du 16 Novembre in Casablanca that same year. Further examples include the 1971 open air exhibition at the lycées Mohamed V and Fatima Zahra, both in Casablanca, the show by Moussem d'Assilhah in 1979, and another at the psychiatric hospital in Berrechid in 1981. In addition, in 1987 his office designed several mural projects in Tangiers, which were placed across the city as part of its new master plan. All of these various projects helped to articulate Chabâa's personal vision of art as something that should be integrated into the everyday life of individuals and made accessible to the greatest possible number of people—a position that went hand in hand with his notion of the urban milieu as a permanent exhibition site.



Wooden sign made by Mohamed Chabâa, Hotel Les Gorges du Dades, Boumalne, 1970-71.
Architects: Faraoui et de Mazières, © Cabinet Faraoui et de Mazières.

Teaching of Art and Architecture

With the creation of the first École Nationale de l'Architecture (ENA) in the early 1980s, a new opportunity came along for Chabâa, who was invited to teach a fine art course at the school. Many issues arose concerning the role of teaching art in the context of architectural training and how it might be done: should the school produce architects with a strong artistic sense or "artist-architects"? Chabâa was fascinated by this question. The lessons learned from Walter Gropius and Frank Lloyd Wright (his favorite architect) were in the forefront of his mind when considering this question, and their example inspired many ideas for the kind of direction he should

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personally take in his pedagogical approach. Around the time he began this new teaching post, Chabâa became friends with a group of young architects whose ambition was to add their own stone to the edifice of Moroccan architectural pedagogy. With them he opened a studio called "Art and Architecture," where he presented seminars on contemporary Moroccan art as well as the work of Studio 400. He organized educational visits for students to contemporary art exhibitions, and meetings with practitioners in their studios; or he would invite the latter to the school to take part in a team-led workshop and exchanges with the community. Chabâa also maintained close links with the Association Nationale des Architectes et des Urbanistes, which had been behind the creation of the Ecole Nationale d'Architecture. With them he organized numerous activities within the school—creating a link with practitioners of Morocco's various craft traditions—including seminars with artisans and study trips throughout Morocco, during which he always searched out traditional arts and handicrafts unique to the region he and his class were visiting.

Love of Traditional Arts

While still a young student in Tétouan, Chabâa often told the story of how on a study trip to the Alhambra Palace in Grenada during the 1950s, his encounter with the unparalleled refinement of the Andalusia's master craftsmen brought tears to his eyes. The traces of their gestures, still intact after so many centuries, the perfect harmony between the architecture and the interior spaces they formed, deeply stirred his emotions. Chabâa had realized early on the importance of traditional arts and their impact on what he called "*perception sensible*" (sensitivity of perception), the development of taste and individual spirituality.

In 1985, while teaching at the École Nationale d'Architecture in Rabat, Chabâa had a chance to further a rapprochement between the modernist tradition and the traditional arts in yet another way. He was offered the post of Artistic Advisor to Mohamed Abied, then Minister for Arts and Crafts and Social Affairs. Abied assigned him the responsibility of managing all matters linked to the creative métiers, including the training of artisans. After some field trips to both the north and south of Morocco, Chabâa undertook the major task of cataloguing and archiving the métiers he had encountered, some of which were dying out. Accompanied by a professional photographer, he documented, illustrated and classified these, presenting his research in a series of pamphlets (one for each métier) published by the ministry. He was especially concerned with encouraging the further evolution of artisanal skills in Morocco, which, he discovered, tend to stagnate and disappear in the absence of a policy designed to validate their intrinsic worth and nurture their continued development. Accordingly, he launched competitions within each domain—saddlery, pottery, rug-making and so on—with prizes awarded so as to encourage excellence and perseverance, and uncover new talents. To further encourage and increase the practice of Morocco's crafts traditions, Chabâa set up the Moussem National de l'Artisanat, an annual event which brought together

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artisans from all over the country, who were invited to exhibit and sell their products. For these exhibitions Chabâa created set and lighting designs highlighting the different participants' products. A separate wing housed exhibitions of contemporary artists as well as meeting rooms where round-tables were held, bringing together artists, artisans and architects. Building on his previous work with the the Association Nationale des Architectes et des Urbanistes and the ENA, Chabâa also organized a study trip to the Rissani region of southern Morocco, inviting along contemporary artists, artisans from the region, architects from the school and academics interested in questions of cultural heritage. This unique meeting resulted in a statement listing recommendations for the future of arts and crafts in the region.

Working to revise the artisanal training programs he had helped set up, Chabâa, sometimes included an architect charged with teaching technical drawing and design. He then conceived an ambitious project named the Institut Royal du Design, whose mission was to train artisan-designers capable of developing projects that would create links with industry while at the same time improving the extant conditions of production and dissemination for their work. Sadly, this project never came to fruition.

A fine illustration of the concept of the "3 A's" is Chabâa's work in Rome in 1990, during the building of the new Mosque of Rome (1984–1995). Chabâa again sought to bring together the traditional arts and crafts, working with Moroccan master craftsmen brought in for the project—Houcine Lamane, Kamal Bellamine and Abdelali El Kandri—who collaborated with two of the mosque's chief architects, Paolo Portoghesi and Vittorio Gigliotti, to develop *zellige* tiles in an array of colors. Subsequently used in mosaics whose outstanding quality testify to the success of this "3 A" project, for his work on the project, Chabâa was awarded the title of Commander of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic in 1991.

NADIA CHABAÂ
