

CRAFTING A COMMUNITY

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DAR AL MA'MUN
MARRAKECH, MOROCCO

Dar al Ma'mun is an artist residency near Marrakech. Artists are able to learn from artisan craftsmen in local villages; an initiative designed to add cultural rather than commercial value to the art scene



Jorge Pedro Nunez, a Venezuelan artist with his piece 'Construction' made from ostrich eggs and a steel frame was one of the first group of residents



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When it is completed, the Fellah Hotel will be an enclave of luxury set in the picturesque landscape at the foot of the Atlas Mountains on the outskirts of Marrakech. But already some of the rooms - ten villas spread across seven acres of fertile land in the valley of Ourika - are being put to good use.

Currently they are home to Mohamed Arejda, Nicolas Moulin, Julia Cottin and Stéphane Vigny, the four artists who have been selected for the second quarterly residency programme hosted by the hotel.

Dar al Ma'mun, named after the ninth century caliphate in Baghdad, was established by Redha Moali, a French Algerian businessman who spent several years as the deputy general manager of Exan-BNP Paribas in Geneva. Using the substantial wealth he accumulated in market finance, Moali decided to make a valuable contribution to Morocco - a country where he says he finds his roots.

'It is a wonderful country,' Moali tells us from his Paris home. 'Ever since my first visit, I knew that I wanted to create something different; a place where intellectual and creative minds could come together.'

Moali and his wife Houria Afoufou, a Moroccan interior designer and architect, created the vision for the hotel in 2008 after the financial crash. The original concept was to follow an ethic of responsible tourism, which involved renting the land from locals, whose agricultural knowhow was then employed to provide the majority of the food for the hotel. The couple also wanted the central feature of the hotel to be a library specialising in Arabic and Continental literature.

'Art was always central to my concept though,' explains Moali. 'I used to live in a world where so many people were trying to find happiness through money and consumerism. I found that most were disappointed. So the process of artistic creativity to find such happiness intrigued me.'

The idea for the residency programme was borne the following year when Moali met a young French art historian



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01 The view of the Atlas Mountains provides a stunning backdrop for the artist's workshops

02 Redha Moali, the business man who dedicated his time and money to boosting the Moroccan art scene

Carleen Hamon in a coffee shop in Marrakech.

Hamon, an independent art consultant and her business partner Juilen Amicel, who spent many years working in Paris with Usines Ephémères, an artist-run association that temporarily occupies abandoned buildings and uses them for artistic space, agreed to come on board and oversee the programme. Their concept was to invite four or five artists every three months to stay at the hotel as complimentary guests. They would be given a 5,000 Euro grant to cover their expenses and the time and freedom to work solely on their art.

'It is an exciting venture and a huge challenge,' says Hamon. 'But there is a new dynamic in Morocco now and something strong is happening here. It is great to be part of it.'

During each residency Hamon and Amicel are responsible for hosting a series of workshops for the resident artists. The first, which began in October last year, saw the five artists



Until recently artists in Morocco had to leave to fulfill their creative ambitions. We hope to become a centre for creative minds across the country and beyond

learning from Catherine David from France's Ministry of Culture and Enrico Lunghi, the director of the Grand Duke Jean Museum of Modern Art in Luxembourg. They also had the chance to work alongside craftsmen from the surrounding villages who work in traditions using leather, wood, ceramics and stone.

'We wanted to create as many opportunities as possible to allow the artist's projects to grow. It is an incredible boost to their work and also offers a very rich experience,' she says.

The long-term plan is to build a permanent facility in the village of Tassoutante, where the hotel is located. It will be a 4000 sq metre building offering lectures, screenings, exhibitions, a library, bookstore and a café. A translation programme is also underway to create a new generation of intellectuals.

It is a project that Moali clearly feels strongly about. 'The problem is that since the financial crisis in Europe governments have disengaged themselves from culture and cultural education,' he says. 'But they don't see the added value that comes with a thriving cultural environment. It can add efficiency and real value to the economy.'

But the Dar al Ma'mun programme is vital also for Arabic culture in general, Hamon tells us. 'These kinds of opportunities don't come up every day and it is so important for the future of the artistic generation.'

The artists apply for the programme through an online form, which is then viewed and vetted by Hamon and Amicel and whittled down to a short list of 30, which is sent to the jury for final selection. A different panel of experts is chosen for each residency with the second batch having been chosen by five judges including Marc-Olivier Wahler, the director of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris and Yto Barrada, the director of Cinematheque de Tangier. They are asked to select a mix of Moroccan and international artists.

Dar al Ma'mun also has a partnership with the National School of Fine Arts in Tetouan, in the north of the country, which aims to engage the resident artists in one week workshops with students from the art school.

'Until very recently artists in Morocco had to leave the country if they wanted to fulfill their creative ambitions and pursue a career in the arts,' reflects Hamon. 'Their country was just not ready for them but now I feel that it is. We hope that Dar Al Ma'mun becomes a cultural centre for creative minds across the country and beyond.'

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01 Carleen Hamon, art historian and independent consultant who co-founded the project
02 Julien Amicel, Hamon's business partner



In his words

Omar Berrada is a writer, translator and critic who grew up in Casablanca but lives in Paris. He was curator of literary events at Le Centre Pompidou between 2006 and 2009 and runs Dar al Ma'mun's translation programme. Here he describes it in his own words:

'Translation is central to our whole project. The name itself, Dar al-Ma'mun, is a direct reference to Beyt al-Hikma, which flourished under the reign of the Caliph Al-Ma'mun in ninth century Baghdad. An impressive amount of Greek philosophy and science passed into the Arabic language there and it was also a place where scholars gathered and had fruitful debates - all of which led to a golden age of Arab civilization.'

Our aim, by launching a translation programme, was to help provide a context for a more balanced and complex view of the Arab world, its history, its literature and its values.

Translation is a political act. It involves a genuine drive to understand the other (person, language, culture) by digging deep into the meaning and structures of a text in order to be able to recreate them in your own tongue. It is an act of hospitality, anti-imperialistic in essence, since it aims at allowing your language to be inhabited by a foreign text.

In the programme we use the residency format ranging from an individual using our library resources to translate a book, to more elaborate configurations when many translators of different languages work on same Arabic text simultaneously. We are also planning regular workshops and seminars. The point is not simply to translate books, but to work together internationally to engage in sustained conversation.