

W[oa]ndering Medina challenges and proposals for the UNESCO site 'Medina of Marrakesh'

W[oa]ndering Medina is a visitor center that embraces and highlights the dynamics of mutual exchange between the UNESCO site "Medina of Marrakesh" and its visitors – or rather, all users of the urban space, including residents and those that have the opportunity to pass through it.

The very name of the center – W[oa]ndering Medina – stems from an undeniable and defining characteristic of the Medina: its labyrinthine layout, which inevitably leads every visitor to lose and find their way over and over again. This name references the two fundamental actions essential to experiencing the Medina: wandering, the act of roaming through its intricate fabric, and wondering, the sense of awe in discovering its beauty, revealed step by step. To make these two actions explicit, the project is based on an in-depth reading of the site, its urban fabric, the relationships that shape it, and its multiple identities – ranging from an imperial city to a Berber trade hub and even an exotic destination for the cultural elite of fashion and design – and on the incorporation of the objectives defined by UNESCO for visitor centers in World Heritage Sites (UNESCO, The Role of Visitor Centres in UNESCO Designated Sites, 2019). The proposal is structured around two key components: an urban project, offering a comprehensive vision and experience of the Medina; the design of the visitor center within El Badi Palace, which serves as the official visitor center for the UNESCO site. In this sense, the W[oa]ndering Medina visitor center is not conceived as a centralized hub, nor as a starting or ending point, but rather as a strategic and highly sensitive node within a vast and intricate network – one that, in all its complexity and potential, encompasses the entire UNESCO site.

Layout of the urban project

Certain elements of the Medina's fabric – recognized as both structural and structuring in its general composition, as well as fundamental to the experience within it – serve as the foundation for an urban project designed around key moments of the visit. At these designated points, several devices are placed which, when applied to various urban surfaces – both vertical and horizontal – serve as elements of orientation and understanding of the place.

In particular, the system of walls and gates, which form the first point of contact between the Medina and its users, marks the moment of entry, where each threshold becomes the starting point (incipit) of a journey. Once inside, the Medina's dense and intricate pattern, in which visitors find themselves immersed (and, to some extent, disoriented), defines the moment of exploration where a network of paths and narrative threads guides visitors through the city, encouraging them to get lost and find their way again, following a coordinated graphic and communicative strategy.

Within the urban fabric, encounters with a network of points of interest – riads, gardens, monuments – shape the moment of discovery, where each designated site offers a deeper understanding of a specific aspect or reality of the Medina.

Finally, major landmarks – such as Jemaa el-Fnaa square, as well as the visitor center located within El Badi Palace – define the moment of knowledge, where the most profound and complete unveiling of the Medina and its meanings takes place.

For the implementation of UNESCO objectives

The W[oa]ndering Medina proposal – both in its urban project and in the visitor center at El Badi Palace – aligns with the key areas of interest outlined in the report The Role of Visitor Centres in UNESCO Designated Sites (UNESCO, 2019). It introduces a new formal expressiveness to the context, connects previously isolated areas, and enhances the visibility and accessibility of the site's unique qualities. The project focuses on some main core goals regarding different stakeholders, taking the possible ways of using the sites as main stimulus: from the ordinary tourist visit, aimed at didactically and directly investigating the history of the heritage, to the specialised visit of the targeted researcher or architect, to the continuous living experience of members of the local community. The main functions of the project focuses on tourism sustainability and visitors' management, interpretation of heritage, educational services, community engagement and community-oriented services. In particular, project activities are divided into three macro-categories.

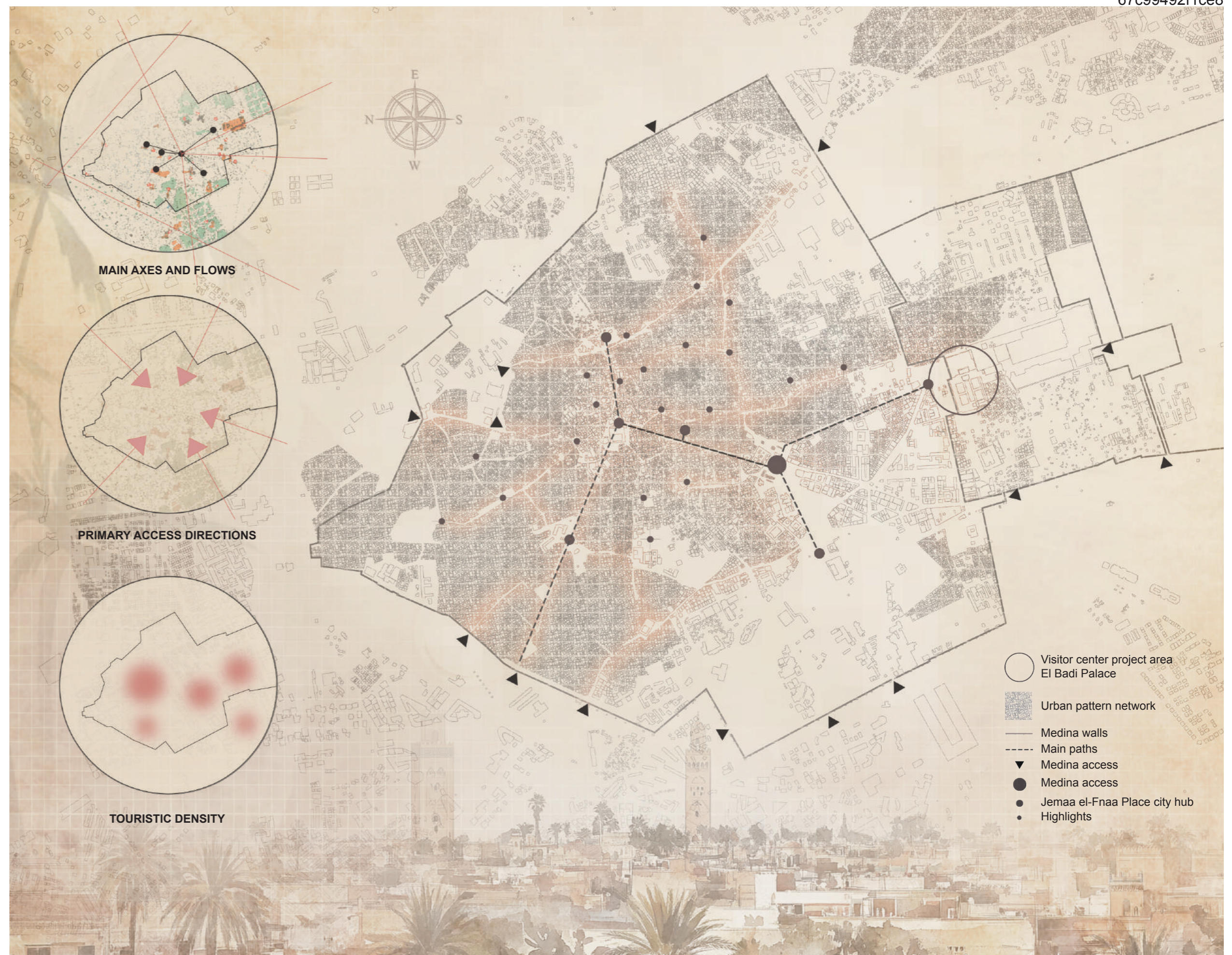
Information: the reopening of the courtyard adjacent to the El Badi Palace and the overall design of the project allow for the reinterpretation and understanding of the original form of the palace, formed by long porticoed paths and pavilions defined a strong axiality in the overall; design furthermore, the particular shading systems proposed allow for direct reference to the intangible heritage of local traditions and Moroccan handicrafts, as a tool for empowering local identity.

Education: the structural system used has a double value with respect to the issue of sustainability and social impact. On the one hand, the proposed structure consists of a system of dry, modular and reversible joints that do not permanently affect the existing heritage; on the other, the formal result, constituting at first glance a static reinforcement structure, already installed following the 2023 earthquake, draws attention to the fragility of the urban fabric and heritage itself; however, once the emergency phase has passed, the same structures define spaces spread throughout the city for social aggregation and sharing, including through workshop or debate activities hosted in urban spaces or in the pavilion spaces within the El Badi Palace.

Accessibility: the project addresses the issue of spatial fruition not only through the design of fully accessible and walkable spaces, but also through the design of spaces where there is full freedom to stop and rest to enjoy the visit, spaces where one can stop and reflect, spaces where it is possible to set up temporary exhibitions in full functionality and usability.

Highlights for a sustainable tourism
The project W[oa]ndering Medina incorporates elements of modularity and mobility, both in time and space, with the goal of seamlessly integrating into the existing dynamics of the Medina. Working within an urban UNESCO site requires addressing the challenge of balancing the inhabited, everyday dimension with the tourism-driven, exceptional, dimension. Both are fundamental to the identity of this World Heritage site, yet they can also come into conflict, particularly in cases of overtourism, which can compromise its proper enjoyment and preservation.

With this in mind, the project is designed to be flexible over time, allowing different components to be implemented and activated at different moments to test the response of the city and its inhabitants. More broadly, W[oa]ndering Medina also plays a role in reshaping how tourists experience the city, acting as a tool to calibrate, guide, and distribute visitors across multiple itineraries, helping to prevent potential overcrowding.



Strategic analysis map

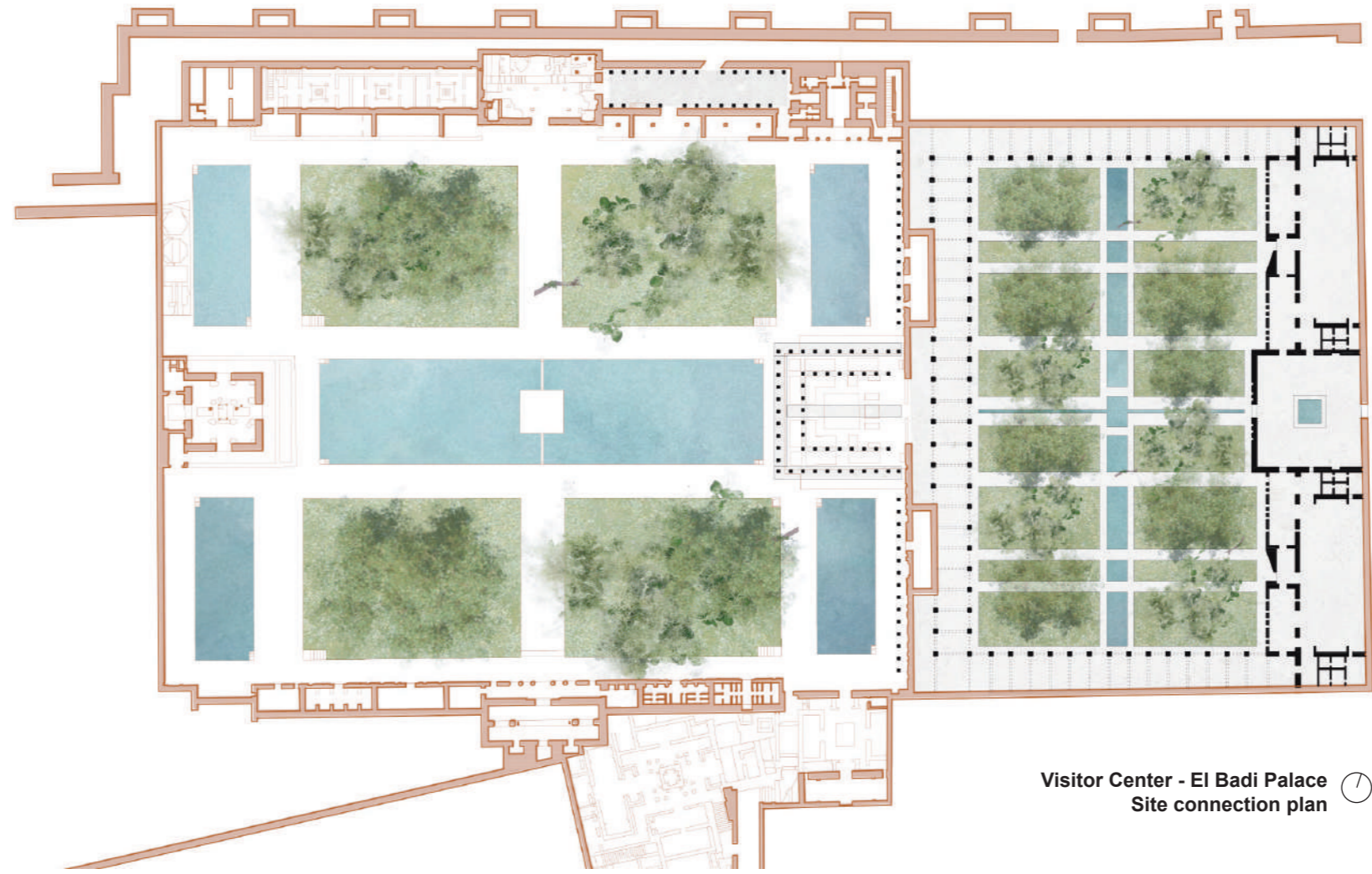


Rather than concentrating activity in a single location, the proposal engages multiple sites, encouraging visitors to move continuously throughout the entire area – from the outer edges to the core of the Medina and vice versa. Expanding the visitor experience beyond just the main attractions promotes a form of sustainable and culturally rich tourism, one that not only provides essential resources for the site and those who care for it daily but also ensures that it is neither exploited nor damaged. Instead, the project fosters an authentic and respectful engagement with the site's heritage and value.

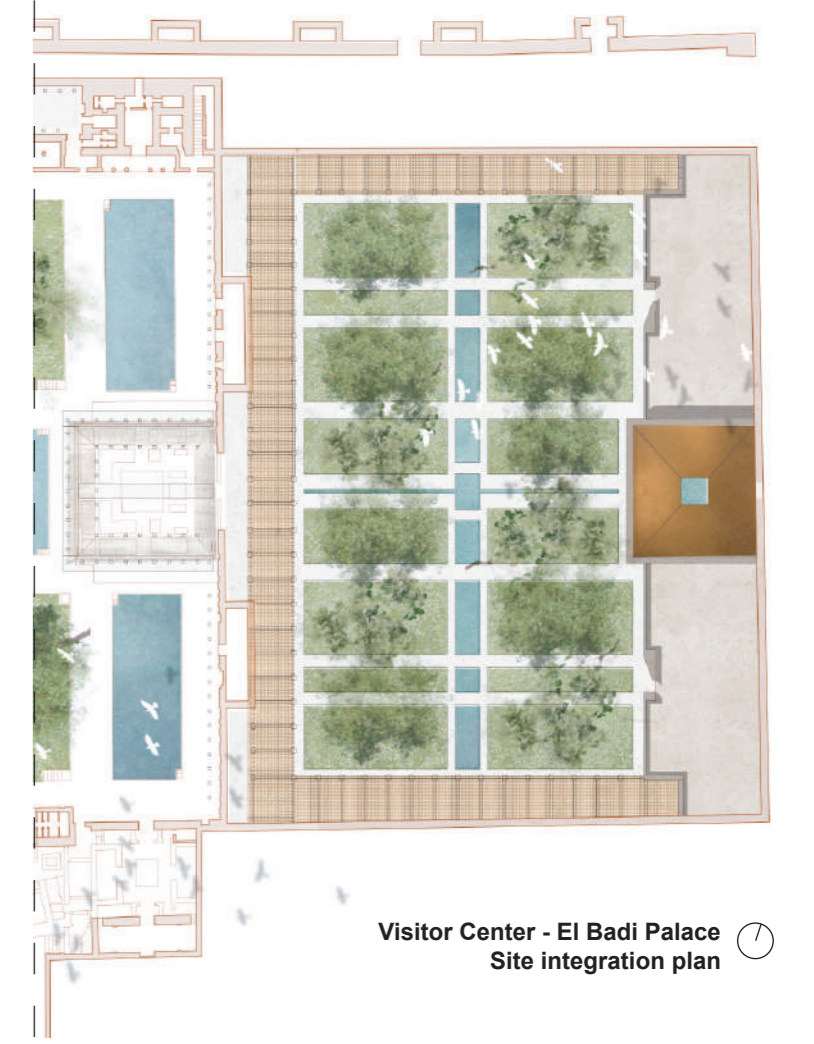
The visitor centre at El Badi Palace

El Badi Palace plays a particularly significant role in the experience of the Medina, both as one of its most renowned attractions and as a key access point to the city and a vast network of green spaces to the south (the Jardins d'Agdal). The visitor center is composed of multiple elements, strategically positioned at different points within the archaeological site. Some interventions establish a direct continuity with the ruins, particularly around the current entrance, the eastern wall, and the remains of the pavilion in that area. As part of an effort to enhance the site, certain spaces are redefined in terms of volume and spatial perception through the use of lightweight wooden structures, fabric draperies, and decorative ceramic elements. These designed yet dematerialized spaces are primarily intended for welcoming visitors who wish to enter the archaeological site directly, without passing through the other sections of the visitor center. Additionally, some palace areas are repurposed for museographic use, effectively exhibiting themselves as part of the visitor experience.

The main core of the visitor center is located within a currently inaccessible and unused quadrangular area along the eastern side of the palace. Conceived as an "urban void" within a dense, saturated fabric, this space presents a valuable opportunity to design a new building for visitors, while also providing a solution for an unresolved urban area – despite its direct continuity with the archaeological site. In this section, the visitor center takes the form of a courtyard, reinterpreting and reintroducing some of the defining characteristics of this local architectural typology (riad). A portico runs along all four sides, expanding on the eastern side, where the main functions of the visitor center are housed, along with the large central hall. This hall, directly accessible from the exterior, is flooded with natural light from above and features a central water element, referencing the traditional and local use of ablution pools. The composition of volumes, together with the design of the vegetation and water basins in the garden, defines the main circulation axis, linking the new courtyard (the visitor center) to the historic one (within El Badi Palace). Alongside vegetation and water – essential elements of the riad – the materials used include stone for the walls and portico columns, ceramic for flooring and select cladding, and wood and metal for the roofing, treated as mashrabiya, once again drawing from local traditions.



Visitor Center - El Badi Palace
Site connection plan



Visitor Center - El Badi Palace
Site integration plan



Interior view of the intervention among the northern ruins – featuring a wooden structure and roofing, complemented by shading fabric drapes and decorative traditional ceramic panels



Interior view of the visitor center main hall – featuring ceramic cladding, the skylight, the water basin, and, in the background, the wall with mashrabiya and a glimpse of the garden



Interior view of the pavilion designed on the archaeological traces of the eastern pavilion – featuring a wooden structure and drapery framing the view of El Badi Palace, with the visitor center courtyard behind



Exterior view of the pavilion designed on the archaeological traces of the eastern pavilion – featuring a wooden structure and fabric drapes running along the wall, culminating in the central volumetric reconstruction



View of the inner façade of the visitor center – featuring the wooden columns and roofing of the portico in the foreground, with the lush vegetation and water basins of the central garden in the background.