Perret Frères, architect/contractors in Northern Africa

L’agence-entreprise Perret et l’Afrique du Nord

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A unique design and construction arrangement

From around 1895 to the end of the 1950s, the Perret Frères architectural and building firm took an approach that was unique France. It was characterized by an unconventional union between architectural practice (inspired by one of France’s strongest, most original, and most coherent architectural thinkers in his time, August Perret, 1874-1954) and the business of building structures in reinforced concrete, also quite innovative at the time.

That the two pursuits should be united in a single firm, directed assertively by a single group of individuals – three brothers – collided with the principle of absolute separation between architect and contractor, a basic tenet of the “Guadet Code” which governed architecture from 1895. The purpose of the rule is to avoid tainting architecture with commercialism. But the Perrets’ approach enabled them to engage in unique building experiences that were decisive for the future of reinforced concrete construction, in France and worldwide.

This experience, and the association between the two businesses, was made possible only by the fact that the Perrets had put down roots across the Mediterranean, in Northern Africa. Although they approached neither Tunisia nor the French protectorates in the Near East, they nevertheless had close relations with Algeria, where they created a subsidiary contractor to build dozens of projects. Likewise, in Morocco, they built several pioneering projects during World War I, and these would play a major part in the agency’s publicity from the end of the war, in view of projects in France. The Perrets also availed themselves of opportunities offered by the young Turkish Republic, and erected some prestigious buildings and villas in Egypt.

Their magnificent archives, containing 30,000 drawings and blueprints, among other things, have been conserved since 1990 at the Centre d’Archives d’Architecture du xxᵉ Siècle (Cité de l’Architecture et du Patrimoine, Paris). They provide invaluable information on the firm’s strategies – both experimental and promotional – including the constant to-and-fro movement between center and peripheries, between France and dependent territories (particularly the Moroccan protectorate or Algerian departments). This is a process that is now quite well known and studied.

The Perrets’ roots in France

First, let us introduce the family and their travels. Auguste (1874-1954), Gustave (1876-1952), and Claude (1880-1952) were the three sons of a masonry contractor from Burgundy whose support for the Commune forced him to flee into exile. The three brothers were thus born in Burgundy, and the family returned to Paris in 1880. The general company then established by the father rapidly prospered, while the two elder brothers studied architecture (brilliantly, especially Auguste) at the École des Beaux-Arts. The two brothers allowed themselves to be absorbed by their father’s company – which became Perret et Fils, then Perret Frères in 1905 – without sitting for the architect’s diploma. Auguste Perret was almost inclined to strut his doubtful pedigree as “contractor-cum-architect” when he launched his career in the 1910s and early 1920s. From the beginning, they associated with great architects from the structurist-rationalist school identified with Viollet-le-Duc: they were students of Julien Guadet, and their father was a friend of Albert Ballu, whom they would join in Algeria.

Their first Parisian buildings are a series of novel and radical proposals, sometimes in form, especially in concept, all based on a structure in reinforced concrete. They contracted the construction of their building on the rue Franklin (1903) to another company working in concrete, but the Perret company itself built the automobile garage on the rue de Ponthieu (1905), and especially the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées (1911-1913): they insinuated themselves as architects into this project – which they grabbed from Henry Van de Velde – after having shown, as contractors, the economic rationality of reinforced concrete for its construction.
Although the Perrets’ abundant production after the war – another chapter in itself – is not relevant here, it should be noted that on several occasions, from 1924 until his death, Auguste Perret taught and trained architects belonging to several generations of the 20th century. We will meet some of them in Algiers. Others, such as Henri Tastemain and Éliane Castelnau at Rabat, and Élie Azagury, Gaston Jaubert, Isaac Lévy, and Louis Riou in Casablanca, would transmit the Perret stamp to the architecture of the post-World War II period in Morocco.

**A decisive Moroccan excursion**

The Perrets’ experience in Morocco was brief but fundamental. They worked there from 1913 to 1920, and created a Moroccan subsidiary early on, when they received the commission for the Paris-Maroc department stores (Hippolyte Delaporte, arch.), a key retail palace in downtown Casablanca. Their other projects were mainly warehouses (including their own materials store) on the outskirts of Casablanca.
Layout of Place du Maréchal Foch, Algiers (1935-1941), Jacques Guiauchain and Maurice Rotival, arch. The garage structure, nearly completed (photo by Chevojon)
Casablanca. One of these, the Wallut complex, was celebrated at length – by the Perrets, as by all the critics of the time – for its soaring, thin shell vaults. The Perrets reused the vaults for the church at Le Raincy in 1923, and explicitly emphasized the connection between the industrial scheme in Morocco and the monumental scheme in France. Perret seems to have had such high hopes for Lyautey’s Morocco that in 1920, he stated that the “cities of tomorrow” should be created in “new countries,” obviously referring to Casablanca, in particular. But the firm was focused on the conquest of Paris, and the same year, it closed its business in Morocco.

**Algeria in two steps**

A friend of the Perrets (and originally of the father), the architect Albert Ballu hired the company for the construction of several of the Algerian pavilions at world’s fairs, from 1889 to 1908. In Algeria itself, as early as 1908 – at the same time as their first critical success in Paris –, Perret Frères was called in to rescue the cupola of the cathedral of Oran, also designed by Albert Ballu. The contract for building the cathedral (awarded in 1902) should have been Perret’s to begin with, but at the last minute, it had gone to a competitor, Cottancin, who held a patent on a reinforced brick system which seemed promising at the time. However, the walls were too thin to buttress the cupola. The Perrets thus had the opportunity to test solutions based on reinforced concrete, and to show the superiority of their approach. From this eventful project, it appears that if they had won the contract from the beginning, the Perrets would have had a substantially different experience with reinforced concrete. Their first contact with Algeria then ended, since their plans for the theatre of Oran (1902) were not accepted.

It was only in 1930 that the Perrets returned to Algeria, again as contractors. Jacques Guiauchain, an architect they must have met at the École des Beaux-Arts, had moved to Algiers, and he encouraged Auguste Perret to send him students. Until the war, these students, Denis Honegger, Pierre Forestier, and Michel Luyckx, would maintain ties between the architects-builders and Algerian territory. All of them, especially Guiauchain, would enable Perret Frères to win numerous competitions and tender offers, or to secure privately-agreed contracts, while the architectural agency, in turn, embarked on projects in Algiers, or elsewhere in the country. In 1934, Perret Frères opened an Algiers branch, directed from Paris.
by Claude, the youngest of the three brothers. In 1948, it became the company Perret Frères Algérie. Well after the death of the Perret brothers, just before being repatriated to France, it did a final stunt by building the hyperbolic paraboloids of the Sacré-Cœur Basilica, finished in 1963 (Paul Herbé and Jean Le Couteur arch., René Sarger eng.). In all, Perret Frères worked on dozens of projects, essentially in or around Algiers, some of them quite large. The most outstanding ones were the offices of the General Government of Algeria (Guiauchain arch., 1929-1934), built in exactly the same years as the Maison de l’Agriculture (Guiauchain arch., 1929-1934). The Perrets also designed buildings, such as the Barbier-Hugo hospital (1936-1955) and a building of studio apartments on rue Desfontaines (1939-1948). Their layout for the esplanade of the Forum (place du Maréchal-Foch) in front of the Government General (1937-1938), with vast terraces above an underground section, was also an architectural milestone.

The archives contain detailed and regular correspondence between the Algerian branch and the main office in Paris, revealing the company’s strategies for success in a lively construction market. After World War II, when the Perret brothers were over 70, they tackled the huge task of reconstructing Le Havre. At the same time, they were questioning their presence in Algiers. Competition seemed tough, and the company became less involved. Nevertheless, it would continue to be present until independence, managed by Antoine Perret, Claude’s son.

**Egypt and Turkey: Outlines of expansion**

Although the company did not build public works in Egypt, the architect Auguste Perret did erect several residences in Cairo and Alexandria for two networks derived from two main sponsors, Gustave Aghion and Élias Awad Bey. Perret also dreamed of several monumental projects (including a Dominican convent) which were not executed. Two of the “signatures” of his style of the 1930s were allegedly inspired by Egyptian motifs: pre-cast trellisform panels (although Perret never confirmed Egypt as a source) and the tapered columns used at the Paris Musée des Travaux Publics (built in 1936, today’s Conseil Économique et Social). Perret himself said that the inspiration for his design of the column went back to his 1927 trip to Egypt.

Finally, except at the very beginning, Perret’s relations with Istanbul were a series of missed opportunities, limited to building two projects by Paul Chedanne for the French Embassy (leading to two trips for Auguste Perret to Istanbul, in 1908 and 1910). Next, just before World War II, Perret was invited by Henri Prost to design two major theatres around Taksim Square, but they were never constructed. Perret also submitted a design for the mausoleum of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1942, but it was rejected. Nevertheless, the
Perret firm was influential in Turkey at the time, for many Turkish architects who later became prominent studied or did internships with Perret.
It should be emphasized that, although Perret's international influence – especially in the Mediterranean world – was much more extensive, thanks in particular to its teaching. Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, and Turkey are the only countries where the firm worked directly.