Thesis Labs
Leiden-Delft-Erasmus Universities

Rethinking Dwelling in Morocco

2025 - 2026

Universiteit Leiden

TU Delft

Erasmus University Rotterdam

Interested in joining this Lab?

Get in touch with or submit your application online

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Main Challenge

"How can housing, landscapes, and water systems be reimagined to support sustainable dwelling in Morocco?"

#01 Sustainable Housing Design

Morocco's current dynamic of urban transformation manifests in mass housing production, accelerated slum eradication, regularization of informal settlements, diversification of residential typologies, and intensified coastal urbanization. It is accompanied by renewed regulatory and contractual frameworks, a reorganization of public subsidies—now more directly targeted to the most vulnerable—and increased oversight of private developers. All of this reflects a deliberate effort to address the shortcomings and imbalances inherited from past housing policies.

However, despite its structured ambition, this approach invites critical reflection. Centralized decision-making and rapid interventions come with risks: high-speed urbanism may result in structural errors, mismatches between supply and need, and increased social vulnerability. This calls for analysis beyond production figures, looking into how people live in these new environments: how are these spaces inhabited? What kinds of social life and resilience emerge? What processes of appropriation or rejection take place? And how do these often-peripheral neighborhoods succeed—or fail—in generating urbanity?

Research topics under this theme should explore a multi-scalar and cross-cutting approach to sustainable housing solutions, alternative approaches to upgrading informal settlements, socially inclusive residential communities, or incremental housing prototypes. Fieldwork, including ethnographic mapping of urban communities in the selected project site, will support the development of design proposals.

The research topics should be able to combine inputs from different levels, namely:

- **Policy**: examine institutional logics, territorial ambitions, and governance tools;
- **Economic**: understand financing circuits, developer incentives, and market regulation mechanisms;
- **Material**: analyze the spatial forms produced, materials used, and underlying production chains;
- **Socio-spatial**: explore the suitability of housing to everyday life, the adaptation or resistance strategies developed by residents, and the ways in which people reconstruct their daily lives in standardized built environments.

Relevant disciplines include, but are not limited to: Architecture and Building Engineering, Cultural Anthropology, Sociology, Sustainable Economy and Entrepreneurship, Governance, Just transitions, Communication and Behavioural Studies (housing, acceptance, social inclusion), Circularity, Resource and Material Flow Analysis, Environmental and CSRD Legislation.

#02 Shaping Sustainable Urban Regions and Park Systems

Sustainable dwelling environments require planning and design approaches that work with natural systems rather than against them. Landscape-based urbanism utilises an understanding of the landscape system and its social, cultural, and ecological processes — the landscape logic — as the basis for sustainable urban planning and design. It takes the natural landscape — including topography, hydrology, and ecology — as the foundation for shaping spatial transformation and positions the biosphere as the context for social and economic development. This approach offers a multiscale and integrative framework for urban and regional design, in which robust landscape structures guide growth, support biodiversity, manage water, and create space for recreation, cultural identity, and inclusive community life.

We invite master's students to engage with Morocco's layered and diverse cultural landscapes — from mountain ranges and oases to fertile plains and coastal wetlands — to explore new responses to urbanisation, climate adaptation, and environmental degradation.

Students are encouraged to choose and elaborate on research threads related with, but not limited to:

- The design of sustainable urban development grounded in the natural landscape at multiple scales.
- The development of regional park systems that structure the territory, support ecological and water systems, and strengthen urban–rural relationships.

Research explorations in this theme may focus on urban regions such as Casablanca–Settat, where rapid growth meets vulnerable coastal and peri-urban forest systems like Bouskoura; or Rabat–Salé–Kénitra, where green-blue corridors along the Bouregreg valley intersect with dynamic agricultural fringes. In Marrakesh, the interface between urban expansion, arid landscapes, and seasonal wadis presents a unique spatial challenge. Other relevant contexts include Fès–Meknès, where historic cores sit within ecologically sensitive basins, and Tétouan–Chefchaouen, where mountainous terrain, forest preservation, and regional park initiatives converge in the Rif.

Students may select a context aligned with their personal interests and develop strategies that contribute to inclusive, resilient, and adaptive urban–regional futures. We are looking for critical, creative, and motivated individuals who want to help advance the discourse and practice of landscape-informed design in real-world settings.

Relevant disciplines include, but are not limited to: Landscape Transformation and Design, Landscape Architecture, Biodiversity and Ecology, Ecosystem Development, Water and Soil Management, Sustainable, Economy and Entrepreneurship (regional development, ecosystem services), Earth Observation and Ecosystem Monitoring, Land–Atmosphere and Climate Modelling, Governance of (just) transition

#03 Living with Water

Climate-related water system change affects buildings and cities through flooding or drought on the coasts and in the heart of countries. New strategies are urgently needed to respond to these challenges based on a holistic ecosystemic approach that acknowledges long-term development, integrates multi-scalar and multi-stakeholder perspectives.

Research topics will use a value-based approach to develop comprehensive visions and mission to address Morocco's current housing challenges, developing further the work done in the PortCityFutures programme and by the UNESCO Chair Water, Ports and Historic Cities. Students will build on earlier research and use transdisciplinary methodologies to address housing challenges in contemporary Morocco with major water-related infrastructural developments.

Two lines of investigation are particularly encouraged:
1. Morocco has long been a model for responding to water-related challenges, cities such as Marrakech depend on ingenious water systems that provide water for drinking or irrigation. The Water Museum in Morocco exemplifies the role of exhibitions and musea in promoting nature-based solutions for water management from gardens to buildings and neighborhoods. Building on traditional knowledge: How can we use these water systems as inspirations for ecosystemic approaches to the future development of Moroccan cities?

2. Morocco serves as the entrance gate to Africa. Cities like Tangiers or Casablanca have long accommodated flows of shipping by building lighthouses, coastal infrastructures, ports and major cities in their vicinity; they are also innovating in terms of new waterfront designs, from cruiseship terminals to heritage preservation. The recently awarded AIVP Prize Rufenacht for Tangiers exemplifies this. How can we long-term analysis and adaptive strategies, mapping, ethnographic investigation and research by design help develop ecosystemic future scenarios for Moroccan cities?

Relevant disciplines include, but are not limited to: Water and Soil Management, Hydrology, Sustainable Energy Technologies (e.g. water–energy nexus), Industrial Ecology, Development of Food Production Systems, Earth Observation and Ecosystem Monitoring, Climate Adaptation and Land–Atmosphere and Climate Modelling, Environmental and CSRD Legislation (international frameworks), Communication and Behavioural Studies, Governance of (just) transition.

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