

Mounir has the look of those people who know how to be fully present. His beautiful blue eyes have the joy of a child and he always blesses me with answers that contain wisdom and kindness. I remember meeting him after my first visit to his eco lodge Adrere Amellal, meaning 'the White Mountain' in the local language, which is located in the Siwa Oasis and even today feels very far away. It's one of the most remote oases in Egypt, located only a few kilometres from the Libyan border, in the middle of what they called 'the Great Sand Sea'. Siwa has been so isolated that the first recollections from Europeans date only from the '30s. Mounir visited the oasis in the '90s and fell in love with the pristine environment and the local architecture that he wanted to preserve. Since 1996 he's been perfecting and slowly changing his place. Entirely built with the characteristic local mix of mud and salt, it completely merges with the environment. I met Mounir

# MOUNIR NEAMATALLA

INTERVIEW BY OMAR SOSA  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY PIOTR NIEPSUJ

one spring morning at his apartment in an art deco building in the Giza district of Cairo. From his window you can see the Nile and hear the symphony of honks so characteristic of this city. He has been here pretty much all his life, except for a period in which he lived and studied in New York and the time he spends at the oasis. Today Mounir is a happy man, but he's far from having resolved all his problems. Over the past few decades people around Siwa have started drilling so many wells, so quickly, that water is pouring into the lake and its rising waters are destroying the surrounding flora and buildings, eventually affecting the salinity of the spring water reservoirs and endangering the whole ecosystem of the oasis. Realising how a small human action can change a whole environment that has remained unaltered for millennia makes me aware of how everything is connected and how often we live in the delusion that our actions don't have consequences.





I'm very interested in your work, and I think we can go back to that later, but I'd like you to tell me about your life. You were born here in Cairo, right?

Yes, I was born a block away.

Are your parents from here too?

My parents were born in Alexandria.

And did I hear you were living with your mom for a long time?

All my life in Egypt. When I moved abroad for a good 13 years, I was living alone. I did my undergraduate schooling in chemical engineering at the University of Wisconsin in



Madison, then went to New York to do my doctorate degree in the same field, and then shifted to environmental and quality management. That shift is a turning point in my life.

In what way?

When I was studying chemical engineering, I'd almost finished all my laboratory work before writing my dissertation. One year and I'd get my degree. All the time I was studying it was OK, because my father was a very loving disciplinarian. He mandated you with love, but he inculcated in you discipline. But when you get close to entering the real world, you tend to wonder what you're going to do. Was I

going to work for a petroleum company? Was I going to work for Monsanto? My goodness, it was a nightmare. But my life in New York was beautiful. I had my friends, I had my own world, and at university I had my discipline. Then I had a third element in my life: in order to earn a little bit more money to be able to afford to live off-campus, I was working with a blind professor. He'd lost his eyesight in the laboratory. He received a grant from the National Science Foundation and needed someone to read his papers, write his papers—to be his eyes. I applied and got the job.

You ended up spending three years with him, is that right?

Yes, I was really learning how to write papers, read papers, analyse papers, analyse data, what to look for and what not to look for, to write clearly, and to think clearly. He was a real scientist. He was part of the Oppenheimer Group and was a powerful man in his domain. One day I confided to him that I didn't know what to do after my studies. He asked me what my interests were, and I expressed what I'd really like to do in life. He said, 'Let me think about it'. And sure enough, a few weeks later, 'How about the environment?'

What did you feel when you heard that? Did something click?

It did, and when I said, 'But there's no environmental program', again he replied, 'Let me think about it'. A few weeks later, he came back and told me, 'We'll keep you here', and the university created a degree for me in environmental health and quality. I got my doctorate in 1976.

So can we say that you were the first one to study environmentalism in Columbia?

Yes, I ended up with a PhD in it. So I came back to Egypt and founded Environmental Quality International in Cairo. I wanted to do something for Egypt, with Egypt, and in Egypt. I always had Egypt in my mind. When I left my country, it was the Nasser years. It was very difficult to leave and come back. But when the country opened up, I came back home for vacation and wondered, 'What's happening to Cairo's garbage?' No one knew. They threw their garbage out the door and it disappeared. Then a friend of my mother's said she knew a nun that used to live among the garbage collectors and had a strong relationship with them. Her







name was Sœur Emmanuelle. She was a very powerful woman, and was compared to Mother Teresa. After I met her, our bond developed to the point that she came to visit me in New York and stayed in my apartment. She ended up taking me on a fundraising trip to the World Bank for the garbage collectors of Cairo. From there I saw Professor Schultz working on systems that could convert waste to energy and so on. All kinds of advanced technology. How do you separate this mechanically, this mush of waste? Every bit was used, down to the cigarette box.

That's interesting. So that's how you started working in the field?

open to exchanges and knowledge. Listening to people that may not know how to read or write but have a strong knowledge.

It was an extension of your education.

Exactly. It was an education for me personally, and for my colleagues at the office. This was the foundation of EQI, and now the company has grown as an advisory services firm. Our mission is to promote sustainable development in Egypt and the region. It's not just about finding work. It's about having meaning in your work, showing the value of your work. Money can't be an objective in life; it's an elusive commodity. If you're searching for



No, my first gaze on that specifically was to look at the life and work of the garbage collectors of Cairo so that they could become the nascent waste management industry serving the city on the grounds of sustainability. They were far ahead of us because they already practised this idea of recycling and appreciated that there's value in waste. And my company was founded around that.

So, it all started there.

It all started there. I began seeing the merits of having social scientists and anthropologists work with sociologists, engineers—this idea of mixing disciplines, mixing people, and being

money, you'll lose your way. You might find money, but you won't find fulfilment. Fulfilment comes from being completely enchanted by the process of life. It shouldn't be like, 'I'm going to work, oh my god'. It's about living a wholesome life where whatever you do is instantly gratifying. This luxury though, which existed in the early stages, faded away 15 years after we founded the company because I had 120 highly paid people and I found myself just chasing contracts.

Working just to pay everyone.

We weren't doing what we wanted to do; we were doing what our clients wanted us to do.



This was the mid '90s. At that point, I had a meeting with my colleagues and I said, 'Listen, we have top-notch human resources all around us here. We have ethics and values. It doesn't make sense if we don't invest in it. And we have financial resources. So let's find a place where we can demonstrate the viability of the principles we've been advocating and advising on'. And so an anthropologist at the office pointed us to Siwa Oasis. That was a turning point.

That's how you first went to Siwa?

Yes, Siwa became an investment opportunity. The environmental enterprise ended up in

there. There isn't a single person I work with in Siwa that I don't love.

I think that's something you experience when you're there. My feeling every time I go is that nobody's really running it. Everybody's just doing their thing.

The best they can. And I don't insist that they do their best. I can't say that everything or every person is perfect. It might be an exaggeration, but we've had our disappointments, or I've had my disappointments, fundamental things that I'd do differently now, but that's irrelevant. Being human means making mistakes. Being wise means learning from your mistakes.



Siwa, and I got the privilege of being a happy man, once again. I'm fulfilled with a harmony between my work and life. I'm very grateful to have found it. When I went to Siwa for the first time, I was about 50 years old. I feel more energetic now than I did when I went there.

When you went, did you have any idea of what you wanted to do?

I made the point that sustainable living is literally what we should all want to achieve. It's the idea I just mentioned, about joy in life, sharing joy, relating to each other, relating to nature, relating to our cultural heritage, being peaceful, and loving all these elements I found



Everything you're describing to me is about enjoying the process. It's not really about having a goal or a finality.

It's engaging in the process, but being guided by some principles. I mean, you have to always elevate your values and principles. They're not set in stone, but there are certain things that need to be preserved. For example, I think there's a big issue with the word 'competition'. It's been oversold and wrongly so, and it's done a lot of damage to the world. I'd like to re-market collaboration with the same intensity that we marketed competition in our schools, our education, and our ethics and values. We'd have a much higher quality





of life. Collaboration is 10 times better than competition. A natural way to live is to see what we can do together to be better. But this idea of elevating competition to the point where it becomes a divide in education, in business and sports—what's wrong with playing a game and losing? What's so euphoric about winning? You do your best. And you should be pleased if you lose and congratulate the one who won, and the reverse. Who gave the right for anyone to assume they're better than another?

What was Siwa like when you arrived? Especially culturally, what was so special and what did you want to preserve?

subsistence economy; in my opinion that's a form of wealth, but in contemporary times we'd say that's an economic failure.

Do you think it's changed a lot since then? If so, for better or worse?

Yes, it's changed. Better and worse are relative terms. I must say, I don't have quite the same emotions when I go now; modernity has invaded the oasis like it does in many other places, and sometimes I feel I'm partly responsible for that. Bringing the attention of the oasis to modern wealth had predictable results that I didn't take note of, as I was engaged in conserving the nature and cultural assets of this



The most precious thing was that it was a pristine environment and a pristine culture at the same time. People were connected to nature in every way. It was an exhilarating experience to recognise that in the 21st century there are still human beings that are deeply connected to the natural elements with strong cultural roots. The scenic beauty and very special nature of their architecture were two things that really struck me. It's an area where the natural elements have a conversation on their own, and with the architecture. The human element was also intriguing because it was a journey into the past, a journey into biblical times. That's the positive side. On the other hand, it was a

place, leveraging them to new heights, and creating a sustainable evolution. From a conventional point of view, yes, the oasis is much wealthier, the people are much happier; but the question is: are they much happier? And that question is very hard to answer.

Siwa had an ancient Shali village that was destroyed. Did you try to recreate that with the architecture of the lodge?

The architecture of Adrere Amellal was inspired by the old fortress of Shali. It played a very important role, as did the white mountain. Both were critical elements. The third element, of course, is the environment in general



in Siwa, in which artists brought the skills, imagination, and energy that helped us move forward in our journey to create something that was environmentally friendly and culturally grounded. All these factors play together in many inexplicable ways. You just have to open up to the energies and conversations with your surroundings. It isn't a vision of an architect or one man, it's a collective journey.

**Talking of architects, how did India Mahdavi become involved?**

We're related through my sister; India comes from my brother-in-law's family. India's mother is Egyptian. I met her father in the mid '90s and

experience and the space, or if there was something happening that was invasive. It wasn't the utility that drove us, it was the beauty. It was the love of the other. This is an endeavour in love, it isn't an endeavour in creation, and it's very hard to explain the end results as it's very difficult to explain the process.

I really want to ask you about the food experience at Adrere Amellal. Being in the desert, with a muted colour palette, and with absolutely no sound pollution at all, you appreciate the flavours and the company even more.

I think that each one of our senses is a benediction. The reason I have the type of service



he kept on telling me that I had to meet his daughter India. Every time I went to Paris, I tried to reach India, but she was busy building her company and career. I didn't fall into the equation until one day, she came to Siwa and that was it. Since then, we've had a lifelong friendship, we're almost inseparable. She's added immense value to what we've done in Siwa.

It's hard to imagine there was a master plan for the layout. Was it all planned, or did it happen sporadically, based on needs?

It wasn't planned. Every morning, with every step, we looked around us to see if there was something happening that was beautifying the

you experienced is because it's not just about the food, it's also the way it's presented and served. One of the blessings of my childhood was being in a family where there were long conversations around the dinner table. I've designed a culinary experience in Siwa that I wanted to share because it pleased me so much growing up. I fondly remember these meetings around the dinner table with friends and family throughout my life. Then I go and live in a city like New York, I travel, and what do I see? I go to a restaurant. The table attendant comes. I have to look at the menu. Then I have to ask what it is. Then I have to choose this. Oh my god! And then





in the end I have to pay the bill and sit and wait until my card works.

It's a constant interruption.

It's a formula. I wanted to recreate respect for the senses, the relationship between the food and the beauty, to do something with care and to simplify it so that it's not too complicated in the end. I wanted to eliminate all the paraphernalia. It's not just the quality of the food. Sometimes it's also about the simplicity. It's the comfort of being around the dinner table and the comfort of getting rid of all the distractions that interrupt the holy reunion around sharing food.

get the ingredients from wherever we can get them. We've adapted our cuisine to whatever the earth provides us with. Again, it's the conversation you have with your surroundings.

And surrendering to what's being offered to you. Because I think that's what I experience when I'm there. I surrender to the experience. There are certain things that you learn through life that you want to share with others. I've tried to avoid things that disturb me, as much as possible, and try to maximise what pleases me. So, part of what you experience is the love I have to share with you. That has gratified me in my life.



I've heard most of the ingredients come from your garden in Siwa. Was it challenging to grow such a prolific garden in the desert? Initially it wasn't, because there were no problems with salinity and the level of the lake was the same as it was for thousands of years. But over the past 20 years, water management has become challenging and agriculture is more complicated. However, overall, I think we have almost all our vegetables harvested from our garden and irrigated with natural spring water. One of the unique elements that I've learnt to appreciate is designing our menus around what's available, instead of imposing what we want to eat and trying to

One of my favourite features at Adrere Amel-lal is your decision not to have electricity—no power outlets, no lights. How do you think that affects the way people relate to the space? All the noise and all the glare that pollutes our daily lives doesn't exist anymore. So we see things differently, we hear things differently, and we relate differently, not just to the spaces and the surroundings, but among ourselves too. The conversations are different, the feelings are different, and the emotions are on a higher level.

It almost seems to be a trend now among very rich people to pay a lot of money to go to



places where they're deprived of all modern technology, because it has become addictive. In your place it seems natural, and that putting a lightbulb in would ruin the beauty and soothing balance you find when you're there. When we started Adrere Amellal, we had no commercial content in mind. I was doing something for my own personal engagement, where I felt I was constantly doing something right. I can't quite define it, but those are the principles that have guided my life, that were at the forefront of everything we did. But you're so right to say that more and more of those places are now emerging on the planet, so that's good news. The fact that they're only accessible to the rich is something that we need to give careful consideration to. Also, the fact that those places aren't adjoined to the natural elements is something we should pay attention to. If Adrere Amellal had to have one main value, it's drawing attention to the fact that human beings are part of the natural state of all living and non-living elements around us, and when we tune in, we're really engaged in the experience.

It's very beautiful to hear that because, today, whenever you travel around the world most of the options you find are over-planned hotels that look like they've been designed far away on a computer and transplanted into a place. They totally lack any kind of spirit.

What you just said is so hard to explain to conventional institutions. Because they're literally bent towards planning for the future and their needs, according to their identity and structure. It's just about bringing your vision and desires to fruition. There's very little space for letting yourself get carried away in your work anymore. For me, the real luxury in Adrere Amellal is precisely that. You don't plan your day, you don't plan your stay, and you get carried away into this beautiful experience that is, may I say, one of a kind and always memorable. There are always new things for us to do. And it's exciting because guests come and give us ideas, sometimes just a simple recipe. The place has been constantly enriched because it established a kind of appropriation. You come and you feel it's yours. The first time you come, you're testing, but then you develop a relationship, and you feel you own the place. And then what happens? You begin bringing your friends and, in turn, you become a co-host.

One of the things you're talking about is sharing love, and that's contagious. I feel like the lodge is in constant change, like it's being constantly rebuilt. The fact that the whole construction is made of mud and salt, things that are transient and could disappear with rain or wind, is very poetic.

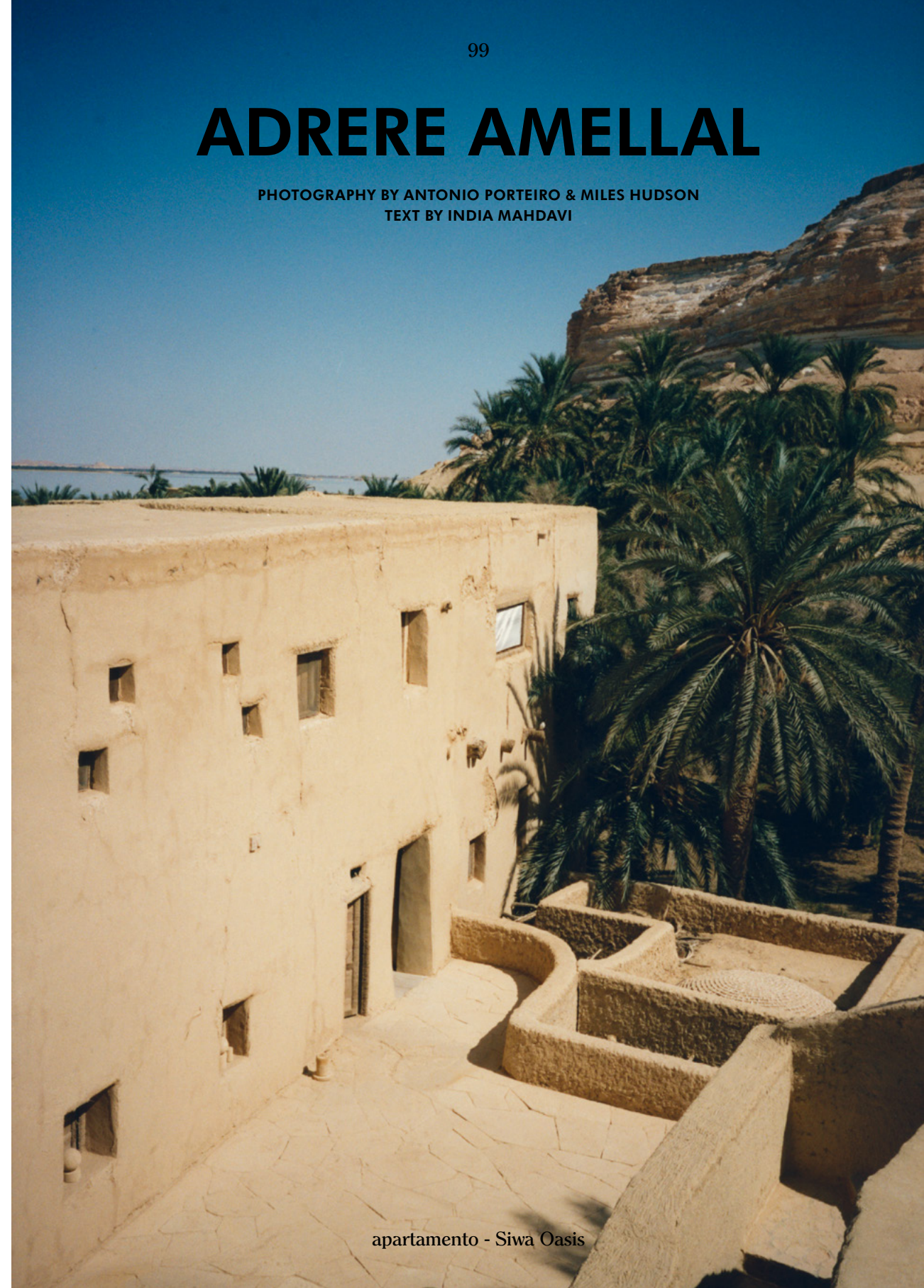
The desire to see this place survive through eternity has always existed in my personal life because I love it. I think it's a testimony to the harmony between what man does and how man lives with nature. I would love it to last, but then again, I know there could be a natural disaster. There could be a rainfall that lasts three weeks, and this place may just disappear. And then you know what comes to my mind? What happens to the ceramic toilet? What happens to the sink? The rest will blend and go back to nature, but these are the eyesores that I'd leave behind. I'm disturbed that I've used some plastic piping. But then in my quest for positive thinking, these can be easily picked up and reused. Life is a big mystery. What is time? Are we just energy? Is what we call death and what we fear simply a transformation from one form of energy to another form of energy, as our ancestors have always said? Is life indeed perpetual to the soul, or is it just now and there's nothing after our material part is no longer here? All these are big mysteries and big questions, but I feel comfortable assuming that I'll always be able to care over Siwa in perpetuity. Maybe it's one of those guardian spirits that have helped me. Maybe I'll be with them one day guarding the place. I don't know.

I'd like to think that the hundreds or thousands of people that have visited Siwa are going to be carrying that energy. And that's an energy that's going to be there forever.

That's true. What you said is so much more profound than what I said. It's in that multiplicity that you have safety.

# ADRERE AMELLAL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANTONIO PORTEIRO & MILES HUDSON  
TEXT BY INDIA MAHDAVI







I remember the first time I went to Siwa back in 1998: my son Miles was two years old and my father had been speaking to me about Mounir and his extraordinary initiative for I don't know how long. After a day's drive, I recall arriving in the pitch-black night with only bonfires and the stars above to guide us. I remember the feeling as if it were yesterday—belonging to planet Earth, belonging to the universe. I was in awe. Adrere Amellal wasn't yet running as it

is today, but all of Mounir's principles were already in place: no electricity, vernacular architecture revolving around the mountain, and local produce from the organic garden.

I got to know Mounir as we wandered around Adrere, and I did what I usually do: give advice when I'm not asked to. In Mounir, I found a man who not only listened but took immediate action. When I returned to Siwa—I used to go every six months—Mounir had put all these improvements in place, and it became a habit of ours to stroll around the site and make decisions: some brilliant, some less so. I'd usually walk around with carbon-copy notepads, keep one, and give one to the workers. We'd have a bucketful of salt which allowed us to define new plans by tracing them on the sand. Construction would start immediately and within a few hours we'd see the building go up under the expertise of beautiful Ahmad. We'd then decide on window placements and dimensions according to the views we wished to frame. There was no predefined plan, no predefined drawings. It was utter spontaneity. It was conceiving architecture as a sculpture. Modelling it like a sculpture. We practised architecture in the most primitive, instinctive, and joyful way, always pushing material and techniques to new boundaries.

As years went by and our little routine took place, Mounir invited me to design his house in Tamazid on a rock formation in the middle of the palm trees. I felt the need to build the vernacular in a much more contemporary way. The house was designed as a rectangle over two floors, with high ceilings and large rooms, a bit like a loft in the desert. Everything was more spacious: the bathrooms, the light, and the openings. Instead of using sand colours, I introduced new finishes. In fact, we redefined a new typology of building with the window frames, the doors, the chairs, and the side tables. At one point, I had the idea to design a collection of objects using salt as a material after it was harvested from the salt lakes in blocks. I started with light votives, where the salt crystals reflect light in the most magical way; this was so relevant as all of Mounir's spaces are solely candlelit. Soon, Siwi people understood the possibilities of salt carving and salt objects. Today there isn't a shop in the Oasis that doesn't sell salt objects. I think this was my real contribution to Siwa. My experience there is so rich in human encounters, laughs, and co-creation (a term coined by Mounir), I'd probably need to dedicate a book to it. For me, Mounir has made an immense contribution to eco-tourism, in the world and particularly in Egypt. Taking such radical and bold decisions in the beginning and continuing to follow his convictions and ethics—he's a true inspiration to me.





















