

THE CHIC OF TANGIER

FOR DESIGNER BRUNO FRISONI AND ARTIST HERVÉ VAN DER STRAETEN, CREATING A HOME IN MODERN-DAY MOROCCO WAS ABOUT RESPECTING THE PAST AND PUSHING THE ENVELOPE.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY VENETIA DEARDEN

CITY AT THEIR FEET

On their upstairs patio, Bruno Frisoni (left) sits on a palm-tree-trunk coffee table that's been outfitted with casters, and Hervé Van der Straeten is in a wood chair friend and author Umberto Pasti had made by young artisans near his house in the Moroccan country. The matte-beige zellige tiles on the floor were handmade in Fez and designed by Van der Straeten, who drew his inspiration from tiles used throughout Spain and Morocco. The metal lanterns next to Van der Straeten came from the Tangier medina.

It's 9:30 p.m. on a Friday in Tangier, and Bruno Frisoni and Hervé Van der Straeten are tending to their guests, making introductions, refilling wineglasses and directing the Moroccan staff (chicken tagine on the counter, olive pits in the ramekins). At their home in the medina, the old citadel perched on a hill in the port city, the couple is hosting friends, among them New York photographer Johnny Rozsa (known for his unretouched celebrity portraits), Jamie Creel (co-owner of Manhattan cabinet of curiosities Creel & Gow), French interior designer Jean-Louis Deniot (whose projects include residences in Dubai, New Delhi, and Corsica, France) and William Holloway (cofounder of antiques auction website 1stdibs.com).

Frisoni, 54, creative director of shoe and accessories brand Roger Vivier, and Van der Straeten, 48, a designer and artist known for his mixed-media jewelry and furniture, are part of the new guard in Tangier, the Moroccan city 350 miles north of Marrakech and just a two-hour ferry ride across the Strait of Gibraltar from Spain. The city, whose narrative has for so long been shrouded in iniquitous hashish smoke and defined by American Paul Bowles (who famously wrote *The Sheltering Sky* in 1949 and lived his final years here) and Woolworth heiress Barbara Hutton (whose



“WE’RE NOT MOROCCAN,” SAYS FRISONI, “SO IT DIDN’T FEEL RIGHT TO CREATE A HOUSE



former home, Sidi Hosni palace, has become something of a legendary, if slightly tired, architectural touchstone), is undergoing a kind of image transformation. This new generation of expats, mostly in fashion or design—a group that may come to include Tom Ford, Alber Elbaz and Philippe Starck, who vacation here—is drawn to the city’s burgeoning real estate market and looking for a getaway residence. (They’re especially grateful for the two-hour EasyJet flight to Paris.) “It’s so close but feels so exotic,” says Van der Straeten, “and not just Moroccan, like in Marrakech. Here it’s a mix: Moroccan, Spanish, English, French and Italian.”

For Frisoni and Van der Straeten, their affair with the city wasn’t exactly love at first sight. “I hated it when I first came in 1997,” says Frisoni. “It’s dusty and windy, too hot and too cold. It’s a place of extremes.” Van der Straeten is more diplomatic: “It’s like a strange cocktail. You first taste it and think, What is that? Then you have more and it gets interesting.”

They began spending more weekends here, staying with Hermès Home creative director Yves Taralon and meeting more people

THAT WAS STRICTLY IN THAT STYLE.”

in the close-knit expat community—which, in a city with few attractions to speak of, was key. “The medina is small,” says Frisoni, “and there aren’t amazing restaurants as you’d imagine. The city is much more about having private dinners and parties at home.”

In 2002, when friends suggested he take a look at a recently up-for-sale house near Hutton’s Sidi Hosni, Frisoni could see that its bones were good, even with its odd inner-courtyard configuration, a remnant of a time when Moroccan sons and daughters were expected to live with their parents after marriage, so homes had extra bedrooms and salons exclusively used for the wedding night.

Frisoni and Van der Straeten quickly did away with the interior rooms, keeping only the outside walls, and knocked out a second staircase that blocked the light. Van der Straeten expanded the window frames and installed large black lacquered metal frames all along the second floor, flooding the space with natural sunlight. “If you notice around the medina,” says Frisoni, “very few houses have big windows.” Explains Van der Straeten, “It’s very Spanish to have small



MIX AND MATCH

Van der Straeten found the chair on his first trip to Beijing. The couple purchased the thuya-wood doorway from an antiques dealer in Rabat, “one of the few places you can still find old doors,” says Frisoni. The flooring (throughout the house) is a Portuguese marble inspired by Casa de Pilatos in Seville. Opposite, from top: Light comes in through black metal windows designed by Van der Straeten, who also created the silver aluminum Capsule stool; the cyan curtains are Dedar, and the Pascal Mourgue chairs were upholstered with blue fabric from the fondouk, the weaver’s market in Tangier; Frisoni found the yellow drawers from Paul Smith London. The guest bedroom features a headboard from Fez that Van der Straeten had painted green and striped wall carpets from a souk in Aleppo, Syria, which the couple had to replace and repair after insects damaged the originals; the red horse lamps came from Puglia, and the traditionally painted wooden nightstands are from the Tangier medina.

BLUE PERIOD

Frisoni found the two wood-and-natural-cord chairs (left) as well as the wood-and-vegetable-leather Swedish chairs (ca. 1957) at an antiques dealer in Paris's St.-Germain-des-Prés. Van der

Straeten designed the two Capsule coffee table/stools, here in white lacquer, as well as the bronze-and-alabaster chandelier. The backless sofa upholstered in royal-blue Dedar fabric came from the Tangier medina, and the white lacquered metal '70s-style lamp beside it is from a Paris flea market. Frisoni found the Syrian bird sculptures on the mantle at Boubker, "one of Tangier's best antiques dealers." The bougainvillea seen through the window is outgrowth from neighbor Barbara Hutton's garden.



ones to block heat and protect privacy, but we have nothing to hide!"

The interiors can best be described as Moroccan-Mediterranean. Though the home is in Tangier, the couple didn't want to create a literal representation. "We're not Moroccan," says Frisoni, "so it didn't feel right to make a house strictly in that style."

As the two had journeyed throughout the greater region—Italy, Andalusia, Syria—those influences were brought to bear. In the guest bedroom, the walls are covered in multistriped carpets from Aleppo, while the headboard is an old door from Fez that Van der Straeten bought from an antiques dealer and had painted a muted green. And though the wooden nightstands come from the medina right outside their door, the red ceramic equine lamps that sit atop them returned with the couple after a trip to Grottaglie, the region in Puglia known for its ceramics. "The entire area is so inspiring that when we travel, we just start bringing back pieces that fit without really having to think about it," says Frisoni.

What makes the home especially relevant for today, however, is the nod to modernity. Frisoni and Van der Straeten are not strict interpreters of a prescribed era or mood; there's always a bold color to punch up a room or a starkly geometric piece to retrain the eye. It can be found in the '70s yellow Paul Smith drawers in the living room or the fragments of Andy Warhol wallpaper. The most striking visual is Van der Straeten's cubic chandelier, which brings a trope as classically Moroccan as the archway into the modern age. "I like working with color and fabrics," says Frisoni, a fashion designer through and through. Van der Straeten's interests lean more toward architecture and hardware (he chose the flooring, created the windows, outfitted the fireplace)—perhaps unsurprising considering his sculptural works in Plexiglas, ebony and bronze.

Just don't label Van der Straeten an interior designer. "I think it's superstition, because Hervé really did design it," Frisoni says, "but he probably doesn't want you to say so because he's afraid of people saying, 'Oh, you do interior design!'" Considering the number of tastemakers who have walked across the house's white Portuguese marble floors or mingled underneath the pergola on the upstairs patio (and that's only one Friday night), the secret may be out. —J.C.