



Home again

Her resulting womenswear label puts a contemporary spin on Moroccan traditional styles and textiles to create vibrant silk kaftans, elegant woollen capes and richly patterned brocade bags.

Because all of Bennani's designs are made by hand in Tangier using locally sourced fabrics, it made sense to establish a base in her hometown. When she returned, her initial intention was to split her time between Morocco and the UK. But when the pandemic struck, she was forced to choose between the two and decided to move back to Tangier full-time. Bennani admits to missing London greatly at first but the move afforded her a creative freedom that would have been difficult to attain abroad. "In Europe, you can either become a Western designer or a Moroccan cliché, so it's hard to really find your voice," she says. "Here in Morocco, we're still building our creative industries. So as a local brand you have the opportunity to bring your own perspective to the story and not always be responding to a particular agenda."

The empty family house seemed the obvious choice to become not only her home in Tangier but also that of the brand. Upon her return, Bennani immediately set about fixing it up. "I thought that it would take a month maximum," she says. "I thought, what could be so difficult about removing some wallpaper, scraping the walls and giving them a good paint?" If only. The renovation of the ground floor alone took

six months, with Bennani bringing her father on board to give her a hand. "It was fun to do it with my dad," she says. "I hadn't spent much time with him after 15 years abroad, so it was really cool to do that project together. It was special for him too because it was his childhood home."

The duo enlisted a skilled team of craftspeople to lend their expertise to the project. "We worked with some amazing artisans," says Bennani. "There were some who knew how to revive the granite flooring, how to fix the cement tiles that were missing and restore everything back to its original glory." Supporting these trades was also important to Bennani. "Moroccan society is built on craft," she adds. "Every city will have a quarter for woodworkers, carpenters and metalsmiths. You can have everything made bespoke and by doing so, you're contributing to real people with real trades. It's a value that we shouldn't be losing."

Refurbishing the house meant peeling back the layers left by each generation. "This room used to be a massive Moroccan salon, with beds lining the walls and corner-to-corner traditional carpet," says Bennani in the living room. "When I stripped that back, I found the original pink floor tiles from the 1950s." As the house was built as a French-style residence, Bennani's grandfather subsequently made various adjustments to the property to suit his family's needs and tastes. "He added the kitchen at the back and this kitsch little tiled water corner with a sink, which is important because we eat with our hands. He also had a real love of craft and added all the carved wood, marble and granite. That's what I really love about the space – that it's a marriage between Western architecture and a Moroccan lifestyle."

As the showroom for New Tangier, the house and its interiors also had to reflect the label's ethos. "The brand is all about craft," says Bennani. "So the idea was to have everything either secondhand or made by a craftsman. Nothing comes from a factory." Much of the vintage furnishings come from Casabarata, Tangier's sprawling indoor-outdoor flea market and souk. It was here that Bennani found various 1930s pieces to match the house's art deco design, including a glimmering beaded chandelier and a curving glass-and-steel drinks trolley. These are matched with traditional Moroccan pieces, such as an intricately embroidered wall hanging from Fez and mashrabiya side tables with latticed wooden panels. "I've been collecting bits and pieces over the years," says Bennani. "A lot of the furniture is very dear to my heart. It's an eclectic mix but I believe that when we love things, they'll connect at some point."

In this residence, that theory is certainly proven right: the French, Moroccan and global influences are given new context and energy. Like Tangier itself, this is a house with countless stories to tell – and many more to come. ——— κ

1. Bennani sitting in front of a fabric wall hanging made in Fez
2. The house's colourful kitchen, added by Bennani's grandfather
3. Upholstered side table from Casabarata market atop the granite floor tiles
4. Decorative arrows add a splash of colour
5. Bennani's grandparents take pride of place
6. Vintage furnishings in the New Tangier showroom



1

"In Europe, you can either become a Western designer or a Moroccan cliché, so it's hard to really find your voice. Here in Morocco, you have the opportunity to bring your own perspective to the story"



2



3



4



6



Homecomings can be bittersweet. When Kenza Bennani, founder of womenswear label New Tangier, returned to Morocco's fourth-biggest city in 2019, she found the beauty of her childhood home hidden beneath dust and debris. There, she was able to give renewed purpose to the 1930s art deco building, collaborating with her father and craftspeople to rejuvenate their former home and turn it into a showroom for Tangier new and old.

A framed picture of her grandparents hangs above the fireplace in Kenza Bennani's home in Tangier. The young couple stand dressed in flowing djellaba robes and gaze warmly from the scene, surveying the home they occupied for much of their lives. "I really love this picture," says Bennani, who moved into the house four years ago. "This is like my altar to them."

With its elaborate stuccoed ceiling, marble-tiled floor and a yellow glass-panelled doorway, the house is tucked away in Marshan, a leafy neighbourhood that sits on a plateau above the city. The cliffs that line its northern periphery are a popular spot to catch the sunset across the Strait of Gibraltar and, on clear days, there are views all the way to Spain. Marshan stretches inland from the coast and is an architectural melting pot of elegant, whitewashed riads, Spanish-style villas and chunky Bauhaus buildings dripping with bougainvillea.

"It's a very community-focused neighbourhood," says Bennani as she leads us along the corridor. "There are so many families living here that have been here for a very long time." Her own family is no different. Bennani's home is one of a handful of 1930s art deco houses in Marshan, leftover from when Morocco was still under French colonial rule. "The house was built by a French doctor and then in the 1950s it became the dorms of the American School of Tangier," says Bennani. "In 1958 it was divided and sold to two Moroccan families – one of which was my grandfather's." Bennani's father was raised in this house and she was born here the year her grandfather died. "We lived here until I turned two," she says. "We'd come to look after my grandmother. She stayed here until the mid-1990s. When the home became too big for her, she moved into a smaller flat and this house was basically just closed up."

It remained that way for decades. Vines crept around the colourfully tiled kitchen and a thick layer of dust gathered along the intricately carved doorways. It wasn't until Bennani returned to Tangier in 2019 that the cobwebs were cleared. She had been living abroad for 15 years, studying design in Madrid and working in Italy before heading to London, where she worked for the likes of Jimmy Choo and Louis Vuitton. In 2014 she struck out with her own brand, New Tangier, inspired by her hometown.

"I thought, how could you materialise a city that is a crossroad between all these different civilisations, all these cultures? How can I turn that into something?"

Photographer — Alex Crétey-Systemans
Writer — Hester Underhill



1. Bright living room at the heart of Kenza Bennani's 1930s art deco home, featuring tiled floors and a stuccoed ceiling
2. Bennani's grandfather added intricate plasterwork and granite tiles to the house after taking possession of it in 1958