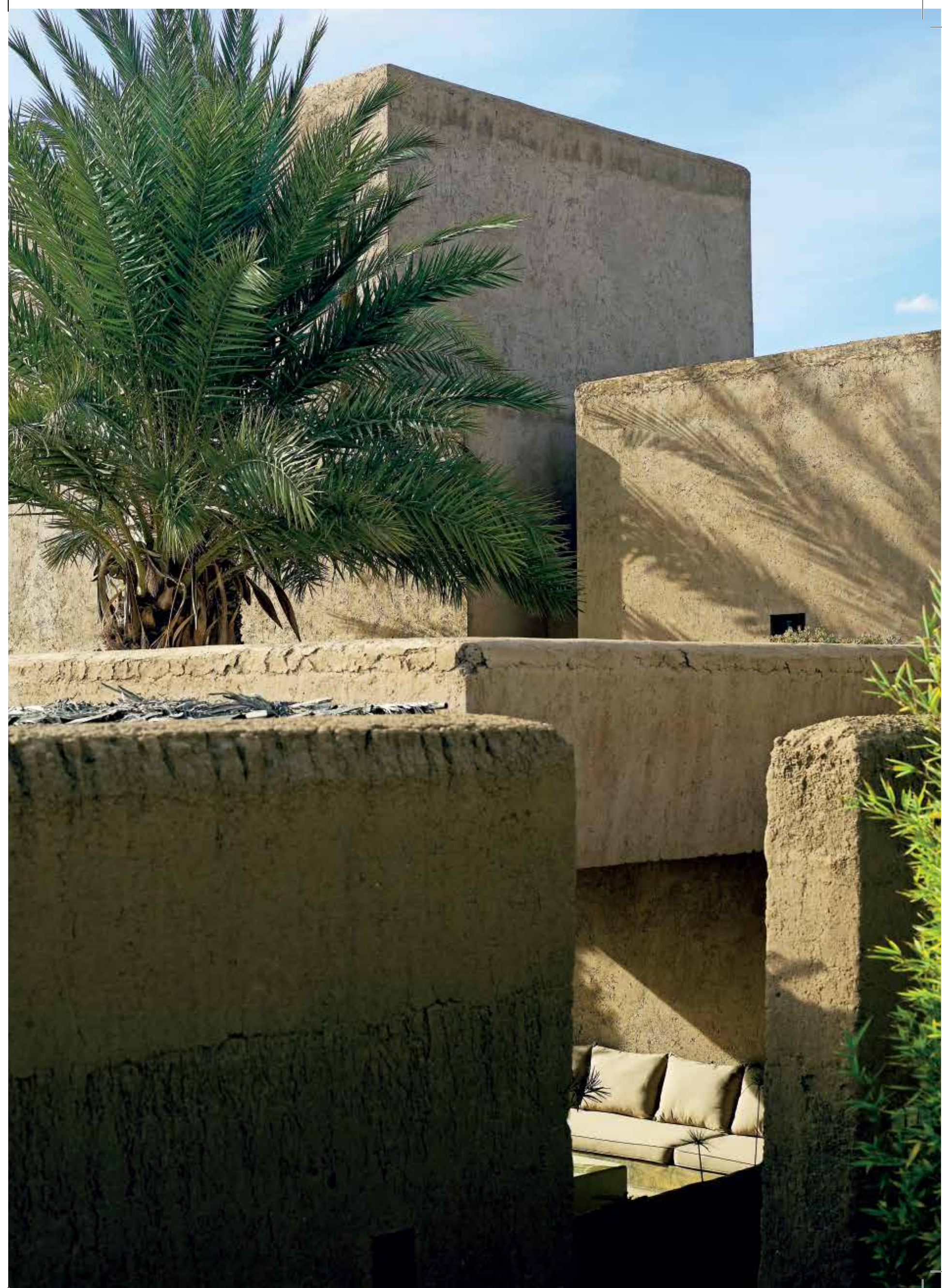




VILLA D

In its arid location, water becomes a precious commodity with elemental appeal.

Contemporary structural forms are created using traditional materials like earth bricks.





**VILLA D
(2004)**



STUDIO KO



**AL OUIDANE,
MOROCCO**

A stone's throw from Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers' tour de force, the Pompidou Centre, in a tiny street in the Marais, is the office of Studio KO. The practice has a reputation for both uncovering the past and diverting from it – an approach illustrated by their working space, a nineteenth-century garment factory housing a twenty-

The house is characterised by a free-flowing plan, with wide openings between spaces.

first-century architectural atelier. Traces of the building's history have been retained but the modernity is evident in the spatial arrangement and the choices in furniture, lighting and art that declare an entirely contemporary mindset.

Immediately after Karl Fournier and Olivier Marty finished their architecture studies in 2000 at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, they opened up their own practice, Studio KO. Fournier admits, 'We pay for it every day. Usually, experience can be gained on someone else's time but for 12 years we have learnt on our own.'

Their work involves revitalising existing buildings as much as creating new ones – in both instances they are inspired by the context, be that the landform or an existing structure. In a restaurant project, Café de la Poste (2006), sited inside a colonial house in Marrakech, 'It didn't feel right or *juste* to create a modern solution,' according to Fournier. 'The existing space simply didn't feel it had the capacity to absorb something too contemporary.'

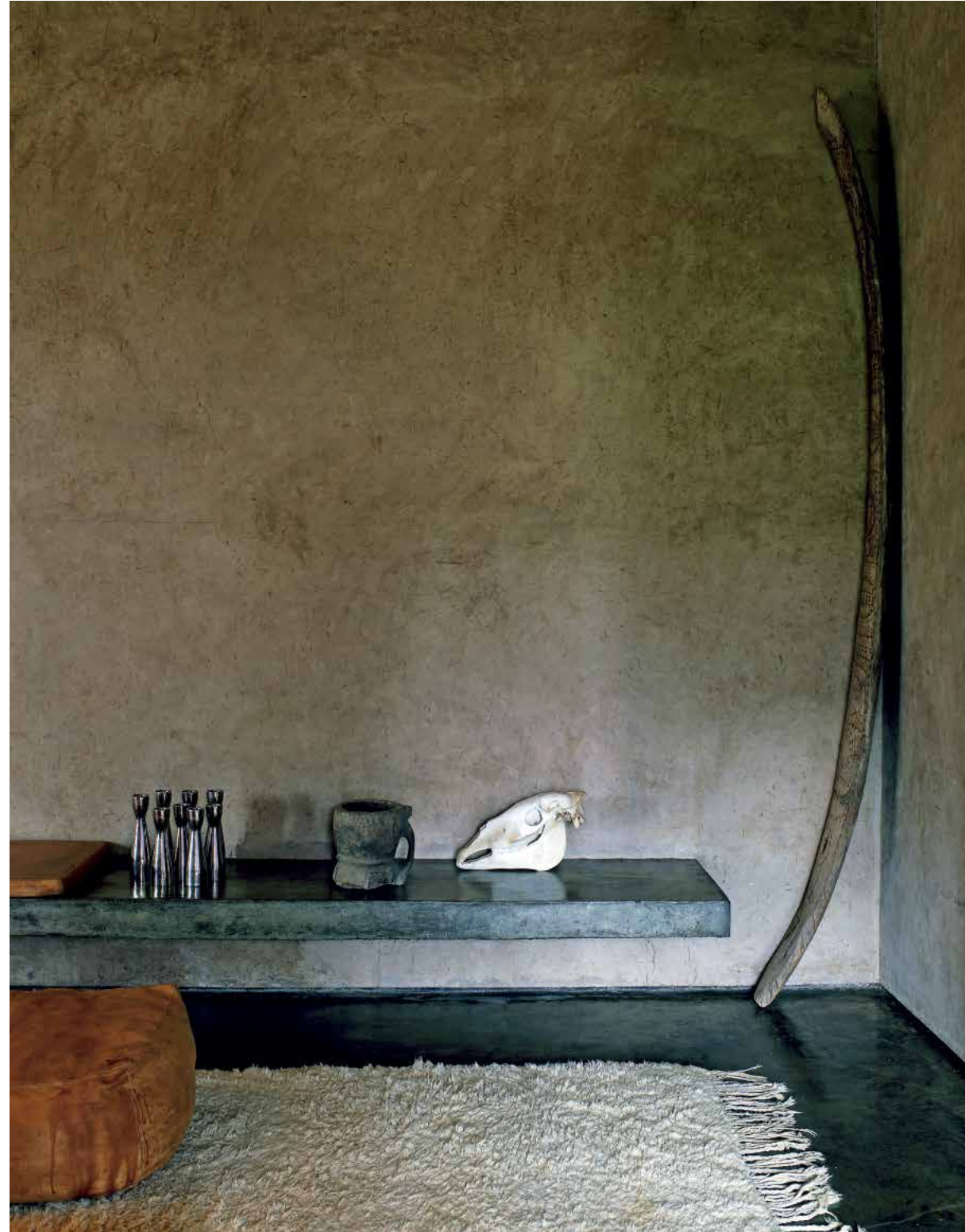
Fournier and Marty first visited Morocco as students. 'We loved it from our first contact and met people there who changed our lives,' says Fournier. 'Hence we have a strong relationship with the country and wanted to make it a more significant part of our lives.' They opened an office in Marrakech in 2001, initially to oversee a house near Tangier for a member of the Hermès family. 'It was difficult to follow construction work and so we set up a small office to do just that,' says Fournier. 'Gradually it got bigger and bigger and now, with major projects happening, it is a big part of what we do. We didn't really consciously make a decision; it has just happened of its own creation.' Similarly, a London office was opened in 2012 as demand grew for their work in the UK, including a retail outlet for Australian brand Aesop and a boutique hotel project in an ex-fire station in London's West End, for Andre Balazs.

The commission for Villa D came from a French couple, with four children, who wanted a home and retreat that was robust and functional but also embraced the culture in a contemporary way. Drawing inspiration from the landscape can be a challenge when the site is dry and flat with earth and palm trees as the main protagonists.

'We decided to convince the client to build only with earth, which was an ecological approach but uncommon at the time,' says Fournier. They set about using sun-dried bricks,

Treating the interior walls with cheap kitchen oil enhances the patina of the natural colour variations.

Custom-made furniture characterises Studio KO's approach to interiors.



reusing the earth from the site, to give the effect that the house was not simply set on the land but was an integral part of it. 'When you see the house from far away, it is really the same colour as the surrounding landscape and has the effect of something that has emerged naturally from the earth itself,' says Marty.

The architects admit that this building was a journey for them as they undertook a theoretical study to explore the building method and use of earth bricks. 'One of the reasons we wanted to work in Morocco was to use local materials and practices about to disappear, and help protect those artisanal skills,' says Fournier. Learning from skilled local workers was part of the process. 'This was our first project, our first private house, in a new country with new technologies – it was very significant for us.'

However, Studio KO was determined not to go to Morocco and work in a purely traditional way. They were aware of the opportunity to create a new architectural language – one that is climate and site relevant, that draws on heritage and local skills, but that is appropriate for people wanting a contemporary lifestyle. 'We wanted to design for clients living in this generation but with meaningful echoes of the past,' says Fournier.

Their understanding of 'modernity' is not about technologies, but about ways of seeing, an attitude, an approach, and an awareness of how to take things from the past and from the present and join them together. According to Fournier, 'It is our modernity, not a lazy white box without acknowledgement of local culture.'

Villa D is formed by a layered series of walls, volumes and window openings with an enigmatic sense of approach. That planned approach is based on the French word 'chicane', which can mean interrupted, intercepted, and, in this sense, something of a deviation. 'It is a progression, things appear, perhaps a little patio, a seating area, water, it is a journey of arrival, it is not direct,' says Fournier.

'The clients wanted a house that was elementary, meaning something that was very close to nature, using earth and water,' says Marty. 'But they also wanted the house to be sincere, and because the client didn't like large windows, we hid the windows as much as we could and designed them as a series of lines scored in the building.'

While mindful that water is both useful and rare, it is integrated into the site. The landscape is dry, and so too are the building and materials; the introduction of water in the form of ponds brings movement and attracts birds, pulling life inside the courtyard. The use of water, too, signifies the convergence of the traditional and modern, and is Studio KO's interpretation of the fountain commonly found in Moroccan homes.

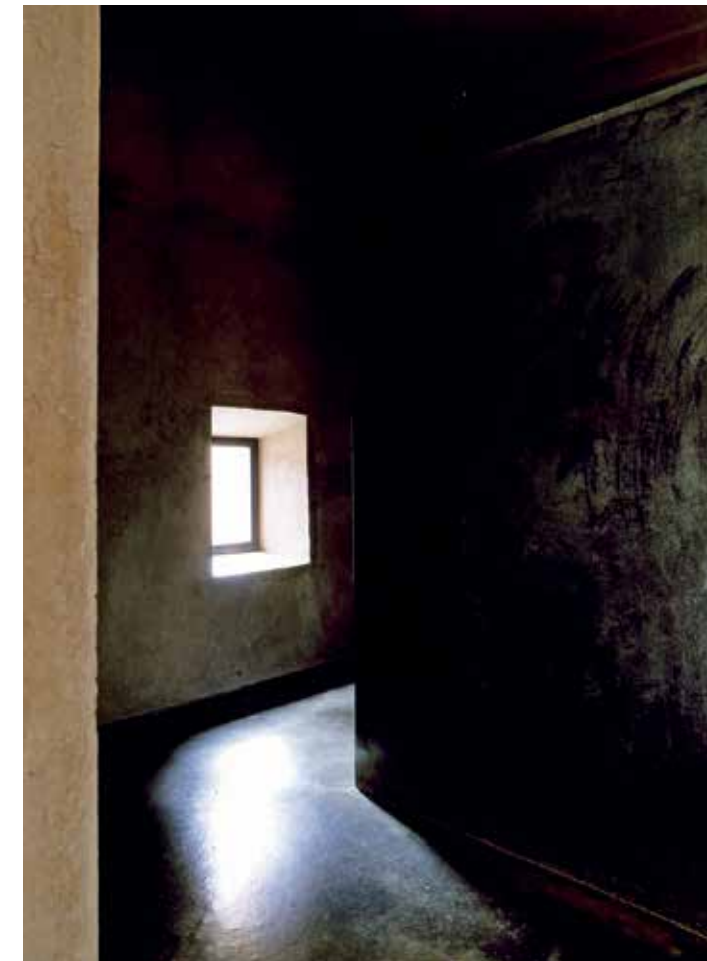
The house is configured as a double-storey core with living rooms on the ground floor flowing from one to the other through wide openings. Scale alters dramatically, with the soaring five-metre ceilings of the two salons contrasting with the more intimate dimensions of the dining room, kitchen and library. On the first floor, the master bedroom suite, with sleeping, bathing and terrace areas, is accessed via an impressive staircase. Openness and fluidity are key to the floor plan; rooms can be closed off with sliding glass doors but more often than not are left open, while the master suite has partial dividers in an otherwise open space. Containment balances openness as the children's area, a single-storey structure with four bedrooms and a shower room, is adjacent to the main building, allowing for both connection and independence. Two buildings for guests function in the same way.

For Studio KO, interior decoration is an integral part of the practice. 'We always try to imagine a complete solution,' says Marty. 'The most

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KARL FOURNIER

Large windows are kept to a minimum, opting instead for slices of glazing and small openings.



Alongside contemporary fittings are utilitarian vignettes with objects of local resonance.

Within the house are a number of intimate spaces, including a library, to balance the more expansive areas.



By playing with scale and proportion, the elongated opening becomes a defining feature.

successful interiors are always considered from the beginning, because there is one driving idea, one concept throughout. It is not very satisfying for us to do houses and then hand over to a decorator. Inevitably we are always disappointed because there are two different languages in the same space, two different directions.'

At Villa D they had the opportunity for a complete execution, starting with the context created by the traditional oiling of the interior walls (using the cheapest kitchen oil) to give a sensuous low sheen. The oil enhances the patina of the natural colour variation in the earth on the walls, creating a soft finish that responds to the manipulation of light and shadow that Studio KO does so well. In some instances, plaster is used for the ceilings to reflect light down into the rooms, and elegant glazed openings punctuate the building, to allow shafts of light to discreetly illuminate the spaces.

Into the context of these free-flowing rooms, Studio KO brings a warm textural play of timber, leather and wool. Custom-designed banquettes in timber and leather, traditional Moroccan Beni Ouarain rugs and rustic objets trouvés mix with simple designer lights and contemporary fittings. Due to the linear connection between rooms, the interior palette needs to be consistent, as it is possible to stand in one room and take in the interior of several others.

Villa D has been important for Studio KO on a number of levels. According to Fournier, many people have seen it and, to this day, it still draws people to the practice. It has also been the genesis of a strong ongoing working relationship between families and artisans who continue to partner with Studio KO on projects – each time taking these skills to a new level. Villa E (2013), a recently completed project in Marrakech, features a burnished stainless steel door that could have been there for centuries but is equally modern; striated earth wall treatments become more sophisticated as workers suggest new approaches, and bespoke designs in Moroccan leather and woodwork are locally produced.

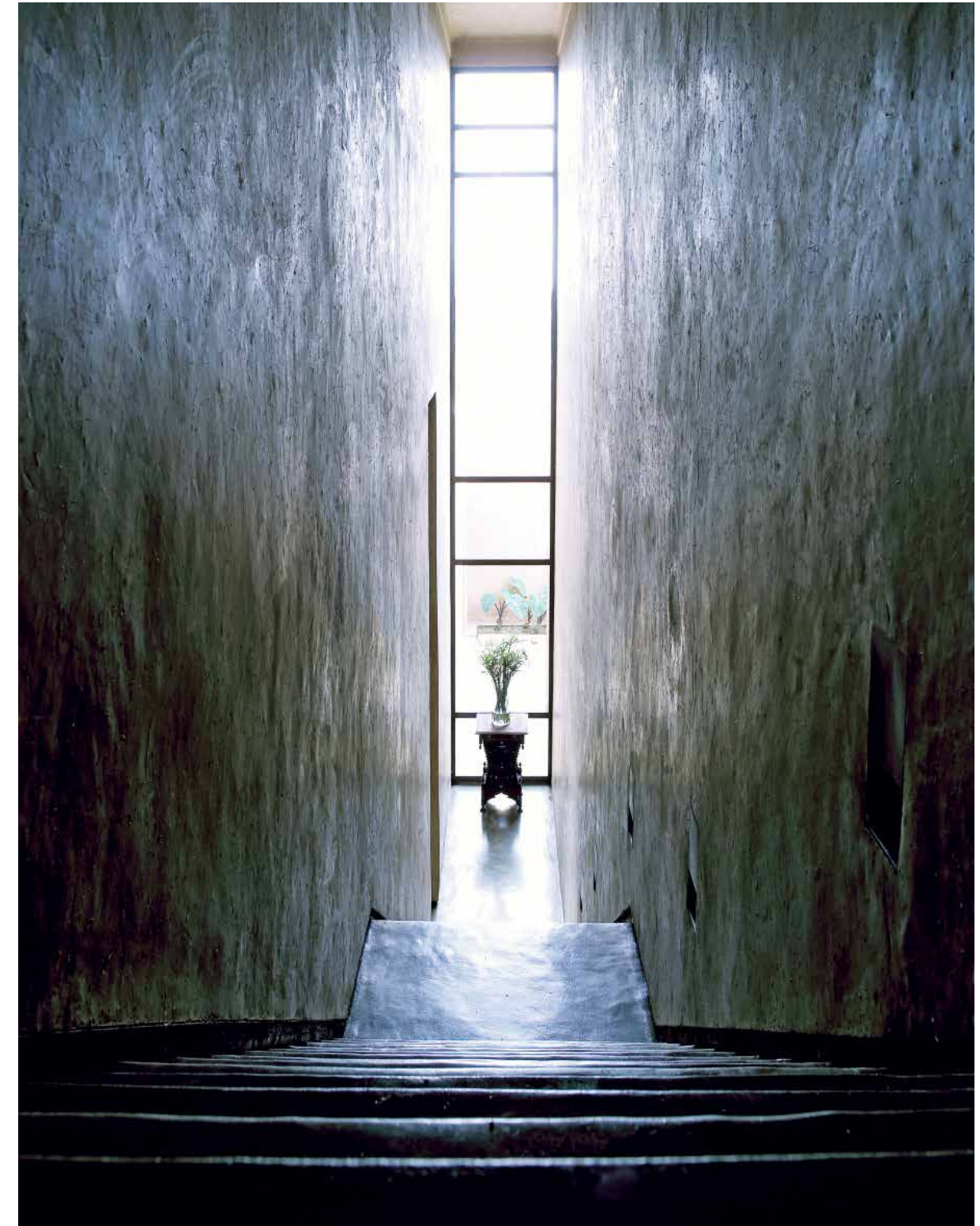
'Artisans are proud to be part of a project reviving old techniques with new usage,' says Fournier. And, in turn, Studio KO has managed to do what they set out to do a decade ago – redefine what a contemporary house in Morocco can be; local and international, traditional and modern, spare and warm, robust and enduring.





Taking inspiration from the earth and palm trees, the house exploits both beautifully.

While the massive window illuminates the staircase, it essentially remains a contained space.



Approach to the house involves a journey of arrival, with detours along the way.

Introduction of water brings birdlife, as well as a tranquil element, into the compound.

