CUBIST CASBAH

Social housing on the edge of Madrid is transformed into a modern eco casbah.

The competition-winning social housing project that Morphosis completed in December of last year offers a dramatic contrast to the bland brick towers of middle-class apartments that surround it. A gleaming white complex of cubist blocks, patios and walkways, it evokes the hill villages of Andalusia or the casbahs of North Africa. Located in Cornubanchel, a masterplanned community bordered by the ring road to the south-west of the fast-growing Spanish capital, it is one of 22 projects in that area sponsored by EMVS, the city housing authority. These were all designed by new or established architects, from Spain and abroad, and they are scattered among the private developments. The construction budget is a frugal €6,000 per unit, and the completed units are offered for sale or rent at a third of the market rate.

Morphosis principal Thom Mayne rose to the challenge: "We've always made a practice of building (responsively)," he says. "I share the idealism of the early Modernists, and the client gave us free rein conceptually as long as we met the budget." For this first venture in Spain, Mayne's team collaborated with BDU Estudio de Arquitectura, a fledgling Madrid firm founded by Baguña Díaz-Lirgo, who briefly worked for Morphosis, and gained experience building another innovative project for EMVS.

Residential construction in Spain is booming, and government agencies estimate that 300,000 units were built last year — almost as many as