

**This page** The Eames 'DCW' timber lounge chair was one of Willem's first purchases almost 25 years ago. George Nelson 'Platform' bench for Herman Miller. The black side table is from the El Fenn boutique that Willem curates. Portraits by Gustavo Di Mario. Rug by Kulchi. **Opposite page** A single olive tree jumps out of the landscape by the pool which is protected from seasonal winds by a concrete wall. The sun loungers were sourced in Marrakech.

# Dune landing

In the hills near the port town of Essaouira, hotelier *Willem Smit* realised his lifelong desire to build a home of a different stripe by the sea.

Photographs **GAELE LE BOULICAUT** Words **JEREMY CALLAGHAN**







**This page** Slatted shade keeps it cool for alfresco dining on the terrace where mustard dining chairs provide a sunny ambience.  
**Opposite page** The structure is built of local stone in four axes comprising a guest wing, the main living area and the main suite which form a courtyard, with the horizon pool on the fourth axis.



**D**utch by birth, Willem Smit says he has forever had one foot dipped in the decorating pond. As a child he recalls being fascinated by the form of the Eames ‘DCW’ lounge chair. While the beginnings of his professional career path were in the theatre as commercial director of The Hague’s Royal Theatre, then as managing director of Stage performance space, he was always renovating, revitalising and re-branding with an identifiable ‘look’. “As a kid, I always wanted to be a decorator, but I couldn’t draw, which was a prerequisite for art and design school in Holland, so I turned to hotel management,” he says. Even in that role, he says he found himself decorating when he was executive director of the *S.S. Rotterdam*, a former flagship of the Holland America Line, which was transformed into a dockside hotel.

Willem’s initial move from the Netherlands to Morocco was to manage El Fenn, an exotic boutique hotel in Marrakech co-owned by the Branson family. Since then he’s continued on the path of renovating and expanding the establishment which has won several international awards under his management, including ‘Sexiest Hotel Room’ by one British newspaper.

“I’d never even been to Morocco. I was running a huge hotel and had no interest in moving here or running a small hotel. But I was invited to come and check it out, and I’m still here. I must have been ready for a life change, I suppose,” he says. That was six years ago.

But in the background of this busy life, making sure that everything was perfect for others, Willem nurtured the need to build something for himself. There was the growing desire to realise a lifelong dream, to build a house by the sea. Three hours’ drive west from Marrakech lies the seaside port town of Essaouira, and he bought the first piece of land he saw here.

The area has a rich history and more recently has become entangled with popular culture. The Portuguese built castles here 600 years ago, and the sprawling remains are still seen lying half buried in the fine beach sand. These were said to have inspired Jimi Hendrix’s anthem, *Castles Made of Sand*. Orson Welles wrote the screenplay of Shakespeare’s *Othello* here and the area was one of the locations for his 1951 film production, while Jim Morrison of The Doors was said to have lived here among the dunes for a while.

But for Willem, Essaouira’s attraction was its proximity to Marrakech. “I wanted to build a house where I could happily exist by myself, but also invite friends if I wanted to. From an architectural point of view, Essaouira’s prevailing winds dictated that the structure be set around a sheltering central courtyard. Also, I wanted volumes that easily communicated with each other and the interior space to be raw, a mix of architectural formwork and the local natural stone. Essentially, I was aiming for an informal loft-like ambience where people could be comfortable,” he explains.



“Essentially,  
I was aiming  
for an informal  
loft-like ambience  
where people  
could be  
comfortable.”

These pages Scattered on the built-in couch in formed concrete are cushions by Maison de Vacances, Hay and Soufiane Zarib, Marrakech. The 'Grasshopper' lamp was designed by Greta Magnusson-Grossman in 1947. Eames 'DCW' chair. The mid-century chair has been covered in a modern batik. 'Brewmaster' by Fanimation ceiling fan.



**This page** The mirror in the main bedroom-cum-bathroom was bought in Belgium and the bath imported from Holland. Bath products by L:a Bruket, Sweden. Original image from the S.S. Rotterdam that Willem once managed. **Opposite page, from left** The bed linen was made in Fez. ‘Eatonville’ chaise longue by Wade Logan. Views from the rooftop terrace.



#### SPEED READ

» Dutch-born, Marrakech-based hotelier Willem Smit of El Fenn fame, found himself drawn to the picturesque port city of Essaouira on Morocco’s Atlantic coast. » Intending to build his dream home, he purchased land there, a block set in undulating hills just outside the city. » The house is built on four axes around a central courtyard to protect from strong seasonal winds, and a rooftop terrace, which offers 360-degree land and seascapes, also follows the local style. The deliberately raw interiors are crafted in local stone and architectural formwork. » Seeking an eclectic but comfortable vibe, Willem has furnished his home with collected pieces sourced from Europe and Morocco.



The fourth axis of the courtyard is formed by a horizon pool which itself is sheltered from the wind by a concrete wall. A walk-up roof terrace, is in a sense in keeping with the local vernacular and is a privileged place to lie in the sun and take in the blue sky above.

Openings in the rooftop provide important sources of natural light for the interior downstairs. Concrete formwork mixes with local stone and the two seem to merge in the form of the terrazzo floor which regularly morphs upwards into architectural features such as the bench seat in the lounge or the bedhead in the bedroom.

A staggered build over three years gave Willem plenty of time to reflect on how he would finish the interior. “My ultimate relaxation is to run a bath and lie in it and then in my imagination do a 3D walk through the space making decisions about how I’d like it to be finished. So I’ve sourced pieces specifically for this project from Amsterdam, and elsewhere in Holland, Belgium and, of course, Morocco.”

In his role of general manager at El Fenn, Willem personally chooses each room’s decor. Consequently he’s developed a special relationship with Marrakech’s best dealers in decorative objects and furniture but maintains that good objects are still hard to come by.

“Morocco has cultivated the image of being a place where you can still find great pieces at an affordable price but the world has become a much more even playing field than it was, much more than, say, just 15 years ago. People say that they pay less for good retro finds here but

it’s not that much less than they’re paying in Europe.” That said, Willem freely admits to privileged access to those antique dealers’ stock. “One of my dealers is about 60 years old and if he likes you, he’ll take you into his back storage place, a massive building that is literally full of old stuff.”

So when his personal castle by sea was finally finished, Willem trucked his assembled finds to Essaouira. “The truck arrived in the morning, we worked all day putting things in their place and I had the candles and dinner on the table by evening.”

A strong believer in mixing it up, Willem likes to live with objects that are both old and new, from diverse origins, and never with what he describes as “that out of the box, ready-made look”.

“As a child there were two design pieces that I was fascinated with. One of them was the Eames ‘DCW’ lounge chair, the other was a book of Helmut Newton’s photographs. As soon as I could afford it I bought both. I still have them. But you see that chair everywhere these days,” he says.

“Today you can even walk into a McDonald’s somewhere and sit on an Eames ‘DSR Eiffel’ chair. My point is that everything has already been done, and more than just once, so originality is hard to come by. Everything has become accessible for everyone these days and that’s why I believe eclecticism and difference is the way to go.” ❧

*For more go to [willem-smit.com](#)*