

Hasan Hirji

Hasan Hirji worked at Aziza Chaouni Projects for eight months starting in May 2023 — in-office in Morocco for six months and remotely for two months. He also worked at ERA Architects in Toronto for eight months. in 2024. This interview is mostly about the experience with Aziza Chaouni Projects.

What did you do to find the placement?

I searched for many job positions in the lead up to co-op; both in Canada and abroad. I had been sending out applications and searching for job placements since first year, so I was relatively comfortable navigating the job search process and contacting offices. I searched and applied for many positions in both architecture and landscape architecture. I also used my network, asking friends, family, and acquaintances about potential contacts or opportunities. It was through my network that I eventually found out about the office Aziza Chaouni Projects (ACP) and, after research, decided to apply.

I found out about ERA through networking, looked more into the firm, and then went through several rounds of application.

How did you choose where to go?

ACP's work is inspiring and an education. I was excited by the office's thematic of modernist heritage particularly in the context of North and West Africa. The projects I saw on ACP's website were incredibly interesting architecturally and completely different from what I had worked on so far in university. The position would allow me to work and learn outside of a North American context, something I was interested in. It would also allow me to work and live in Morocco, where I had never been before. There was a big decision to be made of course. I knew that going to ACP meant I would not have the same type of working context that I would in a development-based office located in Canada. However, the inspiration of working for this office that I admired and having my first office experience in Morocco was strong, and I knew that this was an opportunity I should not hesitate on. It would be an adventure.

What exactly did you do in the office?

I worked on many types of projects. Generally, my work was focused on architectural drawings, digital mapping, workshop design, graphic diagrams, 3D modelling, on-site work, academic research, publication editing, and coordination between organizational bodies.

Some of the key projects I worked on were report writing for a publication on historic settlements in Arab regions in collaboration with UNESCO and UN-Habitat; novel digital mapping of downtown Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso); and pre-design site analysis and community engagement workshops in ecologically significant sites in southern Morocco. I also worked as a teaching assistant and workshop guide for a [Global Architecture Fes Medina Symposium](#).

What was it like?

It was incredible. This work provided me with invaluable exposure to and experience with the world of professional architecture in a relatively small-sized office working internationally. It is important and extremely gratifying to me that the context of my first architecture position completely changed my perspective on the field and profession. I am motivated to continue seeking inspirational work of the type that I was fortunate enough to engage with during this position and to continue researching and exploring the types of architecture that I was exposed to during my time as an intern in Fes, Morocco.

What specifically did you learn?

Alongside typical technical experience such as on-site work, modelling methods, participant workshops, office file management, etc.; I learned a great deal about modernist architecture in North and West Africa as well as detailed research into historic cities in Arab regions. These lessons have had a significant impact on the bank of precedents I employ as an architecture student and my fields of interest moving forward. Linguistically, this position also allowed me to enhance my French and Arabic knowledge, including taking after-work lessons in local Moroccan Arabic dialect.

What did you gain from the experience?

I gained more confidence as an architecture student. Having finished co-op, there is the assurance that you can work well and operate in this field of architecture. It is no longer a nebulous idea; you know that it is possible. My statement of future career ambition and area of interest completely changed after this position. In talking to colleagues, I learned about research grants, career paths, and working experiences that I had not necessarily considered for myself before. I became aware that while I am definitely in the right field for me, it was much more open in terms of possibilities than I had previously imagined.

After this position and my subsequent and equally exciting co-op at ERA Architects in Toronto, I have work experience in two continents and highly specialized regions. I have had experience in multiple languages and dialects, and I have met a great number of wonderful and inspiring people working in my field of study, in areas of the world where I would like to work in the future. This experience has made a very large world feel both more accessible and, also, much larger. It has left a significant, positive impact on me.

What did you bring to the job?

I brought a willingness to learn and work to this job. It was important to me to go into co-op with as few preconceptions about what work would or should be like beforehand. As an intern, whose work patterns and work management were still developing, I understood that the first co-ops in architecture would be challenging. However, being excited to work on or observe as many projects as possible during my time in my co-op positions benefitted the office and myself. Interns in all architecture offices, as I understand, work on many different projects often all at once. Bringing the ability to adapt quickly to changes and show genuine interest and enthusiasm can only be a virtue in that environment. Questions are expected from interns, and I found them to be appreciated.

What was the most fun?

Some of the most fun I had during this position was locating, conducting interviews for, and photographing historic cinemas around the city for one of my supervisors. With my camera, I walked and drove around many quarters of the Fes Medina (and its 9,000 streets) and *Ville Nouvelle*. This experience, which happened towards the end of my co-op, employed all the language and street/city knowledge skills I had learned during my time in the city. I remember finding amazing parts of Fes that I had never seen before, like the *Bab Ftouh* fish market, where on a specific day you might find in a little clearing all manner of sea fare, including whole small brown stingrays sold beside a stall with fresh yellow pears and bright citrus.

What was the least fun?

Although I enjoyed so much of my time in the office, the only time that I found less fun was briefly working on image citations as part of a publication we were working on. This involved tracing down image availabilities and citations for public use, as well as managing their citation in the text. The rest of the editing process was very interesting, and I have been assured by others who have done editorial work that image citations are usually everyone's least favourite part of editing.

What surprised you?

A general surprise about co-op experiences that I have related to with several other students is how useful practical office time management skills are when you come back to university. Software skills for file organization and being able to work and communicate quickly with teams are often seen as less-glamorous in architecture work, however they made a big difference in the work environment. I find it difficult to imagine how I managed to work on university projects without these skills. It was a completely different educational experience in which time management and communication were of equal value to the most technical architectural lessons learned in university.

What's the biggest thing you learned that you didn't know going in?

The biggest thing I learned that I didn't know going in was history, architectural style, construction, urbanism, and vernacular in the context I was working in. Being a part of a system other than the one I was trained in was invaluable and the amount that I learned was massive.

In what way were you transformed?

Like many students who complete co-op, it is difficult to imagine yourself being solely an architecture student anymore. After working, you have colleagues and mentors and become a part of this profession. You realize that you have some agency in this system, and it is entirely up to you what avenue of architecture and urbanism you pursue.

What's an anecdote that encapsulates the experience?

We went on-site to two oasis towns in the south of Morocco while working on pre-design site analysis and community engagement workshops. From Agadir, a major city on the coast, we drove several hours into the dry red earth mountains. After a full day working on one site, a town called Boutbouqalt beside a spring, we drove several more hours to the next site where we would be staying overnight. All along the mountains there were valleys and stepped terraces for planting, with small towns all up and down the red hills. We turned a corner and suddenly deep in the valley there were hundreds of deep green palm trees where the oasis town, Targua N'Touchka, was, our next site. We drove down into the town at night and sat for dinner and tea at a small café amongst the reeds beside the palm tree gorge. It was one of the most incredible experiences I have ever had, and somehow summarizes the anticipation, the surprise, and the excitement I had working on these amazing projects while at ACP.

Have your feelings or ambitions for architecture changed as a result?

I feel grateful to be able to say that since starting co-op in May 2023, I have interned at Aziza Chaoui Projects in Fes, Morocco and ERA Architects in Toronto, Canada. At both offices, my work was focused on built and intangible heritage. These experiences and lessons I owe to the incredible people at both firms who mentored and encouraged me. I did not necessarily know that heritage was something I wanted to focus on before co-op. However, I go now into my final semester of my degree with a strong interest in heritage architecture, a focus and passion I gained from the offices I worked at through co-op.

The conversations with people on my teams, most recently at ERA, have given me new ideas about where I want to go with this architectural education. I see my architecture and urbanism education as a way to explore my area of interest in the role of heritage and cosmopolitan vernacular in Mediterranean cities. It is difficult to process how much opportunity this co-op year and those involved with it have given me. I remain excited to see what is next.

How do you feel returning to school after co-op?

Returning to school after co-op I feel excited about master's applications and continuing with the same energy I had at the start of the school year. It can be an interesting transition back into an academic environment after a year of working, but treating university projects with a similar professionalism and ownership as you had during co-op is helpful. Returning with improved working habits and vastly increased technical skills, especially with drafting software and architectural technology knowledge, changes the way you approach university projects. I have found it to be incredibly useful.

What advice would you give students thinking about doing co-op?

My advice to students considering co-op is don't consider, just apply, keep applying and make your decision based on what comes of your applications. It is an invaluable experience, and I would strongly recommend it.

It is definitely difficult to find a position. There can be a pressure and competitive atmosphere around co-op applications. My advice is to largely ignore this and be as idealistic in your applications as possible. You don't have to only apply to places everyone else is applying to or to places you think you might get into. If there is a firm whose work you like, even if it seems a stretch to work there, apply and see what happens. Employ every means of network and

connections you can. I would also encourage students to broaden their search geographically as far as they possibly can. It might be far from friends and family, but if it is important to you, and you believe in the work you are doing, it can only be a benefit for when you come back. While on co-op, remind yourself what you are working towards. At times it will be challenging or not what you had imagined, but it is the first step, and you can always be proud of it.