Researchers collaborating with Conflict in Cities recently conducted a fieldtrip to the Spanish enclave of Ceuta located on the North African side of the strait of Gibraltar. Felipe Hernández, Lecturer in Architecture at Cambridge, and Project Partner Max Gwiazda investigated the impact of the EU border regime on the built environment.

Since Spain joined the Schengen agreement in 1991, Ceuta has effectively become one of the principal borders of the EU with North Africa. A town of merely 80,000 today, Ceuta is a microcosm for the tensions stemming from the dynamics of migration and integration within the EU. Ceuta is a prime destination for African migrants from sub-Saharan countries (Le Monde diplomatique states that between 1997-2001 alone, 3,286 corpses of clandestine migrants were recovered on the coasts of the strait of Gibraltar). The EU has responded to increased migration pressure by militarising the border through a heavily patrolled, West Bank-style separation barrier, increased cooperation with Moroccan border security forces and the establishment of a detention centre for ‘illegal’ migrants. At the same time Ceuta’s population is diversifying through its growing Muslim community and the regular flow of workers from neighbouring Moroccan areas who benefit from 24-hour visa-exemption granted by Spain in one of the few exceptions made to the Schengen agreement on an EU-wide basis. The Christian and Muslim communities in Ceuta are separated by stark socio-economic disparities, while the economy of the city appears to be thriving from commercial relations with Morocco including narcotics and human trafficking. While Morocco considers all trade across the border illicit, since it considers Ceuta an illegal ‘colonial city’. Moroccan authorities tolerate these economic relations, which have benefited Ceuta as much as the wider Moroccan hinterland of the enclave.
The trip focused on changes in the architecture and urban fabric of the city since 2005 when Ceuta received international media attention for a particularly violent episode in migrant repression, which provoked widespread criticism of the EU and Morocco by human rights groups such as Amnesty International. The most striking finding was the stark contrasts that mark the urban character of the tightly inhabited peninsula. On the one hand, the city centre is the stage for an unabated building boom, featuring cultural projects led by internationally claimed architects that benefit from EU subsidies. On the other hand, the fast-growing Muslim community that has traditionally been relegated to the outskirts of the city near the border, continue to live in deteriorating housing conditions of neighbourhoods with slum-like attributes. Meanwhile, plans are underway to build a larger detention centre for clandestine migrants that would function as a regional hub for Spanish and EU border control agencies. The production of iconic architecture in this context is incongruous as its appears deeply complicit with covert systems of exploitation, which perpetuate colonial hierarchies and contradict policies of international cooperation.