

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38027/iccaua2023en0050>

## Requalification of urban identity according to the history of the place: the Kasbah of Algiers

Menouer Ouassila

Institute of Architecture and Urbanism Saad Dahleb University, Blida-1, Algeria

Email : [menouerouassila@yahoo.fr](mailto:menouerouassila@yahoo.fr)

### INTRODUCTION

Valorization of cultural heritage is a matter that has, always, been based on principles such as consideration of the complex and dynamic nature of cultural expressions, respect for the old substance, the distinction between old and new, and the use of new technologies,...<sup>1</sup>. These considerations can mark out the operations of preservation of the historical heritage, particularly the urban heritage, in a global strategy for its enhancement. This contribution presents an approach based on the history of the place for the insertion of the new in the old. The Kasbah of Algiers is an illustration of the approach.

Labeled World Heritage of Humanity in 1992, the Kasbah of Algiers has been provided with a PPSMVSS (Permanent Plan for the Safeguarding and Enhancement of Safeguarded Sectors)<sup>2</sup>. Since then, all the reflections and interventions have focused on preserving the authenticity and integrity of the site through large campaigns of emergency measurement works to avoid the possible collapses of dilapidated buildings that characterize the old district. At the same time, many restoration operations are, now, being carried out. Some of them have been finalized, such as the citadel, the Ketchawa mosque, the religious complex of Sidi Abderrahmane Et-Taalibi and a few residential buildings. Other operations of the same kind are in the implementation phase, and others are still in the study development phase (mosques, palaces, etc.). The process of the enhancement of the Kasbah of Algiers has effectively been triggered since the approval of the safeguard plan in 2005.

The results in terms of restoration are beginning to emerge, announcing a perspective of conservation and enhancement of a place of memory, “

an eminent example of a traditional human habitat representative of the deeply Mediterranean Muslim culture, a synthesis of many traditions”<sup>3</sup>; a typically Mediterranean urban landscape. However, the fact remains that the Kasbah of Algiers is a living ensemble, even a thousand years old. It is today one of the districts of a city in the process of metropolisation: Algiers the capital of Algeria.

In this dispute, is it not legitimate to mark the “expressive actuality” of time? Does architectural creation have a place in richly stratified sites? If it is yes, how?

This raises the issue of the methods of intervention within the protected sectors. In terms of architectural and urban research, the debate on the intervention in historic centers remains a question of cultural choices related to the mode of appropriation of the architectural, aesthetic, and historical values of the place for a harmonious insertion of the new in the old.

### I/ ARCHITECTURAL INTEGRATION IN HISTORICAL FABRICS

The insertion of a building into its built environment has always been subject to numerous criticisms raising questions such as<sup>4</sup>:

- “This construction does not fit in this site” ;
- “This architecture contrasts with its urban, rural or landscape environment”,
- “This building is beautiful if taken apart, but in this context, it does not fit”,
- “In this project, there are no adequations to the place, to the environment”, ....

In general, the morphological integration of construction in its urban context implies:

- respect for its immediate environment: skyline, size, architectural style, ...
- and the continuity of the urban fabric: alignment of buildings, ...<sup>5</sup>,

---

<sup>1</sup> The restoration charter, 1972 and the eight points of Camillo Boito.

<sup>2</sup> Law 98-04 on the protection of cultural heritage

<sup>3</sup> Criterion V at the origin of the classification of the Kasbah as world heritage of humanity. <https://whc.unesco.org/fr/list/565/>

<sup>4</sup> WOITRIN M. (1979), « Intégration en architecture et urbanisme », *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine*, n°5, p.15.

<sup>5</sup> In the case of construction in modest urban complexes where the project does not emerge in relation to its context: constant number of floors,

Thus, for the most part, architectural integration is synonymous with the uniqueness of architecture, hence the concept of morphological integration. However, it happens that a localized rupture is tolerated when it is justified because it does not mean, systematically, the disappearance of its identity in the urban landscape (El-Ghonaimy, 2020\_). At the same time, if the architecture is isolated from its context, if it is not part of a whole as much as an expression of its own program, its quality risks being compromised. In this debate, two types of integration can arise:

### **I.1/ Integration through discretion**

The integration of construction into its built environment by discretion consists in establishing a balanced and harmonious relationship between the quality of the architectural object and the space in which it is located and of which it is a constituent part. It turns out to be a fundamental criterion for the production of an architecture "that passes, in other words an architecture whose success is measured by virtue of its ability to be forgotten"<sup>6</sup>, architecture that respects its context.

Without meaning "neutrality, integration into the invisible, even into the non-existent"<sup>7</sup> but also without emerging and dominating the context, it must be considered globally for continuity architecture and landscape integration in the purpose to (Fig.01):

- Achieve continuity and harmony in architecture,
- Reflect on the project with regard to local characteristics,
- Avoid monotonous and stereotyped architecture at the national level,
- Look for forms and architectural volumes adapted and integrated into the lines of the urban landscape.
- and promote landscape integration through the choice of location, shapes, volumes, materials, and colors.



Fig. 01 : New/old by insertion.

Source : <https://assets.paperjam.lu/images/articles/nouveau-president-a-automne/0.5/0.5/640/426/250437.jpg>

### **I.2/ Integration by rupture**

The brutality of the rupture contributes to the effectiveness of the meaning of integration. The rupture from the point of view of volumes and architectural forms with the surrounding urban fabric can bring an effective insertion when it is a question of marking:

- A special presence,
- a dominance,

---

cornices respecting the alignments of the levels...; case of villages, small towns, ...

<sup>6</sup> BARDET J. (1995) « comment s'intégrer sans disparaître », *Monuments Historiques, n°105 : construire en Quartiers anciens*, Éd. C.N.M.H.S., Paris, p.16.

<sup>7</sup> Same, p.14.

- or an emergence.

with the aim of “brandishing an architectural signal, breaking with a more humble and calm urban context”<sup>8</sup> (Fig.02).

Several examples can illustrate the importance of architectural integration by rupture, like the disparate towers in the consolidated urban fabrics and their irreconcilable forms with the whole; the Pompidou Center, an architectural gesture expressing the technological refinement in the fabric of Paris as a brutal reminder of the current technological world which proves effective<sup>9</sup>, ... (Fig.03).



Fig. 02 : The Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto



Fig. 03 : The Pompidou center in old Paris

Source: Fig. 02 : [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Royal\\_Ontario\\_Museum\\_\(9674325453\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Royal_Ontario_Museum_(9674325453).jpg)

Fig. 03 : <https://www.sortiraparis.com/images/80/83517/421587-visuel-paris-centre-pompidou.jpg>

## II/ THE DIVERSITY OF POSTURES IN ARCHITECTURAL PRODUCTION

The expressions of architectural productions in historical fabrics diversify according to the sensitivity, culture, and references of the authors of the projects, hence the following attitudes:

- **Imitation or pastiche**, despite its visual harmlessness, hinders architectural creation
- **Accompaniment** by the use of discretion by the resumption of volumetry, colors, and the principles of composition of historic buildings. It remains an attitude that does not pose the constraints of the reality of the context of the project: old materials, interior distribution, and decorative details,... The architecture consequently remains an architecture without particular character.
- **audacity tempered** by respect for the characters of the existing (volume, materials, colors, size, composition, ...) with the introduction of elements of modern architecture (concrete, large glass openings, a second skin of wood, screen-printed glass, laser-cut metal, etc.).
- **The interweaving between existing buildings and new construction**, sometimes responding to protection requirements by preserving part of the heritage, but always making it possible to make up for the lack of history in contemporary buildings.

Each of the forms relies on the other to find its point of balance so that the project acquires meaning. When this report is no more than a juxtaposition, it loses its historical credibility to be nothing but fanaticism, sometimes going as far as farce.

- **Contrast or integration by contrast**, introduces a break between the new construction and its built environment. The attitude stages the two periods that collide: the old and the new.

All of the attitudes put forward fall within the framework of the so-called morphological integration of the architectural project in its built and urban contexts. Opting for the choice of an architectural posture rather than another, in a context of consolidated wealth, becomes a decision to be justified according to the richness of its

---

<sup>8</sup> WOITRIN M. (1979), « Intégration en architecture et urbanisme », *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine*, n°05, p.17.

<sup>9</sup> Over time, the Pompidou Center has acquired an insertion that is not harmonious or aesthetic but rather social through the urbanity that its place has acquired.

stratifications (historical, aesthetic, cultural, social), as well as its history which remains anchored in the collective memory of the place. Hence the approach that I propose in this contribution.

### III/ THE MEMORY OF THE PLACE: added value in architectural production

In fact, it is an approach to architectural production which postulates the history of the place as a conceptual element of the new in the old. It is based on the concept of “planning according to the history of the place”. The Kasbah of Algiers is considered, in this case, as a pretext to illustrate the interest of the approach and to test the results to which it can lead.

The proposed approach is presented as a reflection on urban renewal through architectural innovation and the preservation of the spirit of the place as well as the collective memory of historic centers. According to Jean Nouvel, it is about “being modern, and making the best use of our memory, and taking the risk of invention”<sup>10</sup>.

In this experience, the reflection of the project was triggered by the problem of the future and the development of the Kasbah. One of the districts of the city of Algiers whose classification and subsequently the promulgation of the Permanent Plan for the Safeguarding and of Enhancement of the Safeguarded Sector become obstacles to creativity and to the manifestation of the expressive actuality of the architectural project.

Beyond the upper Kasbah, whose fabric remains homogeneous and characterized by the integrity and uniqueness of its urban fabric and its urban landscape, the lower casbah, also called the Marine district, presents itself as a field of experimentation since it has been subject to numerous operations of radical transformations. Indeed, the Marine district is the original core of the city of Algiers, the starting point of its establishment through the Phoenician counter that settled there. The district was the origin of the consolidation of the Roman city baptized in time “*Icosium*”.

Since and until the eve of 1830, the date of its French colonization, “*Djezair Beni Mezranna*” experienced intense urbanization which made Algiers an important economic center under the reign of the Ottoman Empire from the 16th century. Until a time not far away, the Marine district was the maritime interface of Algiers expressing the close and deep relationship in the urban history of the city, a relationship that was interrupted after the creation of the commercial port and its separation of the urban dynamic from its background.

In this experience, the project aims to restore and consolidate the city-sea relationship as an attempt at urban and architectural production expressing a duality between old and new through the development of an arts and culture complex.

near Bastion 23, it is a form of expansion sound. The methodology adopted, in this experience, is an approach based on the historical-morphological reading of the urban consistency of the city, a reading that allows one to recognize all the historical structures still preserved and/or disappeared that have allowed the consolidation of its Urban fabric. It makes it possible to identify the specific parameters that define the identity characteristics of the place.

As part of this approach, the historic structures thus recognized become the points on which the architectural and urban development proposal will be based. To do this, in-depth research in historical documentation was necessary: book documents, archives, and old and new cartography, .... The synthesis of the documentary research made it possible to establish the process of formation and consolidation of the city while identifying the key elements to be reinterpreted as project ideas. It made it possible to establish what is called for in the approach: the permanent structure of the Kasbah of Algiers. The graphic document has made it possible to identify in particular the historic layout of the Marine district that has been erased by modern interventions carried out during the colonial period.

(Fig.04).

A first project idea is taking shape: the restoration of the historic route of the Marine district, a route that was erased following the demolition of the lower Kasbah after 1830. The altered route was restored from the archives of the French military engineers preserved in the historic service of the army in Vincennes. The idea made it possible to think of projecting a district of traditional typology in a contemporary expression in order to perpetuate the memory of the Ottoman city in the lower Kasbah that in time was attached to the upper Kasbah forming a single urban entity.

Thus, bastion 23, which is isolated today, will find its logic in the traditional urban ensemble. The project was thought out on the site of the current multi-story car park, a superfluous building that disfigures the urban landscape of the place. At the same time and in order not to falsify the history of the city, the project will be part

---

<sup>10</sup> S.n., *Création architecturale et innovation urbaine dans le centre historique de Bordeaux* », P1, [enligne], disponible sur : <https://www.arcentreve.eu>.

of the envelope formed by the modern buildings built during the colonial period. The discovery of the complex of modern arts and culture will be made from several breakthroughs that will ensure visual relations from and towards the sea.



Fig.04 : The permanent structure of the Kasbah of Algiers

Source : élaborée sur la base d'un fond de plan dans plan de sauvegarde et de mise en valeur et de Missoum S., *Alger à l'époque ottomane, la médina et la maison traditionnelle*.

The relationship of the upper Kasbah with its port gave rise to the idea of extending one of the two streets through which the city is located. Its name was Porte Neuve Street, today street Rabah Riah. It will traverse the immense square fitted out after 1830, and thus find the scale of the urban square at the level of the current place of the martyrs. The extension of the street will be done by restoring the historic layout and creating a colonnade inspired by the colonnade of the es-sayida mosque, one of the most beautiful mosques in the Ottoman city demolished after 1830. on the one hand to restore a human scale to the place of the martyrs and on the other hand to open to the sky the archeology park whose discovery was initiated during the works for the realization of the metro station in this place (station of the square of the martyrs) (fig.05).

A second project idea is the restoration and consolidation of the city/sea relationship by relocating the port of Algiers to the port of Cherchell and its reopening to the public according to the recommendations of the SNAT and the safeguard plan. The idea is to convert the seafront from a commercial area isolated from the city into an area of leisure activities, commerce, and catering areas, and the creation of terraces in order to attract the public. The project will be reinforced by the restitution of the old "Bâb el Bhar", demolished after 1830, and the reinterpretation of "Souk El Hout" (fish market) which existed there by the reopening of the fish market on the fitted-out square.

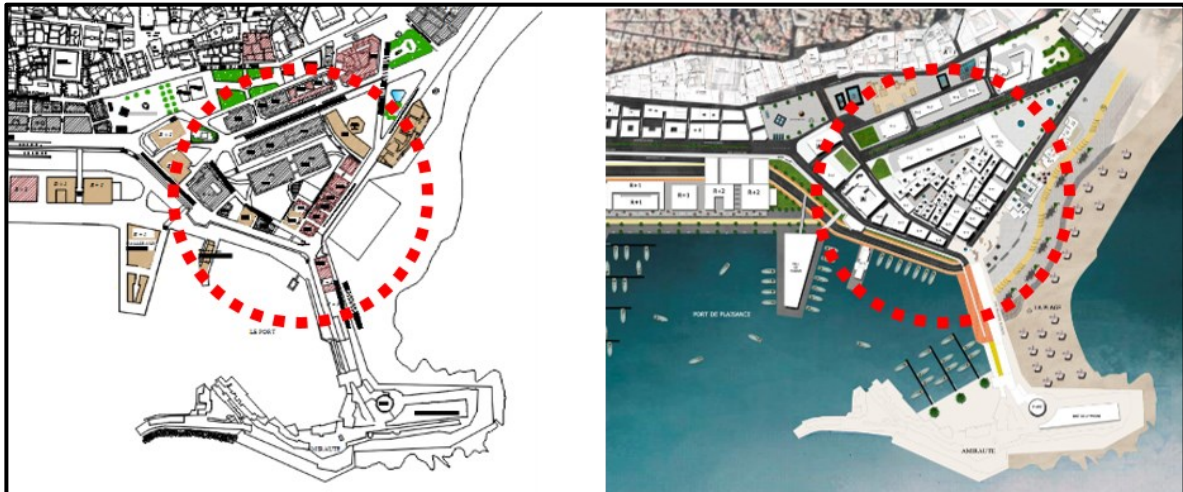


Fig.05 : inventory showing the multi-story car park and the layout by restitution of the historical layout of the marine district in Algiers

Source : Halimouche I. et Bulkaria T. 2021, *INTEGRATION DE L'ARCHITECTURE CONTEMPORAINE DANS LES CENTRES HISTORIQUES P.F.E : Centre des arts et de la culture extension du Bastion 23 ( Cas la casbah d'Alger )*, mémoire de fin d'étude dirigé par Menouer O., Institut d'Architecture de Blida-1 (Algérie)

The Ottoman port, penon tower, and other historic structures inside are now closed to the public as it is occupied by the military. The recovery of its upstream part, the kheireddine pier, and its historic stores can also allow the opening of the port to the public and therefore allow the city to reach the sea.

The theme of water is another project idea: the springs and fountains that existed in the city during the Ottoman period are also part of its collective memory. Some still persist. Their interconnection is proposed through the development of a thematic tourist circuit, other circuits are envisaged in particular the circuit of the mosques. It was envisioned that all tours would end at the modern arts and culture complex.

The other idea is the development of an arts and culture complex in a contemporary style in order to mark the expressive topicality of the project. The site is near Bastion 23 also called the Palace of *Rais*. The design of the project was also based on the restitution of the parcel layout of the surroundings of Bastion 23 from an archive plan recovered from the fund of the French military engineers. The contemporary expression of the project refers to several elements of the site and its urban history, such as (fig.06) :

- the restitution and/or the extension of traces and historical lines of the district, which allowed the genesis of the form of the project,
- the integration of the program of the architectural project with that of Bastion 23,
- the creation of urban passages in the form of stairs like the urban stairs that exist in the upper Kasbah
- the reinterpretation of the idea of the city wall and its materialization in the expression of the facade in the direction of the sea,
- the spatial entities are agglomerated, fashionably reinterpreting the aggregate of the city facade on the city, in a contemporary expression but referring to the geometric patterns of the doors of traditional houses,
- Transparency in order to ensure the visual relationship with the built environment on the city side and to take advantage of the panoramic views on the seaside.



Fig.06 : the sea side arts and culture complex



Fig.07 : the modern arts and culture complex on the city side.

Source : Halimouche I. et Bulkaria T. 2021, *NTEGRATION DE L'ARCHITECTURE CONTEMPORAINE DANS LES CENTRES HISTORIQUES P.F.E : Centre des arts et de la culture extension du Bastion 23 (Cas la casbah d'Alger)*, mémoire de fin d'étude dirigé par Menouer O., Institut d'Architecture de Blida-1 (Algérie)

## CONCLUSION

Urban and architectural interventions in a site with high heritage value prove to be a complex issue that combines memory, enhancement, and production contemporary, rich but above all new. They are now the subject of many safeguarding, enhancement, and adaptation studies contemporary, all based on the built and unbuilt elements existing on the site and have contributed to its formation and which can be valuable lessons for new architectural and urban designs. The experience presented is part of this reflection. It is based on the reading of the urban forms of cities and the processes of their formation as a tool for urban planning and architectural design, the concept of "planning according to the history of the place".

## Bibliography

- Benhamouche M. (2018), « L'architecture et l'urbanisme au Maghreb aux XIX-XX siècles : Cas d'Alger (1800-2000) ». ENAG.
- Bertrand M-J. (1984), « les places dans la ville ; lectures d'un espace public », Edition du Paris, Dunod / BORDAS,
  - Bernard A. (1931), « Alger, Étude de géographie Et d'histoires urbaines », Annales de géographie, n°224.
  - Bertoncetto B. (2004), «Centres anciens, entre vitrine de ville et gestion de la pauvreté une question de développement» in «l'intervention en centre ancien, pour quel projet urbain et social ?" Acte de la journée d'étude. Centre de Ressources pour la Politique de la Ville PACA.
- El-Ghonaïmy, I. H. (2020). Street Furniture Influence in Revitalizing the Bahraini Identity. *Journal of Contemporary Urban Affairs*, 4(1), 11–20. <https://doi.org/10.25034/ijcua.2020.v4n1-2>
- Charte Européenne (1975) du « patrimoine Architectural». Adoptée par le Conseil de l'Europe. Déclaration d'Amsterdam.
  - Choay F. (1992). « L'allégorie du patrimoine », éditions du Seuil, Paris.
  - Cresti F. (1993), « Contribution à l'histoire d'Alger ».
  - Devoux A. (1875), « Alger, Etude archéologique et topographique aux époques romaines arabes et turques », *Revue Africaine* n°19.
- Hadjilah A. « La rue Bab Azzoun Bab el Oued à la période romaine. Essai de restitution du cardo d'Icosium. » Article format PDF.
- ICOMOS. (1931). « Charte d'Athènes pour la Restauration des Monuments Historiques », Premier Congrès International des architectes et des techniciens des monuments historiques, Athènes.
  - Khelifa A. (2007), « Histoire de l'Algérie », Edition-Beaux livres d'art et d'histoire.
  - Lacaze J. P. (1976), « Introduction à la planification urbaine : imprécis d'urbanisme à la française », édition Le Moniteur, Paris.
  - Le Glay M. (1968), « A la recherche d'Icosium ». Format PDF.

- GEORGESCU PAQUIN A. (2014), « Actualiser le patrimoine par l'architecture contemporaine ».
- Menouer O, (2018). Contribution à la reconnaissance du processus de formation du territoire de la ville d'El-Djezaïr, avant 1830. Thèse de doctorat dirigée par le Professeur ZEROUALA M.S., EPAU, Algérie.
- Merlin P, Chaoy F. (1998), « Dictionnaire de l'urbanisme et de l'aménagement », Presses Universitaires de France.
- Messikh M-S. (2000), « Alger la mémoire », Edition du Layeur.
- Missoum S, « Alger à l'époque Ottomane, la médina et la maison traditionnelle »
- Rousseau A. (2010), « Chronique de la régence d'Alger », Edition du Kessinger Publishing
- MUTUAL S. (2001), « Pauvreté et dégradation environnementale : l'avenir des villes/centres historiques. Rétrospective et Perspectives. Le cas de l'Amérique Latine et des Caraïbes », in « des quartiers historiques pour tous ». Une approche sociale et humaine pour une revitalisation durable.
- Saidouni M. (1999), « Elément d'introduction à l'urbanisme histoire, méthodologie, réglementation », édition Casbah 45.
- Sitte C. (1889), « l'art de bâtir les villes », éditions de l'équerre.
- Spigai V Et Levy A. (1989), « Le plan et l'architecture de la ville, hypothèses pour de nouveaux instruments d'urbanisme. », Cluva Editrice, Venezia.