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Reading the colonial space through non-normative resources: An educational experience in the construction of meaning

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Abstract

The urban space is the place of exercise of a plurality of actors who draw it and give it meaning. What is given to perceive is not an object frozen in time and does not have a unique reading scheme. Here we relate a pedagogical experience of analysis of the colonial urban space of the city of Mostaganem. The aim of the operation with architecture students is to exploit, in the absence of a reliable archival basis, unusual supports for an interpretative approach to the evolution of colonial space. The data are collected outside the usual educational practices to create a coherent methodological approach that can be reproduced subsequently. These are mainly romantic stories, life stories and old postcards. Our experience is dual: first, we describe the context of the study, namely the evolution of the city of Mostaganem, while being based on the characteristic supports previously quoted; then we report an account of the method supposed to objectify the use of subjective materials in the reading of the city.

Keywords: Colonial Urban Policy; Built Of Meaning; Representation; Education Strategy; Reception.

1. Introduction

In their learning of architecture and town planning, students are confronted with the analysis of an urban fact by using different resources to understand the genesis of the space in which they are called upon to intervene.

In addition to their methodological posture based on the theories of urban analysis and the various currents linked to morphology or meanings, the students are also in a posture of receivers - or recipients - and will then behave like users with multiple expectations. However, what is given to perceive in space is not an object frozen in time and in no way has a unique reading scheme. Here we start from the principle that perception is based on experience and is presented as "a series of internal states endowed with its subjective dimension" (Peacocke, 1983).

When the resources supposed to facilitate the reading of the urban phenomenon are deprived of preconceptions as it is the case for the colonial urbanization policy in Algeria, emotional considerations appear. The students' approach is naturally oriented towards a morphological reading followed by a search for the city's imageability. However, if the first is an information extraction operation followed by an objective processing of the data to detect the salient features in the urban phenomenon, the second calls on the experience of the lived space with a succession of subjective internal states. This establishes a communication process which works in the construct of meaning and which seems to us worthy of interest. As such, we report on a pedagogical experience of reasoned exploitation of non-normative data in the restitution of a reception of the colonial space of the city of Mostaganem (Algeria). Our goal is to develop a methodological approach where urban reception depends "both on the object perceived and on who perceives it" (Mérenne-Schoumaker, 2012, p. 257). We thus seek to endow the pedagogical approach to learning urban analysis with a double representational and phenomenological dimension. The hypothesis is that the use of sensitive data (to base the apprehension of the lived space on an experience) would constitute a palliative of the documentary weakness. These subjective resources would present themselves as a tool to help understand urban phenomena.

2. Study context and methodology observed

To make the development of this article coherent, we will begin by describing the urban space in question before developing the problems linked to the sensitive reading of the history of colonial urbanization. We will finally expose the educational strategy carried out in this experiment.

Description of downtown of Mostaganem

A coastal city in western Algeria, Mostaganem corresponds to the typical development plan for Algerian port cities described by Marc Côte (Côte, 1988). These latter grow in successive haloes between mountain and sea. This historical development by sectors, excluding the density of the indigenous population in favour of an elitist colonial space, reflects the antagonism with the pattern of centrality and gradient of most cities. of the world.

Thus, the current space is considered as a composite result of a superposition of pre-colonial and colonial spaces. These are spatial and societal shreds which testify to social practices and organizations and whose importance lies in their enduring effect (Figure 1).

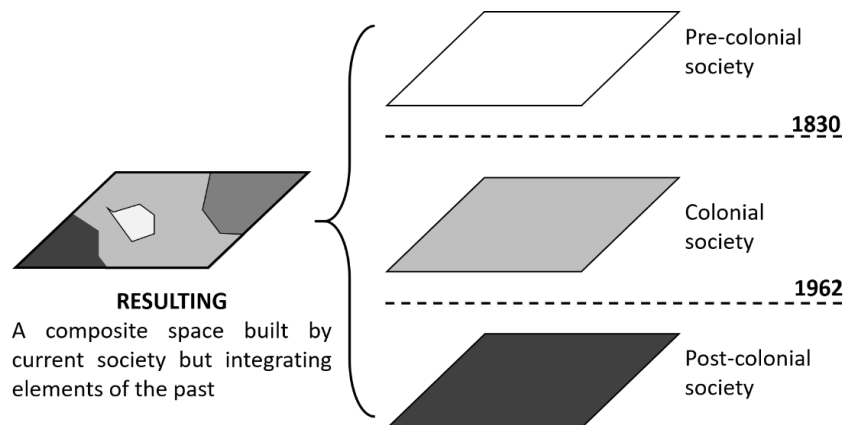


Figure 1. Space-society relationships in Algeria according to Marc Côte (1988)

The downtown of Mostaganem is made up of three entities strongly structured by the Ain-Sefra wadi: the Arab Kasbah Tijditt, the Turkish citadel “Derb” and the colonial nucleus (Figure 2). He mixes Arab, Spanish, Ottoman and French influences. However, we can note a preservation of the Arab quarter tending towards isolation and a partially harmonious integration of Turkish heritage into the colonial fabric.

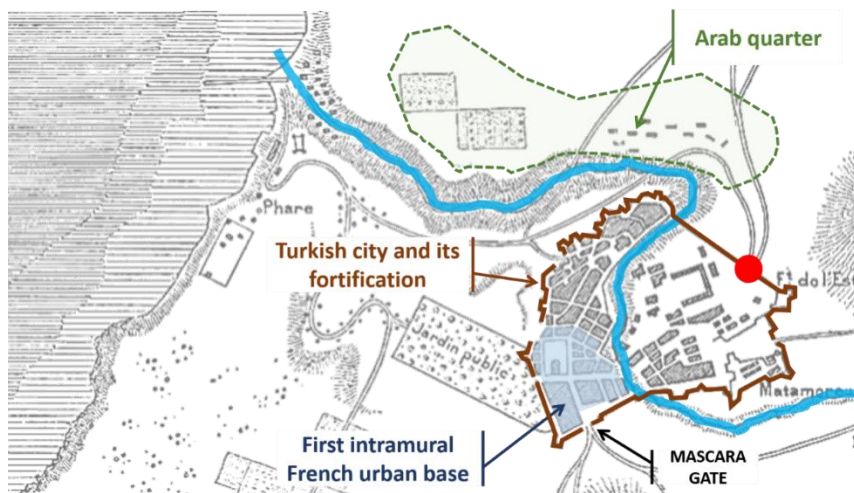


Figure 2. Some indications in a Map of Mostaganem from 1886, a survey of the French military navy (Red dot indicates the single passage between Turkish and Arab areas).

These features reveal a colonial military option: implant the city next to the fortified Turkish nucleus and adopt a south-east orientation to avoid topographical constraints. This had the effect of sparing the urban and architectural entity of the Derb and turning its back on Tijditt. (Yamani & Brahim, 2009).

2.1 The problem of duality

It is clear from the previous description that a strong social and ethnic division accompanies the spatial division initiated by the successive phases of urbanization in Mostaganem. This division persists in the users' feelings by the weak physical link which connects the popular district of Tijditt to the modern downtown (marked by the red dot on figure 2), contradictory street structures (opening/closing) and a social division and functional. The urban space in question shows two founding models: the medieval model with its organic constants of proximity, interpenetration and visual sequentiality, and the 19th-century city model with its linear constants of movement, of regular grid network as well as public places with regular geometry.

The question arises around the urban identity which is, in certain regions, comparable to “a multidimensional phenomenon which is based on the distinction between self and others and it includes a rage from culture to various levels of urbanism system; hence, based on the interaction of the conceptual system, the social and cultural system of the surroundings is formed which is always changing and developing” (Kamyar & Jafari Spouzezi, 2019)

Monotony and the lack of identity of the postcolonial urban landscape (Yamani & Brahim, 2009) encourage students to perceive the downtown as the only readable, meaningful entity. They tend to stop at the first conclusions that the city is a dual space where two atmospheres confronting each other confront each other. They base this dualistic vision on the collection of testimonies from the inhabitants and maintain that they cannot push their morphological approach further for lack of resources.

2.2 Lack of resources and worsening of the problem

In the educational context, the validity of the material collected by the students is questionable. The educational goal is to teach them to collect and sort a large mass of data reflecting a lived space. Their quest for completeness is supposed to be balanced by the preliminary theoretical course, the methodological contribution of which is based on different trends. Our orientation towards non-normative resources stems from the disparity of results that we meet with students and their tendency to extrapolate. We have noticed over the years that this disparity was the result of a lack of archival resources leading to an unreserved return to testimonies from users.

This "history loss" (Stora, 2004) means that Algerian society "does not seem to want to leave its status as an oral society, which therefore does not need to keep (protect) the written thing; which besides causes mistrust of the one who receives it" (Soufi, 2000). This state of affairs is confirmed by the propensity of students to want to fill information gaps with oral testimonies from city users; between the morphological reading of the city and the listening of the user, a representational divide undoubtedly arises (Khainnar, 2013).

2.3 Action strategy

Our educational strategy is organized in three phases (Figure 3). First of all, students must work on a data collection to analyse a state of dysfunction on the urban fragment.

The first phase represents a morphological reading followed by a reconstruction of the users' perception. A corpus of data is constituted through a qualitative type methodology (textual and iconographic). An action plan is drawn up to collect and/or generate sufficient data for reading and interpretation: shots in sequential mode (Cullen, 2012) and mental maps (Lynch, 2005), a survey of the different urban patterns an investigation into the different urban patterns and a typomorphological approach. These researchers, by introducing the terms "urban landscape" or "imageability", define the urban space visually grasped and mentally perceived in its three-dimensionality and its plastic materiality as much as in its sensitive apprehension: "it is almost entirely through the vision that the environment is apprehended" (Cullen, 2012, p. 11). The second phase is interested in new resources that we introduce at the same time or we judge that there is a deconstruction of the initial representations of the place.

The third phase involves a reconstruction of the meaning brought by the new data. It suggests the receptivity of implicit resources and tries to institutionalize sensitivity and emotion as added value when reading space.

It seems to us that the didactic structure latent to this exercise is able to channel the "bleeding from memory" as it likes to describe them the historian of the war of Algeria, Benjamin Stora. It is about working with students on a part of the general history of Algeria while suppressing "a kind of memory inflation [which] unfolds through testimonies, memories and autobiographies" (Stora, 2004). The resources consist of a testimony from an autobiographical novel which recounts the journey of a young resident of Mostaganem, representing a bourgeoisie of Arab-Turkish origin, living in the French part of the city and their awakening to the colonial conditions that led them to join the revolutionary troops.

the extract describes the perception of the city in the 1950s by a group of adolescents of all origins who isolated themselves in a high location in the city: "When we got to the top, we turned around. The city lay at our feet, so beautiful, to go from one district to another, it was enough to turn your head. A few steps from us, covering the hill, the impressive fortress called the East Fort, one of the many Turkish remains of our city. [...] Further down on our right was the Tjiddit district, a white Kasbah like all the Kasbahs in Algeria; a city of cubic houses with whitewashed walls, narrow alleys and adjoining terraces" (Ould-Moussa, 1980).

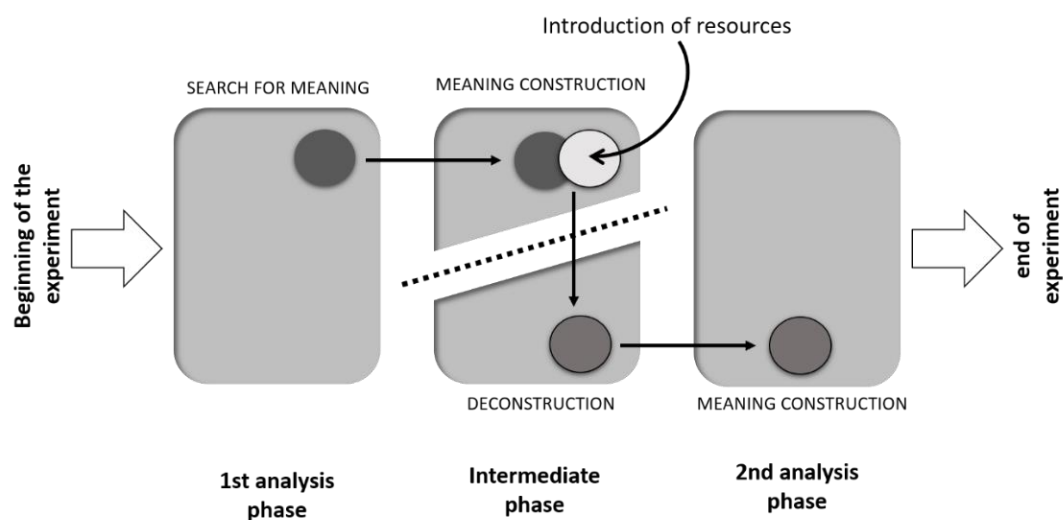


Figure 3. Structuring and introduction of resources into the educational strategy (Developed by Author).

The dichotomy between the European area and the indigenous area becomes evident in the rest of the description: "Tijditt, it was the lower town. Its houses were used for housing, but also grocery stores, bakeries, Moorish baths, small restaurants and other small shops, as well as so-called 'Franco-indigenous' schools. [...] European-looking neighbourhoods were modern, with streets and wide avenues. [...] All the important public buildings were there: the lycée, the colleges, the post office, the churches, the town hall, the court, the hospital, the banks, the station, the covered market, the chamber of commerce, the sous - prefecture and all the beautiful cinemas. In the suburbs were also the synagogue, the prison, and the brothels" (Ould-Moussa, 1980). Subsequently, we added to the corpus postcards of the downtown taken from the same angle of view on the "Mascara gate" and part of the fortified Turkish enclosure (Figure 4). They bear witness to the transformation of the urban landscape at different periods of the colonial era (Figure 5). It is an autobiographical novel which recounts the journey of a young resident of Mostaganem, representing a bourgeoisie of Arab-Turkish origin, living in the French part of the city and their awakening to the colonial conditions that led them to join the revolutionary troops.

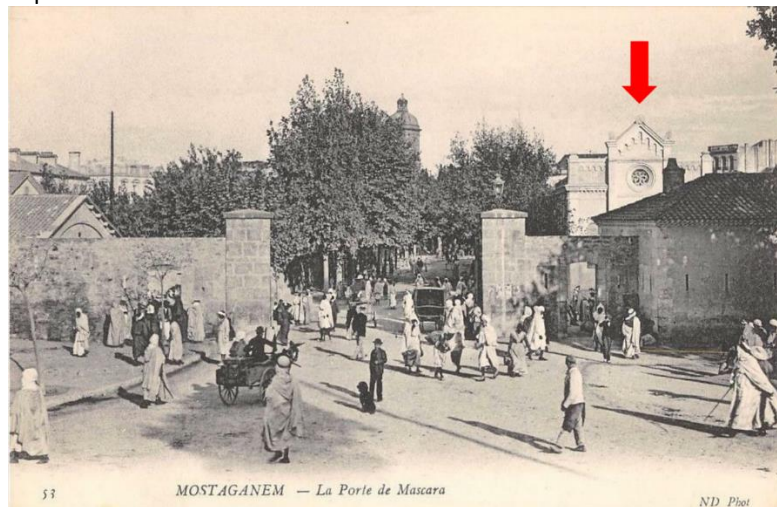


Figure 4. First postcard resource dated approximately 1835 (the Protestant temple is indicated by an arrow, it is considered an unchanging landmark since the creation of the European city until today)

We can read there the transformation of the city to adopt the European fabric, the opening of the old structure by the crumbling of the protective wall and the opening of large avenues penetrating the existing fabric. We also see the emergence of symbolic buildings such as a Protestant temple or a church. The students perceived reality of the pre-colonial space with the surrounding wall, a large part of which currently remains and materialized the name "mascara door" which until then had only corresponded to a locality. We use as a benchmark the first colonial building built intramural, it is a Protestant temple (indicated with an arrow on the illustrations) and which marked the establishment of the first settlers. One can easily evoke the establishment of a purely colonial and civilizing image aiming to gradually erase the primary identity of the place: "Cities have idiosyncratic identities composed of the combination of identity elements [...] Due to [...] urban branding, cities have lost their unique identities to a significant extent; and resemblances among cities have gradually emerged" (Erçevik Sönmez, 2020). The students proceeded by compiling and reading various maps, recovered from archives and books as well as from frescoes painted in the city's chamber of commerce. They deduced that Mostaganem was divided in 1833 into three distinct parts:

The downtown "El Bled" occupied by the Turks and the "Koulougliis" is located on the left bank of the wadi "Aïn Sefra" which divided the city in two. Reserved for the beylical command and the local aristocracy, it was protected by a wall pierced with five doors and dominated by a Turkish fort called "fort de l'est" (east fort). It contains buildings dating back to the Merinid occupation and is therefore not contemporary with the Ottoman occupation. Note that the beylicat designates the territory over which the power of the bey (Ottoman governor) is exerted, while the koulougliis represent a typical social group of North Africa, resulting from the mixing of the Turks and the Maghrebis. The district of "Matemore" was almost exclusively occupied by the "Hadar" city-dwellers. It was located on the right bank of the wadi and overlooked the downtown. It included the grain silos to which it owes its name as well as several beylical palaces. The two parts are brought together by the enclosure which gives the effect of a grouping but keeps a distinct imageability. The Arab quarter "Tijditt" is a Kasbah with cramped alleys and white houses nested, grouping together polluting activities such as tanneries, oil mills and other crafts. Connected to the city only by the "Medjaher" gate (point shown in red in Figure 2), this district houses Arab peasants attracted by work in the flour mill, it is surrounded by plots of cultivated land.

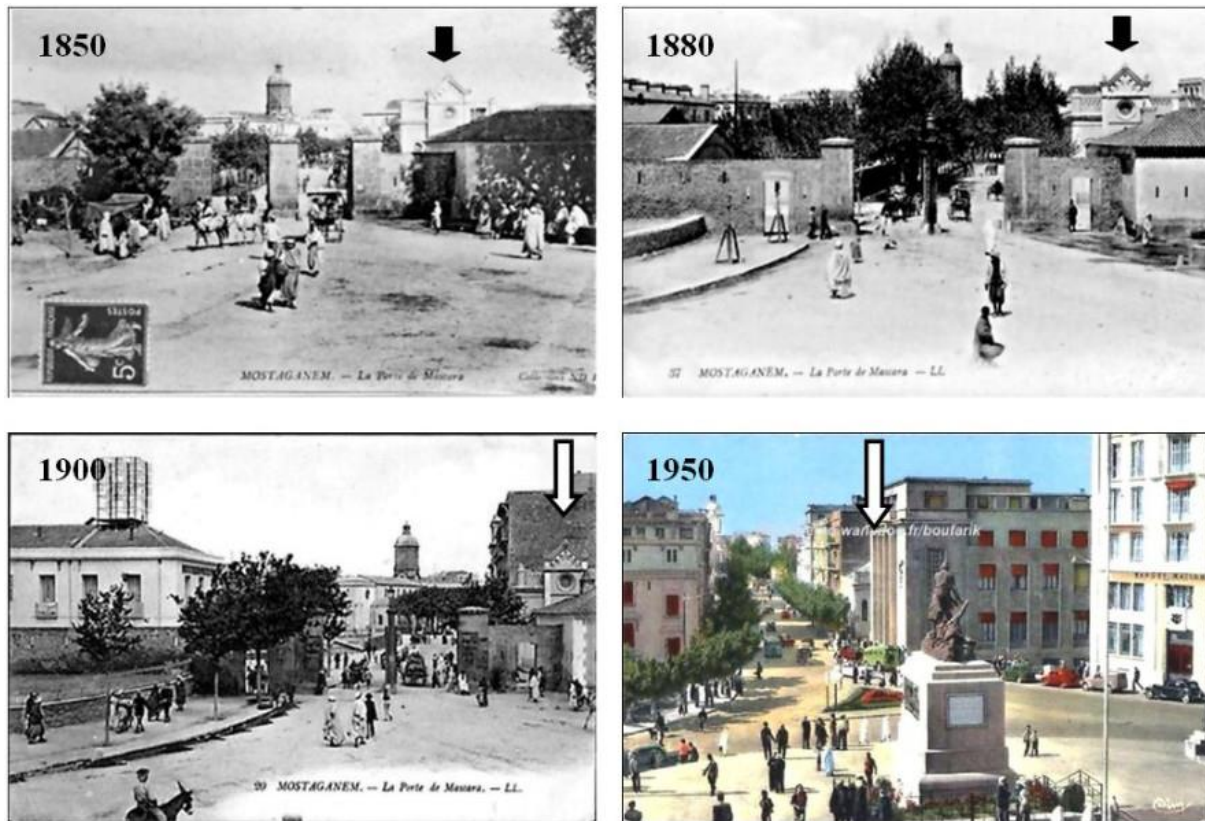


Figure 5. Mutation of the place of the "Mascara gate" visible by the approach of postcards

3. Theoretical references:

We maintain in our approach that there are as many perceptions of space as there are actors while insisting on the notion of the collective image of the city generated by all of the perceptions (Lynch, 2005). This "mental map" represents a dominant image formalized by a set of perceptions resulting from multiple interactions of users with their space.

These spaces of interaction are physical in nature (built and not built), but also social or subjective in nature (Habermas, 1984). They give rise to an interpretation of information emanating from reality in a simplified model influenced by the culture and psychology of the one who perceives reality (Figure 6).

Understanding the model requires studying the factors influencing the perceived and experienced space, the emotional supports of which have as much impact on the construct of meaning as the explicit supports (Laudati, 2013). In the case which concerns us, the students are readers in full construction of the meanings stemming from their societal values.

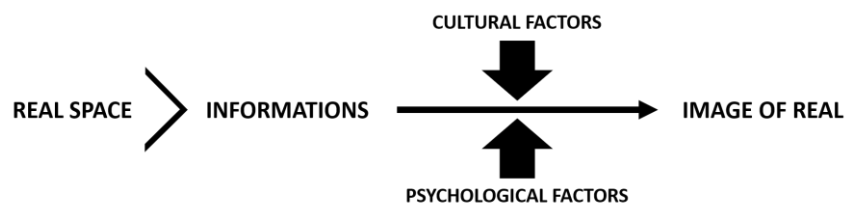


Figure 6. Diagram of the formation of an image according to J. Doherty (1969)

Our methodology is based on certain postulates cited by Laudati (2013) in his cognitive approach to urban reception, favouring the question of the interpretation of the message concerning the context:

1. The sense of the city is open to interpretation, it depends on the users' mode of production
2. The context and socio-cultural belonging of the receiver influence the interpretation. The reception is structured in a given place and time, but feeds on the experience of users, of history.
3. Reception involves a collective memory and a game of exchanges between expectations.

It is, therefore, necessary to return to the historicity of urban forms and their hierarchical overlap: "the professionals lost their concern on the intrinsic qualities of urban form, on how it is evolved historically, and on how its elements are related

to each other. They abandoned themselves to the relative ease of application of insensitive planning with high confidence in the decency and convenience of procedural functioning of planning” (Ünlü, 2019).

4. Results and discussions:

The introduction of non-normative resources instantly raised questions about the methods of validating the corpus for urban analysis. The students had to review their criteria for accepting resources.

The discovery of meaning in images and stories had the effect of helping students to go beyond the factual considerations of urban space to focus on the process of building reality among users.

They understood that the meaning given to the city comes from a process of interpretation of the messages which would be determined by “social and cultural factors, and influenced by the concrete situations and contexts of its occurrence” (Quére, 1996). The intermediate phase of our learning strategy (Figure 3) resulted in putting users' testimonies into context as well as questioning the students' representations.

4.1 From duality to otherness in the city

The reading of the romantic story immediately provoked a reinterpretation of the readings made so far by introducing, among the students, an awareness of the policy of colonial extension and the spatial dissociation between indigenous space and colonial space. The apprehension of the space narrated by the author, while being imbued with partiality, produces the expected effect in the course of the experience: The Arab city, compared in an implicit sense of confinement (territorial, functional and social) to the open European city, seem to exist before the colonial fact.

The testimony is thus valid no longer on the condition of the accuracy of the facts reported but precisely because of its ability to report a reality of representation.

During the debates on the evolution of the urban landscape noticed on the succession of postcards, a question emerged on the orientation of the urbanization policy conducted in Mostaganem and its likely effects on current dysfunctions.

The dualistic interpretation gradually gives way to an ambivalent apprehension of the city; the principle of missed association duality leaves room for problematic assimilation. It is no longer a question of students from two cities facing each other on either side of the wadi, but of a city within the city. The confrontation remains sensitive but its materialization is no longer of a morphological order. Mostaganem depopulates before the arrival of the French and the latter explain this by the tyranny of the Turks towards the peoples in search of independence. A military officer is said to have said at the time of Mostaganem's unopposed capture: “Matemore will be the rear zone, the defence centre and the spot bringing together all the military establishments ...the other Mostaganem will be left to the natives, only we will establish near the door "Bab-El-Djerad" a small reduced for a hundred of men that will suffice to prevent the city to close its doors and form a rebellion” (Belhamissi, 1982). It was after giving a new breath to the downtown and after creating - between the main parts of the city - the links countering the emerging gaps of an unusual urban flow, to install the army in strategic places and to contain the mobility of Arab natives.

1. Links within the precinct are reinforced and strategic points are occupied. A radical transformation is taking place in the urban landscape.

2. The wadi constitutes a morphological rupture dislocating the city and the Arab quarter very weakly connected to the city by controlled doors is naturally besieged.

3. The “colonial” city is developing on strategic axes and towards the sea and the port, abandoning the junction of its urban fabric with that of “Tijditt”. The problem is felt until today.



Figure 7. Dual evolution of the colonial city.

(Base of a 1942's U.S. army map, source: university of Texas Libraries)

We can see in Figure 7 the evolution of the city by the colonial urbanization policy. The layout of the Turkish wall (in red) is kept intact on the side of the Arab quarter (in green) in order to constitute, added to the natural rupture of the wadi, a rampart with the colonial city centre which builds on the existing Turkish urban structure.

The wall is falling apart on the European side, revealing large boulevards and an extension towards the sea through the port (arrows).

4.2 Representations: from fracture to consensus

First, the non-normative resources approach brings new elements to the understanding of urban space. Students are encouraged to consider complex data (postcards, literary stories, urban legends) as objects of mediation.

The correlation of sensitive data with the feelings that emerge from this data has the effect of placing the perception of space beyond its intrinsic nature by introducing sensitivities at the heart of urban analysis. The students then realize that they are themselves users who must make an effort to objectify

The impact of these resources can be seen in the change in perception of spaces that students rediscover as new spaces. Decoding - in Hall's sense (Hall, 1990) - no longer corresponds to the restitution of the original space because the user participates in it subjectively through a collective memory and expectations.

The meaning of the urban is defined beyond physical space, by a construction in a context: the receiver is located in space, time and society. The three components are extremely marked by urban episodes.

"Trapped in these narrow streets, the army could only use its equipment with infinite difficulties and slowness. It was, therefore, necessary to quickly spawn through this labyrinth of small streets and constructions contiguous to each other communication channels, now essential. This is what promptly opened the first streets and squares" (Picard, 1994).

Certain ancestral social practices (such as the funeral auction) are manifested in the form of a mobilizing procession which starts from the centre of the Arab city and ends in the form of a sometimes massive crowd in the colonial public square. They deduce that the dysfunction which manifests itself by the aspect of perennial seclusion of the Arab quarter, in particular in the representations of the users, is not only due to spatial conjunctures, but also and mainly from a phenomenon of re-appropriation of the "other" place. resulting from the colonial urbanization policy.

This re-appropriation focuses on the colonial space at the expense of a return to the Arab city. The opposition between the colonial and the traditional, Western modernity and the Arab-Muslim space does not seem to be effective (Picard, 1994).

4.3 Receptivity of students

The introduction of non-normative data placed the reception of students by immersing them in a context of belonging. Interviews conducted at the end of the experiment demonstrated that the problem of otherness ended up structuring their work methodology by engaging them in collective reflection. Thus, the codes prevailing in spatial identity were organized around a collective vision and common expectations. A reflexive work carried out by the group led to a reinterpretation of Marc Côte's scheme (Figure 1) by including the dimension of otherness and a reformulation of their methodology for approaching the problem (see Figure 8).

We note that the reception of students in pre-colonial urban spaces is done without separation from the current space; the latter is - in their eyes - completely absorbed by society. They thus note the distinction between physical entity and

cultural representation. From a typo-morphological point of view, the students clearly identify the types of fabrics that form the composite fabric of the city, but they regulate this purely quantitative reading of space by an interpretative approach to space reception. Also, we will notice on the diagram that the Arab quarter is represented as a different city, no longer dual and contradictory from the rest of the fabric but distinct and original.

Subsequently, the dysfunction targeted by the objective of this analysis was treated in a vision of preservation of the urban entity, with these specificities and its heritage, cultural and urban potential.

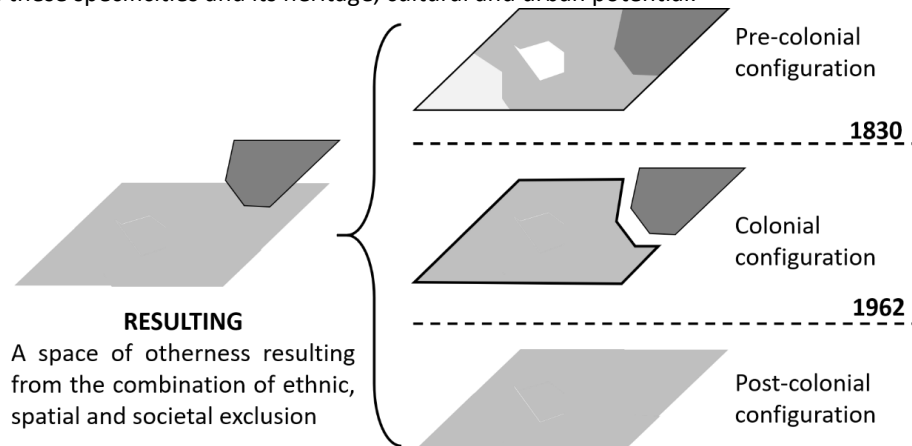


Figure 8. Reinterpretation of space-society relationships in Algeria.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this experience allowed us to see two interesting lines of study:

- One concerns the didactic component: by providing a point of view on formative evaluation in the context of urban reception.
- The other, presented in this article, concerns the receptivity of the urban through the reformulation of the approach methodology.

The example of non-normative data reinforced our idea that students could take into account individual and collective representations in the process of reading the urban fabric by developing an ad hoc methodology based on receptivity.

They were able to address the meaning that users give to places while objectifying their representations. They thus managed the complexity of the urban component in its plurality.

For this, their methodology was based on an oscillation between physical data and subjective data with a systematic deconstruction of the construct of initial meaning to gradually incorporate the new resources.

The objective of the experience was achieved when the students arrived at a collective construction of the sense of the urban, taking into account the subjectivity of the reception of users, the history of the place and the game of exchange between expectations. of each one.

Thus, the reading of the urban phenomenon, facing a documentary weakness due to the poverty of the official resources, was attenuated. The experience will benefit from being extended to similar cases - colonial cities with sensitive subjective data - in order to lay the groundwork for an educational strategy calling for compensation in the assistance tools for urban reception.

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