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## Urban Public Policies in Annaba: Between Continuity and Urban Déjà-Vu

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### Abstract

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For several decades, the medina of Annaba (Algeria's fourth-largest city), located in the heart of the city, has been a focus of the country's urban policies. Our specific interest in this part of the city—the oldest—allows us to shed light on the identity constructions associated with it, which are still emerging, and to understand the dynamics at play in its relationship to the city and its inhabitants. Our work analyzes the effects of urban public policies, as well as interviews with representatives of public authorities, residents, and heritage preservation associations. Our findings will help to highlight the pitfalls and repetitions inherent in these top-down approaches. Our objective is to initiate a genuine appreciation of the heritage space and a true urban renewal.

**Keywords:** medina; heritage; identity construction; public policies; urban dynamics.

### 1. Introduction

In this work, the notion of architectural and urban heritage departs from the vision of old city centers as "museums" and/or "empty shells," to encompass the idea of a living space appropriated by its inhabitants, whose place and role in the constitution of the heritage space cannot be ignored. Thus, the concept of "inhabiting heritage," developed at the Saumur colloquium, is explored.<sup>1</sup> This approach seems relevant for analyzing the case of the Annaba medina. Therefore, our methodology involves understanding the medina not only as a physical heritage site, but also as a lived space. In this sense, living in a heritage site like the old city of Annaba is not a neutral experience. Its history, its mnemonic value, and its cultural and identity-related significance are all elements that transcend the mere materiality of its physical heritage and give this living space a specific character in terms of the practices, uses, and relationships to space of its inhabitants. We also believe that successive waves of inhabitants from diverse social backgrounds who have resided in the medina have each contributed in their own way to preserving this heritage from the dangers of becoming a museum piece. Thus, the approach to heritage in this reflection aligns with that developed by Guy Di Méo, who considers that "heritage results from a strictly social production with an ideological, political, and/or economic purpose" (Guy Di Méo, 1998). Since the country's post-colonial period, namely the 1970s, and up to the present day, public heritage policies concerning the medina of Annaba, commonly known as the Place d'Armes, have essentially consisted of policies aimed at relocating its inhabitants. These residents benefited from social housing in large collective housing complexes located in the ZHUN (Urban Renewal Zones).<sup>2</sup> of the city. From the early days, the effects of these successive relocation policies have particularly degraded the medina. The displacement of a large part of the population, while leaving their homes without any support or overall heritage vision, has had the immediate consequence of multiple waves of precarious, transient, and above all endemic repopulation in dwellings left empty and without any maintenance. Located in the very heart of the city, the medina of Annaba faces the seafront and the port of Annaba to the south and east. It is bordered to the west by the main square, Cours de la Révolution, built during the colonial era, and to the north by the residential neighborhood of Les Caroubiers and the current five-star luxury hotel, the Sheraton. Since December 2006, the old city has been part of a heritage rehabilitation program whose objective is to "define its future and propose to organize its functioning and rehabilitate its image" (Boutemedjet, 2008).

<sup>1</sup>Symposium "Inhabiting Heritage: Meaning, Experience, Imagination" at the European University of Angers, Saumur, from October 13 to 16, 2003

<sup>2</sup>ZHUN: New Urban Housing Zone

In our analysis, we ask what the consequences of relocation policies are within this neighborhood ? Our hypothesis is based on the fact that these policies have, from the beginning, allowed the establishment of an attractiveness that is destructive to its built environment and to a detrimental institutional abandonment.

Our article is structured in two parts: the first sheds light on the different practices of circumventing urban regulations by residents claiming social housing; the second part reveals the close links that exist between these practices and the degradation of the medina's heritage.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The medina has a population that is 52% renters. According to A. Hafiane<sup>3</sup> The medina is sometimes a place of refuge and transit, sometimes a preserved heritage of identity. It is perceived according to this duality: a place of rich heritage and history to be preserved and/or an obstacle to the modernization of the city.

The actions and words of the inhabitants are central to our research. It is not our intention here to design a fixed and definitive analytical tool, as fieldwork is far from being confined to precise and closed analytical instruments. We structured our interviews, numbering one hundred and fifty-seven, with open and relatively broad questions, in order to allow for voluntary responses and narratives, covering a period from 2008 to 2024. These questions were based on the following themes: their personal and family histories, the connections between inhabitants and their relationship to the medina, their social interactions, social networks, and their modes of organization. The discussions were also punctuated by questions about their viewpoints and perceptions regarding institutional interest in this heritage site.

Depending on the situation we were in with the residents and their level of availability, The questions weren't pre-arranged, in order to allow them to express themselves with a great deal of freedom. They depended primarily on the level of openness they were willing to offer us. Indeed, some of them didn't wish to continue. the interview, would completely derail it, or direct us to other people further away and we were forced to restart differently depending on their moods.

The choice of our interviewees was made with the aim of covering the sociological spectrum Homeowners and renters with high, middle, and low incomes. The latter group typically has only a precarious salary or a pension shared by several households. The renter sample The residents were chosen based on their dates of arrival, both long-standing and more recent, and their family ties. This allowed us to determine if there were differences in relationships, the organization of daily life, and social connections. We were unable to reach squatters who have an illegal occupation status and refuse any contact with us. Similarly, we were unable to meet an individual frequently mentioned by residents for his illegal activities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with design professionals, for example the office that designed the POS<sup>4</sup>, which includes the 2006 rehabilitation program - and especially the urban planner who designed this program, A. Hafiane. For the development of this work, we also conducted five semi-structured interviews with the Association for The Backup of The Old Woman City, created by owners, which played a major role throughout the study of the POS, and the actions carried out in the rehabilitation program, as a full-fledged actor.

The essential assistance of two technicians from the Old Town Conservation Office, Ms. "Y" and Mr. "H," and their ongoing support, provided us with valuable insights into both the relationships and the development of new connections between residents and government agencies. They did not live in the area, so their visions and their constant interaction with the locals were very useful to us.

In such cases, direct observation was essential to verify our hypotheses and their indicators. This method was perfectly suited to observing the links between the inhabitants and the medina; this could not be quantified because it is embedded in practices, customs, relationships, and interactions with the living space.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Living in The Medina: Between Practices and Circumventions of the Rules

The two relocation operations that the inhabitants of the old town experienced in the late 1970s and during the 1980s, in order to The de-densification efforts left a lasting impression, even to this day. The conditions for qualifying for social housing on the city's outskirts are well known to the population: an advanced state of disrepair of the dwelling, a long-standing residency date indicated by rental agreements, and a precarious situation where it was verified that the sum of official income did not exceed a certain threshold. The census was conducted at the time without any methodology, and the lists compiled were not kept. This haphazard approach, in which the names of families who received housing did not appear on any official documents, led to a certain attitude—as explained to us by the president of the association for the preservation of the old town, Mr.<sup>5</sup>"D" - in the fact that the relocated residents, for the most part, returned and squatted in the premises. Sometimes even in their former homes, when the opportunity arose. They sold or rented their social housing and took advantage of the opportunity offered by the State, leaving these emptied places abandoned and without any support from the State, because these relocation operations were not followed by the reclamation of the premises vacated by the residents:

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<sup>3</sup>Abderrahim HAFIANE, architect-urban planner, president of the AUA (Urban Planning and Architecture Agency), designer of the medina rehabilitation program and associate researcher of the Arab and Mediterranean Worlds Team of the UMR CITERES in Tours (France).

<sup>4</sup>POS: Plan d'Occupation des Sols (Land Use Plan)

<sup>5</sup>We made the deliberate choice not to publish the full names of some of our interviewees in order to guarantee anonymity. This choice is also applied later when the names of mayors and elected officials are mentioned in the interviews.

*"[...]Some of them have already had housing, and there are illegal occupants who have benefited from housing. They sold these apartments, or rented them out, etc., and they came back... Aaaaaaaah!!!! Yes!!!! Most of them are like that; some have had housing three times, three times!!!! It was anarchy, which is why there's no... I personally know someone who had an apartment, rented it out, and came back here to his place, the misfortune... to the same place he was in. You see how it goes. (Mr. "D", 2024).*

Following this, a trend began to emerge: former residents who had benefited from social housing were returning so that they could be re-registered, when the opportunity arose, on another list of housing beneficiaries. Living in the same conditions as before, many of them were able to obtain a second and probably a third social housing unit, to the point that having just one was no longer sufficient. It is worth noting that these practices were reported by most of the people interviewed.

*"Mr. "D": [...] once, there was a knock at the door; she came out, I introduced her to the Mayor, and she told him her story. He said to her, "Listen, madam, I promise you, and this is in front of Mr. "D," in less than six months you will have your apartment, less than six months." We left the lady, saying goodbye. She immediately called him back: "Wait! Wait! Wait a minute!! Tell me... how many apartments are you going to give me? [...]" She wants several apartments, well yes, she lives in an entire school, we're not going to put her in just one apartment!!!!!! She told him, "I live in a school, you're not going to give me just one apartment!!! You have to give me half a building... how much will you give me?" The Mayor replied, "And how much do you want?" She told him, "I want three, three apartments." (Mr. "D", 2023).*

Residents who were unable to secure housing are pointing the finger at local government officials for the emergence and organization of this speculative market; these accusations even go so far as to name specific mayors or municipal officials who allegedly took advantage of the failures of the system at the time:

*"Chahla: [...]we didn't seize our opportunity during the time of Mayor "Z," he told us...he took us up there...and told us to give 5000 DA, at that time there was the FIS<sup>6</sup>In power; they told us that corruption is wrong; if we were awake, we would have given it away... And back in Mayor "B's" time, he gave the keys to all the women, and we stayed. We're veterans here. Back in Mayor "T's" time and with his clan, people moved out, they vented their frustrations, they left, then came back, then, for the second time, they moved back, and then came back again, and for the third time, they left and came back.*

*AB<sup>7</sup>What do you mean ? They moved and came back, then moved again and...*

*Chahla: They leave, they sell their homes, they come-back, live in a ruin...the commission comes and takes them...three times, they've moved three times, that's why we stayed, they're our cause...that's why. They move, they're given a place to live, they were in El-Bouni, then they got another one in Sidi-Amar; they take it and they come-back, they take it and they come-back, so those who stay at Place d'Armes [...]" (Chahla, 2020).*

It is wrong to believe that these practices exclusively concern former residents; owners who no longer live on the premises are also subject to this, their properties being neglected by them, for many reasons of co-ownership and what this engenders in terms of different visions of the interests of the multiple and diverse heirs, or even by the detachment and a stigmatized representation of the medina, which had led to neglect and a lack of investment:

*"A. Hafiane: You have a very significant speculative process underway in the medina. Because the law doesn't allow property owners to reclaim their land, they were in a state of limbo, waiting for the State to do something—not to build their houses, but to protect their property, since they no longer have any say in its fate. Take this building; you see the St. Augustine alleyway going uphill. There's a corner building there, completely squatted, and the owners are Mozabites. They would like to reclaim it, but they know they can't; in the Local Urban Development Plan (POS), it's listed as an amenity. They told us they were happy that the State took it and reimbursed them, because it's a solution for them, since they can't evict the squatters. It's entirely squatted, very well located on the central square with a very interesting view from the theater." It was proposed as a cultural facility, and as such, expropriation is possible, which would be a good solution for the owners. On the contrary, that's what they want, because now they have no say in the matter concerning their property. (A. Hafiane, 2023).*

Another speculative phenomenon that persists involves a famous figure in the medina. Despite our numerous attempts, we were unable to meet this individual, but his reputation precedes him.<sup>8</sup> Apparently, the former inhabitants attribute to him "the cause" of the degradation, so to speak, the physical and especially social degradation:

*"Khadidja: [...] well, it's Abdallah, the tailor; he's the one who... I tell all... He's in cahoots with the State, he restores the emptied house a little and then sells it... Abdallah, the little one, the tailor; you know him (addressing Mr. "H")*

<sup>6</sup>Islamic Salvation Front

<sup>7</sup>Anissa Boutemedjet

<sup>8</sup> This character was mentioned in the accounts of many individuals, during our interviews with residents, the president of the association for the preservation of the old town and also with the urban planner A. Hafiane.

Mr. "H": Yes, I know him

Khadisja: You know him, Abdallah the tailor... he's the one who ruined the Place d'Armes... He restores and rents out or sells the empty corner; even in ruins. The whole Place d'Armes is in ruins, except for the owners' houses [...]"(Khadidja, 2022).

Such reported practices have become widespread in the medina, reinforcing its transient nature; it is therefore relevant to note that the public authorities and their actions on the ground are likely nonexistent in the face of this reality. The various complaints from residents, property owners, and others... Their relationship with this phenomenon remains unresolved, so they cease to do so and do not feel more concerned by the issue.

### 3.2. The Degradation of Heritage: An Illegal Practice?

#### 3.2.1. Practices and Degradation of The Built Environment

The medina of Annaba, designed throughout the ages according to known civilizational models, presents a dichotomy: Arab-Muslim/Haussmannian. The urban landscape no longer faithfully reflects these historical, architectural, and urban references. A bitter reality, however, is distorting and erasing, to some extent, this heritage. The visitor is confronted with entirely new forms, additions both inside and outside the courtyards of Arab-Turkish houses, in the streets and alleyways. These include the replacement of doors with windows and vice versa, the extension of a semblance of an upper floor onto terraces, and illegal constructions on vacant lots resulting from the collapse of a building or part of a building. (Figs. 18, 19 & 20)



**Figure 1.** Construction of an unfinished room in red brick on a terrace. Photo A. Boutemedjet, 2022.

**Figure 2.** Construction of a room with a sheet metal roof, on a terrace. Photo A. Boutemedjet, 2022.

**Figure 3.** Addition of a brick room between two buildings. Photo A. Boutemedjet, 2022.

These transformations, mostly unfinished, are visible by their size or by the materials used, which are different from the original constructions of the medina; they vary between the exterior walls in red brick left in this state, the roofs which, due to lack of resources, are made of sheet metal; the small rooms on the terraces, the multitude of exterior paintings as finishes, the filling of gaps between houses and buildings, etc.

"Mr. "D": [...] But they do what they want now, they're building on the road, you understand, there are shantytowns here. They're building shacks out of corrugated iron in the old town.... We took photos and we notified the authorities and everything [...]. There's no response.... There's nothing, even if we go to the police station, right there nearby, they do nothing..."

Ms. "Y": They couldn't care less.(Mr. "D", 2024)

These practices inform us about the situation in the Place d'Armes area. This is due, among other things, to the movement of people who pass through and, intending to stay temporarily, find themselves settling permanently due to a lack of resources and the ever-increasing rental market. New and long-time residents, whose children are growing up and reaching the age to marry, are converting and building rooms as extensions in their courtyards or on their terraces, sometimes as a temporary solution, sometimes as a more permanent one.

The reader is here informed that a police station exists within the medina, along with an urban control service, "Sector 1," located on El-Fida Street in the very heart of the medina. This service comprises two architects and technicians acting as "urban controllers," tasked with penalizing all violations, illegal constructions, and non-compliant buildings that may occur throughout the sector, including the old city. This service collaborates with the Urban Planning and Environmental Protection Police (PUPE) in its operations. It is clear that all these abuses are taking place right under the noses of local authorities, who are responsible for taking action and have a duty to respond.

#### 3.2.2. Transitory Nature, Indifference of Character

The squatter movement is not limited to former residents of the old city. According to data from the Local Urban Development Plan (POS) analysis, and following the relocation of the 1980s, over 65% of the medina's population had settled in this area for a period of no more than four or five years. This confirms, according to the study, that the old city was and still is a transit zone subject to demographic renewal, as the growth rate is not proportional to the high number of new arrivals. Household size varies: 55% of households consist of five people, and 28% have more than eight family members. Living spaces in a typical medina house mostly consist of two rooms; more precisely, the actual situation in the old city is an average of 1.73 rooms per dwelling.

The income of these families, as discussed by the office in charge of the Local Urban Development Plan (PLU), would shed light on their situation and allow for an assessment of their ability to contribute to improving their housing conditions. However, this issue remains sensitive and complex: sensitive because it is considered confidential, and complex because other potential sources of income, such as rents, inheritances, and informal employment, are not disclosed. For example, 42.86% of residents have undefined income, 15.8% have incomes of less than 10,000 DA, and 18.2% earn between 10,000 and 15,000 DA.<sup>9</sup>DA.

Residents from low- and middle-income social classes constitute a demographic flow. They are attracted to this place because of its geographical centrality, the proximity of the various services it offers, and especially because there is no rent to pay for "vacant properties" or because of the negligible sums they represent compared to the rental market in the city and in these central locations, hence the emergence of a significant speculative phenomenon.

This newly arrived population, along with the long-time residents, partly explains the advanced state of disrepair of the buildings. Their motivation stems from a desire to leave, either to move to social housing or to save money and relocate, especially among new couples. These characteristics mark a detachment from the medina, given its precarious conditions. By choosing to live there, they view it as a place of passage, transit, or refuge—in essence, a space of instability. The shift from ownership before relocation to squatting by the former residents, fueled by real estate speculation and the lure of low rents, has affected the buildings through neglect and neglect. They prefer not to invest in properties that do not belong to them and, consequently, do not participate in their restoration.

*"A. Hafiane: Because social housing policy in Algeria was somewhat biased, due to the surveys conducted, you have a percentage of people living in substandard housing, so you are registered on the list of people eligible for housing. People still exploit legal loopholes...even though they could have already benefited from housing. Moving through the old city allows them to acquire social housing, not necessarily to be rehoused, but to benefit from an asset, because social housing could be sold."* (A. Hafiane, 2022).

This does little to alleviate the already dilapidated state of the buildings, caused by the ravages of time and the aging of the structures, most of which are two centuries old or even older, resulting in structural weaknesses. This is compounded by stagnant wastewater and rainwater; given the obstruction and obsolescence of the drainage system, this water tends to back up to the surface. Adding to all this is the fact that the buildings are interlocking, resting on the load-bearing elements of the adjoining structures, which contributes to the current condition of the adjacent dwellings.

### 3.2.3. Transitory Nature, Intentional Characteristics

Unfortunately, other realities exist that could be directly linked to the deterioration. These are the actions of individuals who intentionally damage buildings in order to obtain a "report" from municipal agencies, which issue these documents after conducting an on-site inspection. This "technical report" includes observations such as: "partial subsidence of the ground at the junction of walls and floors, high humidity causing plaster and paint to peel, lack of lighting and ventilation, damaging cracks appearing in the corners of the walls..."

*"Mrs. 'Y': [...] you know, they come to us saying their wall is going to collapse because of the explosion, etc ... they've come from everywhere. They're demolishing their own ceilings, damaging their houses ... the main thing is that we go out to assess the situation. [...] they're the new ones, the new ones, the illegal occupants. The long-time residents come to complain politely, they ask about the status of their case..."* (Mrs. "Y", 2023).

This technical observation is highly valued because it officially attests to a state of advanced deterioration. Several factors prevail in a rating system on which the criteria for allocating social housing are based, hence these destructive practices.

## 4. Conclusions

The heritage space that is the medina of Annaba, which is the subject of many studies and actions in the desire of the State to rehabilitate it, to restore it, in short to safeguard it and to connect the inhabitants to it, hardly prevails to say that the latter suffer or remain on the margins of the reality of its political decisions.

Our research, as it unfolded, highlighted through our analysis the deployment of a variety of actions and their dynamics. It demonstrated that residents could, individually or collectively, display ingenuity and creativity in finding workarounds, detours, and even adopting a stance that was both agreed upon and legitimized by the social group in order to achieve their ultimate goal of relocation. Heritage-related public policies would greatly benefit from integrating this reality into their efforts to safeguard and rehabilitate the medina of Annaba from the outset, thereby enabling a complete and decisive break with the traditional and "been there, done that" urban pattern that has persisted since the post-colonial period of the 1970s. This would allow for genuine urban renewal of this area, particularly the Place d'Armes and the metropolitan area of the country's fourth-largest city in general.

## Conflicts of Interest

"The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest."

<sup>9</sup> 280 Algerian Dinars are the equivalent of 1 euro.

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