

A City between Metamorphosis and Mutation from 19th to 21st Century

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Abstract: Constantine is a big city, particular because of its site and history. But it is especially a city that currently polarizes a huge interest from public authorities, researchers, as well as citizens represented by associations that are militating to safeguard and promote the city. Making Constantine “a regional capital, a metropolis” is the ambitious urban project of this city authorities. It is a prestigious project, but at the same time, a double-edged sword. With the emergence of this project, a new conception of the city and its image is induced, the one that conjures new canons of urban modernity, with the whole discourse that sustains it and indicators that materialize it. A new attitude toward the current city of Constantine has emerged, from both the authorities and citizens. The inhabitants are continuing in spite of all to invest their city and do not accept that the natural process of appropriation of space may be stopped indefinitely. The author will try to expose the conflict situation of a changing city inside numerous and varied issues, as well as stakes and challenges.

Key words: Urban morphology, colonial impact, post colonial changes, built heritage.

1. Introduction

Constantine is a great city that ensures the function of regional metropolis of eastern Algeria. The morphological breakdown of this city and its urban disintegration, as a result of multiple factors, have led the public authorities to undertake a policy of the city initiated and conducted by the government as well as a modernization project commanded and ordered by the president himself.

Making of Constantine “a regional capital, a metropolis” is the ambitious government urban project. A prestigious project, but it is also a double-edged sword. With the emergence of this project a new conception of the city and its image is induced, making re-emerge on the surface the new canons of modernity, with the entire speech that sustains it and indicators that materialize it. A new attitude toward the present town of Constantine is raised, from both the authorities and citizens.

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The author will try to highlight the ideological trends that underpinned through history the different approaches and action undertaken towards such remarkable city, coming undone and redone on a cyclical basis, and the resulting urban impact.

2. The City of Constantine

Algeria’s third largest city, eastern capital of the country, Constantine occupies a central geographical position within the region, an area of 2,297.20 km, 2,943,111 inhabitants, therefore, a density of 410 inhabitants/km². The “mother town” of Constantine occupies an area of 231.63 km², where reside 448,374 inhabitants, it is characterized by a high density of population, 1,936 inhabit./km².

Constantine is a city that, spatially, consists of a patchwork of heterogeneous entities, historic core or Medina, the colonial fabric, suburbs, large housing estates, informal settlements, self-built and slums. Among these unbuilt entities, space does not participate in the structure or the city urbanity, it is a vacant land without planning or qualification, generating forms of regulated squatting or imposed

pollution.

The ancient city of Constantine was a high place during its whole history. A fortress because of the topography of its naturally fortified site, the relief of the rock, which rises to an altitude of 645 m, occupying an area of 42 hectares, surrounded by deep ravines and crossed by the Rummel River, made an “impregnable” city [1]. The only points of connection of the city with the outside are the bridges of Sidi Rached, El Kantara, Sidi M’Cid, Ali Mellah the footbridge and the large square of Bab El Oued or “Breche” (Fig. 1).

In the early 19th century Constantine was limited almost exclusively to the rock, which by its scarps was a natural defensive site (Fig. 2). It is, indeed, a place affirmed spatially and functionally, concentrating the majority of official buildings, social, cultural and administrative amenities. Gradually, as the author goes through the arteries branching off from the place of the Breche, the fabric frame changes, the lanes are shrinking, the facades are common, and the fabric merges with a tissue of another nature: the Medina.

A sudden uncontrolled urban growth invading the city has generated heterogeneous landscapes transforming its image, Medina, spatially, no longer represents more than 1/45 th of the city fabric.

3. History of the City of Constantine

Because of its strategic location, the nobility of its social component, its cultural richness, its economic potential, Constantine has always been the city of command per excellence, with a power and a multiform commandment: political, military, administrative, economic and cultural.

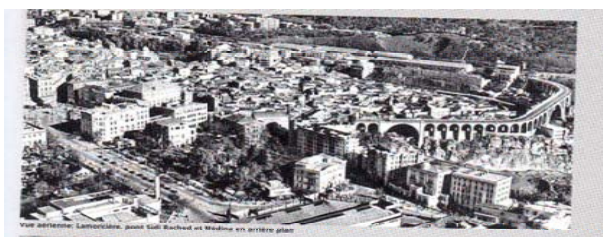


Fig. 1 Aerial view of Constantine.

It was the crucible of several Mediterranean civilizations. Formerly Cirta, Numidian capital, it was Constantine who named it, the one who rebuilt it after its destruction in 313 AD, Punic-Numidian (third century BC), Greco-Roman (second century BC), Arab-Islamic (seven century JC), Ottoman (since 1522) and French (since 1837). That is why Constantine is seen as a huge monument in terms of its urban and architectural constitution. Besides the fact that it has always been the political, economic and cultural seat of all these civilizations, it is impossible to ignore the character of this city, Turkish Arabic, mainly transformed by Haussmann’s gesture, which reflected the images of modernity in the late 19th century, particularly the architecture which was designed to enrich the visual culture with monuments charged of educating and shaping the taste.

The exacting and limiting site nature of the rock has caused the fact that the urban area of Constantine can not keep the product of past civilizations, that is to say, Muslim Arab, Ottoman and French, each having been forced to destroy, transform and metamorphose in order to deploy and rebuild. The witness of this contrasting and forced patchwork of architectural and urban heritage is the Medina which is the heart of the city.

Of course that the Arab-Muslim city has been established on the indigenous Berber and Roman substrate, Ottoman domination was grafted with minimal disruption to the Arab-Islamic heritage, despite some adjustments imposed by the Beys (Turkish governors) (Fig. 3). The city resisted preserving its physical structure, its morphological features and the layout of its streets. But the “retournement” [2] of space and the great mutation have been imposed in 1844 when the city was disemboweled and the entire northern part of town overlooking the site of the rock has been dismantled and replaced by an exogenous tissue, punctuated by regular iconic buildings symbolizing colonial triumphalism.



Fig. 2 Bridges of Constantine.

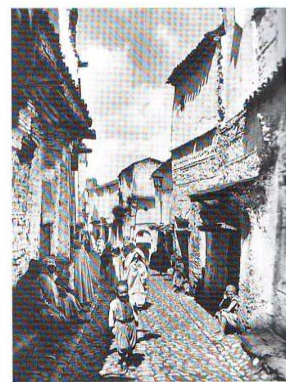
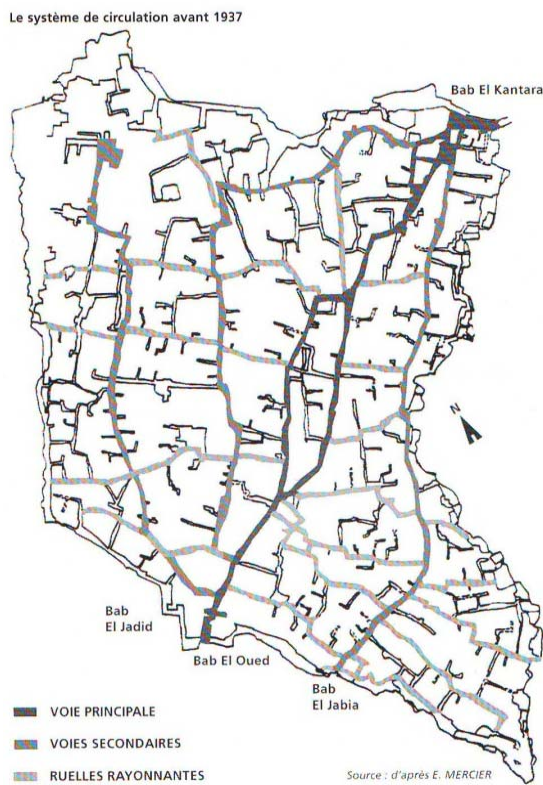


Fig. 3 Constantine before 1937.

In a broader context, a deep search of a cultural and artistic ideal has raised the architects of the 18th century passion to the ancient times. The period 18-19th century was a period of urban redefining, a desire for republics representation through the more abstract forms of neoclassical. This epoch was same that of French colonialism assault on Algeria.

The land of Algeria was the space of exaltation of artistic trends and ideologies, especially the architectural and urban experimentation. Some currents of thoughts and architectural trends were expressed through forms and typologies as “neo-classical architecture”, “Moorish Revival architecture”, “modern architecture”, “Mediterranean

style”, were materialized by facades and forms etc., finally end to the “style of government” [3].

Indeed, in producing the colonial city in Algeria, the French colonial power has also produced a discourse related to ideology. The incarnation was the emblematic signs such as the official building, places, streets etc. and the architecture of the town had become architecture of representation.

Currently, the colonial legacy is the major part of the Algerian cities, it imposes its logic and its image, images rich with signs dominating by the quality and quantity, to the point of having deeply embedded in the collective memory. The colonial urban project aimed and realized the formation of urban and architectural spaces of collective meaning, deliberately placing themselves in a position of opposition and denial over the meanings and coding systems of traditional Algerian city [4].

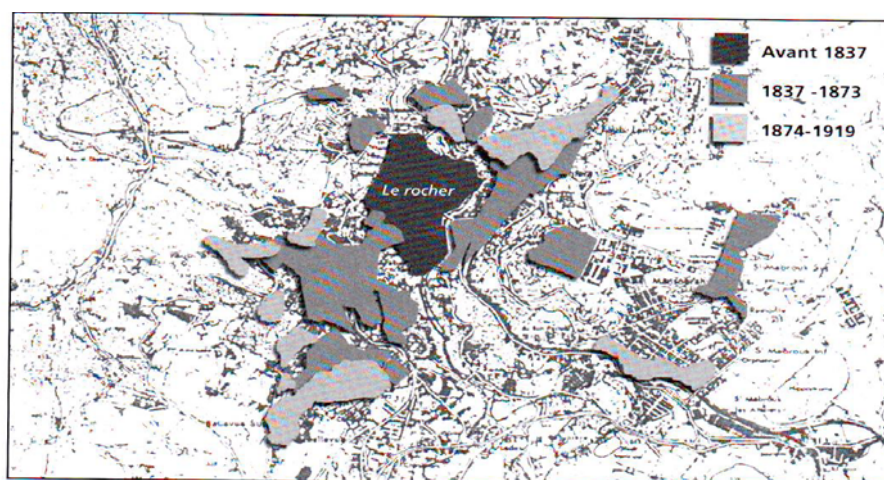
4. Urban History of the City of Constantine 19th to 20th Century

The colonial city having supplanted the indigenous town was affected by the layout of strategic communication routes that were used to distribute the devices, to streamline flow, for social control and ideological representation of a France which is assigned to itself the “duty of civilizing the savage societies”. This evolutionist view was, indeed, marked

by the colonial ambitions in seeing the distant societies as backward societies destined to join them.

Colonialism has processed by demolishing whole sectors of the city to rebuild new ones dressed in neo-classical facades. Disemboweling for the enlargement, rectification of streets and squares has been created the emergence of a city different from that preexisting one. This “turning space” also sought to separate the indigenous identity from their structures in order of their acculturation. The shape of the existing city, loaded with memory and values has been mutilated by the devices of knowledge, representation and power in colonial society that was imposing its own memory conveyed by legitimizing new signs and symbols (Fig. 4).

The newly imposed spatial system was in fact an ideological system wanting itself at the same time a means of integration and distancing from each other. The Algerian city was used as a testing ground for numerous technical servicing and the way to achieve the “modern” project and make it visible. This is actually a symbolic appropriation of colonized space, the form that assumed the production and use of symbols that contain a “social and political effectiveness” [5], reinvestment of material forms. This is actually a process of “marking” that took place, since the toponymy until the demolition and architectural and urban production.



constantine 1919, les phases d'évolution principales

Fig. 4 Main evolution steps of the city of Constantine.

After the invasion of the city of Constantine, French colonialism has chosen to make of the space from which was break for the assault, from which the name of the place of the “Breche”, the center and the pole embodying its presence and its supremacy and make it an element for the composition and urban aesthetics of the city of Constantine. The space of Breche, a major space of representation, acts as a spatial link between the old city on the rock and the new colonial city.

The colonial urban fact was the plating of exogenous model, the disemboweling of endogenous tissue through Haussmannian breakthroughs having crossed the Medina. There was a composition by replacing, reversing space [2] and by extension, which merged the two tissues. Concealment of indigenous fabric is made through the homogeneity characteristic of the composition creating a scenography implemented at the gates of the rock. Indeed, concrete tracings tearing the fabric in the rock have completely transformed the morphology of the original fabric: ways and boulevard bordered with facades leading to places for purposes of control, ventilation and legibility of urban space. The cuttings caused by the plots have led to a fragmented also obeying to the same implemented scenography. Buildings of two types: An extraordinary first type is that of official institutional buildings—the courthouse, the post-office, bank, theater, market, are grouped around a central space, the “Brèche” which represents the main entrance door became pole of growth in the urbanization of Constantine; and a second type which is common and repetitious of the residential buildings along streets and boulevards and which majority ground—floor, are assigned to the shops.

The Ordinance promulgated on 09/06/1844 divides the town on the Rock in the European quarter and indigenous quarter by the Rue Nationale, now rue Larbi Ben M’Hidi. The greatest part of the place of Brèche was occupied by military buildings. The same year, the council also decided that the extension of the

city should take the direction of Coudiat Aty, south side of the rock which is connected to it by an isthmus. The republic from 1848 favored the civil administration with the creation of the prefecture, prefecture and municipality. Outside the ramparts concessions were granted, which is the influx and installation of colonists, traders and manufacturers in the suburbs. In 1865 Napoleon III reassured the colonial population marking a qualitative jump in the urban expansion of the city. In 1866 outside the ramparts of the houses rose. Inside the ramparts began the expropriation of houses bordering the east side of the Brèche.

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In 1887 the work on the Coudiat were inaugurated, the cuttings collected from the Coudiat sites were used to fill both sides of the isthmus. The city had won the 7 hectares in the Coudiat and 8 to 9 hectares at its gates. From this time on was the beginning of the city expansion then sprawl, which continue till nowadays (Fig. 5).

The first social programs conveying a minimalist architecture influenced by hygienist and economist



Fig. 5 The Breche square.

current has made born the concept of HBM—Habitat Bon Marché (inexpensive housing) in 1911, economic hygienic housing for people with low income. In this type of housing was missing the constituent elements of the colonial building: porch door, console, cornice, window frame etc. and are reduced to their simplest functional expression.

The HLM—Habitat à Loyer Modéré (low-rent buildings), rental buildings are constructed by public or private agencies, accommodation which replaced the HBM by HLM in 1930. Large ensembles, the product of modernist tendency that appeared in the 60th, under a regional balance from the command of General De Gaulle to appease the rising Muslim populations revolted by their situations of poverty. That was tall buildings according to the model of towers or bars, a pure product of modern architecture. Finally, around the 50th the cities of resettlement appeared in order to absorb rural migration to big cities and eradicate shantytowns and unhealthy forms of habitat. Process of building was becoming more and more standardized and industrialized. However, the modernist trend has not failed to leave its mark in Constantine, as in the rest of the country. From 1954 to 1962, interest have carried, mainly to the customer and the European and French administration, a production made exclusively of buildings with office equipment or accommodation for executives and employees of government or large companies. Cities

resettlements, for solving the problems of shantytowns were not numerous, the free facades, the right angle, the bays in width or length glass panel have proliferated in the landscape of the city, especially its suburbs.

The post-colonial period, after a transitional period where the inherited housing vacated by the Europeans responded to the need of the Algerian population on its own, in addition to the completion of ongoing projects, the Algerian state faced a deficit in housing following the rural exodus and its consequences on the city. The option of social housing oriented the production to a simplistic architecture of large, industrialized building for the greatest number of achievements in a short time.

The economic concern and the load of numbers caused, by the emergence of molds dictates and cranes roads of large companies, have caused the abandonment of the rules of composition, layout and urban aesthetic, formerly balancing technical progress and aesthetic concern.

5. PMMC: Modernization Project of Metropolitan Constantine

The Metropolis of Constantine Modernization Project of the President or PPMC [6] is a major program seeking to assume an emblematic and symbolical character (Fig. 6). This is an urban project, designed as an utopia achievable because commanded

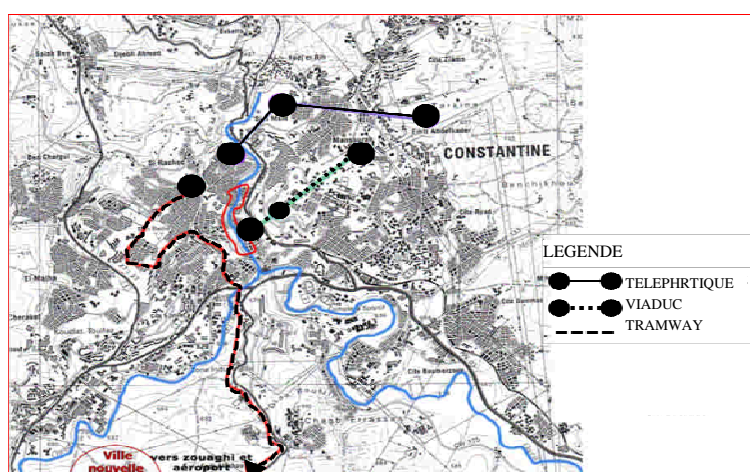


Fig. 6 The big structural projects in Constantine. Source: Towns and urban projects.

by the head of state, with multiple ambitions, including: enhancing the image of the city's beautifying, modernizing by the contemporary projects, requalifying by the urban renewal and rehabilitation, enhancing local potential and promoting investment. PPMC components have acted on these large spatial territorial entities, apprehending the site of the city in several spatial scales that are also levels of intervention and development: the rock, the proximity of the rock, the suburbs and the periphery of the city, planning a short, medium and long term.

Since the aim of marketing is essential, building reception facilities and improving the image was the priority, in fact, under this component itself, targeted objectives are the following:

(1) Creating an attractive and functional urban environment by large metropolitan facilities and Services;

(2) Improving the accessibility of sailings;

(3) Building a valorizing and positive image of the metropolis through flagship and iconic projects.

The government has seized the opportunity to redesign parts of the city, wanting in a holistic and integrated conception. The overall improvement of urban quality was initiated by coordinated actions on housing, transportation, culture and community services. Then the image of Constantine is changing with large operations as well as small, the redefinition of all urban transport infrastructure, parks, sewer systems and servicing, the demolition of large old areas and their replacement by business centers and prestigious projects such as the Congress Hall and grand hotels in deliberate substitution of a great popular district. So although the shantytowns were eradicated but also whole districts have entirely disappeared to make room for the immensity of these big projects. The impact would be achieved by the first emergence of the flagship projects such as major equipment, prestigious projects, and structural products, such as the tramway, cableway and the giant bridge. Among numerous consequences of this actions:

the forced removal of populations to the new town of Ali Mendjelli, specially designed and built for relieve congestion and delaying growth of the city of Constantine.

Moreover, the public authority is between two antagonistic situations difficult to reconcile concerning the built heritage, on the one hand a strictly defensive position of this heritage, attitude that freezes all action, on the other hand, individual anarchic interventions, even non-regulatory and secret. Residents continue despite all to invest their city and do not accept that the natural process of appropriation of space may be stopped indefinitely. The protagonists of the heritage conservation of the city under the protection and safeguarding associations are on the lookout against any processing or decision and the government ordering the safeguarded perimeter law for having a stranglehold on this great land resource. So, many actors who oppose the interests of very high stakes, even contradictory, are represented by this heritage. Parallel to the implementation of PPMC, and the development of PPSMVSS (permanent plan for the safeguarding and development of the saved sector) as palliation of the plan of land use for the preservation area, a rehabilitation action ordered by the wali of the city has focused on pilot projects located in the lower part of the Medina, constituting a facade of the city. Nevertheless, the only action that has been undertaken is the project of rehabilitation that did not emerge from patrimonial concern, but rather in logic of enhancement and embellishment of the general appearance.

While the regulations governing the PPSMVSS was under discussions, any action was paralyzed, any intervention of the population banned, the government proceeded with the conversion, rehabilitation of some homes without actually having the associated population. These have continued to invest their space outside the law and in the secret of the night.

The action undertaken by the city public authorities

has provoked mixed reactions because all shows a desire to makeover the city, the dress it a uniform of modernity making bizarre the ancestral landscape, the strong identity having long marked the imaginary, collective memory and aesthetic awareness of its inhabitants, by the injection of specific projects, symbols of modernity but too out of line with the identity of the city.

“A modern city is not a city adorned with buildings and flashy fetishist architecture, a modern city is a city that works, where communications are made easy, which provides employment and where life is pleasant. The authors will add a modern city, which is a city negotiated in its forms, functions, transformations; it is the place to practice democracy. With these remarks the authors refer to major PMMC (modernization projects known as Constantine) and undergone a number of seminars and writing and even masters and university theses” [7].

6. Conclusions

The inhabitants of Constantine city are currently living one of the most important experiences for the most striking on a human and existential level. It is the historical event of rapid metamorphosis of their ancient city.

The authors know in so much asserted way, that the city is not a place only for theoretical and political representations, not a place only for planners, urban planners or operators, developers, contractors, or even for that politics. And making a “city” is not remaking

“the city”, especially not remaking by excluding the main actor is the inhabitant.

Mental images transmit cultural models related to collective memory. What is the foundation of the idea of the place emerging necessarily of conventional behavior related to conceptual schemes, spatial situations, shapes and memorable textures. Concertation and participatory processes remain the ultimate and essential accompaniment to any transformation of the city guaranteeing the avoidance of rejection consequences of traumatic voluntarism, in any action related to the existential space of the city by involving citizens.

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