The Algerian historical built environment: "Reasons of decay!"
The case of the medina of Constantine.
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Abstract: Conservation is a recognized concept, vital to the survival of the historical heritage and that of the historic built heritage in particular. But unfortunately remains relatively uncommon in the Arab-Muslim countries as well as those of third world including Algeria. The preservation of this very heritage is not appreciated at its true value. This is in fact one of the main causes of degradation of historic towns and cities and the built environment in general in these countries.

In Algeria, regrettably, very few decisions have been made, but the proposals were either too theoretical, empirical or not very realistic, added to that a certain inertia and defeatism displayed by the authorities and a legal framework well below the reality on the ground.
Thus, despite the fact that Algeria has a huge historical heritage of universal validity, it unfortunately remains poorly exploited, even worse, he is wasting away at an uncontrollable rate, or even irreparable.

Key words: cultural heritage, historic environment, citizenship, decision maker, medina, Constantine.

I. Introduction
Algeria has a fairly rich historical heritage of universal reach which, unfortunately, is wasting away. Unique treasures are in danger; most of their characteristic features are being degraded and disappearing in almost total indifference. This same indifference is causing all kinds of mutilation and irreversible damage to our heritage. Adding to that, a mass production of a built environment which unfortunately does not meet neither the aspirations of the Algerians, nor their real needs. As since the early days of independence and to palliate to a pressing demand, the Algerian state has opted for a construction technology mainly imported, and practicing a disproportionate "westernization" as to the use of standards, forms modules and building materials. Which, in our view, engendered not only a visual disorder to our environment, but also a cultural and especially a social one, in addition to a great technological and economic dependence? The impact of these policy choices (through the various national development plans) is being felt today in our society, obviously, because of a technology that "deny" local identity which may under no circumstances be considered as our social, cultural, architectural ... heritage.
So, besides the fact that the housing crisis is growing and getting worse every day, Algeria is losing its most valuable architectural and urban heritage.

II. Aims
This study aims hopefully to lead us to:
- Enhance the built historic environment conservation policy,
- A more appropriate conservation policy, more tangible and therefore more appreciable.
- A change in attitude of the authorities (policymakers) to this phenomenon.
- An awareness of the general public in relation to this problem.
This same general public who should be the first and main concerned, because in fact, the different concepts and conservation policies would be nonsense and of no effect for any ill-informed and ill-sensitized population.

III. Genesis of the question
A. Origin: The current crisis has clearly an origin and which, in our opinion, grew with the phenomenon of "vacant property" [1]. This same phenomenon, especially in the housing projects which were discontinued by the French governors on the eve of Independence, gave place to false impressions of great opportunities and equally great availability of housing.
For several years, housing needs were met, particularly in big cities, mainly because of the availability of these so-called housing "vacant properties", but unfortunately, with a mass rural exodus, this situation did not last for long and the housing crisis was inevitable. Thus the whole situation engendered:

- More and more intolerable crowding population.
- Unbearable reduction of housing living space.
- Erosion of elements of comfort and quality of the city such as intimacy, cohesion, harmony, communication...
- Destruction of conventional family ties with some impact on the quality of social development...

In fact, the increase of population in "old" cities was mainly due to the influx of people who left the rural areas, with virtually no interest to the site, on the one hand; and on the other hand, it remains generally true that the rapid development of the entire population is generally detrimental to the survival of historic towns, in the example, among others, the Kasbah of Algiers and the medina of Constantine (object of our study).

B. Causes: as a consequence of the technological choice, particularly in the building field (70’s), a housing crisis appeared, and new neighborhoods have been built since that time by the action of the state. Collective dwellings built in height, as buildings which apartments are rented to the public. Besides that, the arrival of a rural population in search of work encouraged the phenomenon of "shanty towns" in the medina. Gradually the population pressure was such that the housing has lost its traditional content and turned into a miserable and degraded “shell” (it is not necessary to emphasize that these mainly rural origin populations were not at all prepared to live in a “dwelling” in the medina and the immediate result was the deterioration of the latter).

Thus, elements of architecture itself (dyed wood, faience, wrought iron, worked marbles, zellige…) are being destroyed or even sold. The medina is being sold in parts. [2]

It clearly appears that rural migration is the main cause at the origin of the crisis; different movements, of population which according to the so called “push and pull” movement [3], could be classified into two distinct categories:

- **voluntary movements**: following a colonial policy (land laws and dispossession of the fellahs). The first movements were recorded during the First World War [4], yet took on even greater significance later on. By creating this situation, the authorities of that time wanted to:
  - transfer the lands belonging to indigenous (Aboriginal) to newly arrived settlers (immigrants).
  - create a workforce (mainly agricultural) cheap and abundant.
  - control (later on) the “male” population in major cities using “special centers”...

- **involuntary movements**: recorded during the independence and mainly caused by:
  - the return of the exiled population during the war, from the border areas.
  - the rural poor who wanted to settle in the city to take advantage of new conditions such as: schools for their children, better health coverage, greater opportunities of work, proximity to services and community facilities, opportunities for decent housing after the mass departure of the French settlers...

These movements were then amplified by the various policies (development plans ...) and the choice of technology (industrialization ...), which proved to be (to our sense) unsuitable.

To all this will be added:

1 – **The substitution of population**: which took place just after the independence (1962), and was characterized by the mass exodus of Europeans (leaving the country) and the need to replace them in the various activities they occupied [5].

This phenomenon generated another, that of "social rehabilitation" [6], whereby each stratum climbs a spatial category:

- the bourgeoisie of the Medina moved to residential areas (such as Bellevue ...).
- the middle class retrieved the space vacated by these latter.
- the vacant property was in turn picked up by the inhabitants of the shantytowns, while those of the medina, were taken up by new immigrants (population imperfectly integrated and predominantly of rural origin).
2 – The social Phenomenon (Urbanity): The current Algerian society is characterized by profound changes, located at different scales, individual, family, and city. [7] So that social relations are transformed, its composition and current characteristics are not the ones they used to be. They become based on new ways that create not only a new balance, but more importantly, new "imbalances". These new forms are primarily related to the relationship: City / Countryside (urban / rural), which revealed another form of social imbalances even within the city. Direct consequences of this phenomenon created two types of personalizations: Urban / Rural, as Ibn Khaldun, had already in his time opposed: Hadhari / badaoui in his theory of Umran. In this sense he described the process for a bedoui (rural) to become a city dweller. This latter could, in fact, become a city dweller at the end of the third generation. Thus, features, essential for rural are transposed into the city, where the pace of life is very fast and streamlined social relations, the dense neighborhood, and very limited freedom for the organization of the living space.

This situation has obviously generated new urban problems, especially the respect for the neighbor and for the collective organization of space and environment. At the end, the old city dweller is de facto, isolated in his own city. Thus, the concept of citadinity has lost its content and was replaced by the urbanity?

- **The citizen (citadin)** [8] as a resident of a city in which each element is in harmony with the whole through a process of social and spatial hierarchy, which in fact, no longer exists.

- **The urban**: as a new urban dweller, tenant in a city where urban elements are joined to each other at the whim of a functional and rational logic, where nothing is in place permanently.

The engendered change in lifestyles has contributed significantly to the decline of the medina.

3 – The natural Factors: Among the natural factors causing degradation of the historic built environment that can be cited:

- Aging buildings: as that of a building affects both, the materials and structure, the transformation of the first which is not always harmless.

- Action of water: conveys chemical agents, which carry off the product of their reactions. It promotes the growth of microbes, worms and insects. In the long run, the mechanism goes away because the limits within which it could play, taper off gradually, excessive stresses occur causing a failure of the material, leading to ruin.

- Natural disasters: Constantine is in a zone of high seismic activity, which over time had a remarkable effect on the frames. Added to that, a significant instability of formerly vacant land. Thus, we are witnessing major landslides.

4 - Poverty of the built environment proposed (current): Regarding the built environment, Algeria, used since the early years of independence, a mainly imported technology, which led us straight to an almost total dependence on the West?

This was followed by excessive “westernization” in the use of standards of comfort and building materials, which did not meet the demands and aspirations of users. Thus, and as a result, new cities are without soul, where impersonal constructions proliferate; while under-equipped in commercial facilities, social, and cultural rights; creating thus a "visual chaos", so to say; cities without souls nor character. We will never know who should be to blamed, the architect or the administration which has accepted project, with constant repetition of buildings and facades, reducing the minimum side regulatory prospects, creating a veritable concentration camp atmosphere. Or as resumed Le Corbusier: "A new built environment and invasive, disgusting, funny, Gougeat, nasty and ugly, fouling landscapes, cities and hearts.” [9]

This echoed a direct way on the Algerian society, while creating a series of conflict situations:

- almost total disregard of the historic built environment, from the side of the authorities and of the citizen.
- marginalization of traditional architecture in architectural practices.
- depreciation of the vocabulary of the architectural heritage in particular.
- loss of skilled labor in the practical techniques and materials of traditional building work...

5 – The inappropriate Legal framework: since the independence, Algeria has produced very few pieces of legislation relating to the protection of its built heritage. [10]

Thus, the only laws that can be set as reference are:

- an order for excavation and protection of sites and historic monuments and natural ones which was in fact a continuation of the texts dating from the colonial era, but with some adjustments.
- a legislative decree concerning the conditions of architectural production and the exercise of the profession of architect, but that does not evoke the architectural heritage without concrete proposals.
- a law on the protection of cultural heritage (most recent), which was relatively complete, but which includes also many weaknesses and failures.

This aspect of the question, however, remains vital to the historic built environment. For in fact, without an adequate legal framework, any proposal, response, or even thinking, would become obsolete and ineffective. The result is that the texts produced are generally insufficient and inadequate with the reality on the ground. And as a matter of example, the colonial heritage (mainly architectural) has never been explicitly recognized as part of our cultural heritage, neither the architectural nor the urban one.

IV. Conclusion

It is indeed high time that this issue should be dealt with objectively. For it is rightly the moral responsibility of every manager: architect - urban planner - economist - sociologist - lawyer – decision maker ... and any other person concerned with the Algerian historic built environment, to take appropriate initiatives. It is clear in our sense that, despite the destruction and loss of parts of our architectural heritage, though, much remains to be done to ensure serious actions to protect and take in charge that very heritage, such as:

- new definition of architectural heritage and its components while introducing clear distinctions about the different conservation operations (rehabilitation, restoration, renovation ...).
- serious references to international heritage, through the different charters, recommendations …
- redefining the legal framework managing our historic environment.
- inventory all the details and the various components of this very heritage.

In this sense, the historic built heritage, including old urban fabric, instead of being a burden to the authorities, could become a valuable alternative, a source of inspiration and major referents.

"... The challenge is to define what Gives lasting identity to parts of towns and Such for Assessment to the extent to all which the new can be absorbed sympathetically among the old ..." [11]

References

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