Reconstructing Tunisian Architectural Identity in the Context of ‘Ottomanization’, Colonization, and Post-Colonization

Abstract

This article discusses how layers of hinterlands were historically recreated within the city of Tunis through destruction and reconstruction. Invisible historical, political, and architectural layers can be reconstructed to reflect how the marginalization of Tunis and the erasure of its architectural identity under colonization prevailed. The Medina of Tunis was appreciated and revisited at times, but marginalized, ignored and devalued in other instances. Its destruction and marginalization were imminent before and after Tunisia’s independence. Several historical and political factors came into play and helped to protect the Medina. This research examines the contemporary eras of destruction or ‘near-destruction’ that the Medina has faced in the modern age. It argues that these challenges, even if they attempted to harm this settlement’s urban fabric, also strengthened its architectural image. This paper will be structured around three historical periods and will primarily tease out different instances of destruction and reconstruction in Tunis and the impact different vanquishers or rulers, had on its urban fabric. These historical eras include late Ottoman-Husainid (1830 – 1882), French colonization (1882 – 1956) and post-independence period of 1956. This research surveys the existing literature and material archives of the three periods. It examines key architectural examples and urban interventions from within the Medina to understand how, despite the processes of destruction or ‘near-destruction’, this organic structure reshaped its identity beyond the hinterlands and how its confines predefined urban core.

Keywords

Architectural /urban history, destruction, reconstruction of heritage, Medina, historical marginalization
Throughout history, Tunis and its Medina reflected layers of construction and demolition. Tunis (Arabic: Tunus) is a North African port city dating back to early Islamic times. Like ancient Carthage, it is situated at the base of a large gulf, sheltered from northern winds, at the western and eastern Mediterranean junction. Strategically located, Tunis became a crossroad of civilizations and a point of interest for invaders to expand their control over the region. The strategic locations of Carthage, founded in the 9th century B.C. by seafarers from Tyre (Sur), and Tunis, founded at the end of the 7th century A.D. by Arab conquerors, are generally confused. Tunis is located inland, on the landward side of a low-water lagoon, on a hill which slopes gently towards the east but towers over the Sedjoumi sabkha (coastal mudflat or sandflat) to the west. The name of the city is Berber and originally signified ‘halt’ or ‘encampment’. It took the place of a more ancient city, Tunes. ‘Arab Tunis was not created ex nihilo; it took the place of a more ancient city, Tunes, and adopted its name’. The city was a crossroads of civilization, and its development has seen several phases of construction and destruction, creating tensions at times but reinventing the city at others. The destruction of Carthage and the development of Tunis are linked. The Arabs (end of the 7th century), fearing a Byzantine conquest, destroyed Carthage. They established their first Arab foundation at the base of the lagoon and Tunes’ outskirts. This foundation took place under Hassan b. al-Numan on the orders of the Umayyad Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan. The city was later under the control of the Fatimids, Almohads, and Hafsids, and the latter period was amongst the richest of all. During the last period (1229 – 1574), it gained Ifriqiyyah’s capital status and became an important intellectual centre. Thriving urban industries, trade, architecture, and a diverse population were the features of that period.

The Medina of Tunis was established towards the end of the 7th century, circa 698. It evolved gradually to cover different city areas and acquired a complex urban fabric throughout its history. This Medina is a well-established example of Islamic Architecture and it has survived into the 21st century while exemplifying architectural mediation between its past eras. It is also an enclave that ‘is not only rich in a great variety of religious monuments but also the site of the most interesting domestic architecture in North Africa’.

This research will first focus on the Ottoman period, and in particular the last period of the Husainid dynasty (1705 – 1975) before colonization, specifically from the 1830s onwards. It will then turn to the colonial period (1881 – 1956) and later the post-independence or postcolonial era (1956 – 1987). This historical ‘sequencing’ aims to demonstrate how, although made fragile by destruction or near-destruction to its material and immaterial forms, Tunis has reshaped its identity and recreated its
architecture. This research will examine Ottoman approaches to architecture inside and outside this urban structure. Later, the colonial era comes with a dual city concept, where a colonial structure somehow competed with a marginalized Arab-Islamic city. The postcolonial era brings at last debates about rethinking, abandoning, or reengaging with the Medina. The destruction and reengagement with the Medina’s legacy led to instances of tension and re-enactment. These urban dynamics revisited its architectural identity and revealed its hinterlands’ layered complexities.

Ottoman era: Post 1830s Tunis - Reform and Decline

The early period of Ottoman domination of North Africa is worth mentioning to highlight the strategic and military interests in Tunis and the destruction that occurred in the city. The city of Tunis was the centre of continuous battles to control and fight the Turks. These battles led to fortresses’ construction, once by the Emperor Charles V of Spain (1535) and once by Don Juan of Austria (1569). In 1573, Don Juan of Austria and his army’s siege resulted in destruction and demolition of the city. It became a partially destroyed city controlled by Sinan Pacha. Don Juan of Austria ordered his armed forces of 8,000 men to construct the famous Nova Arx [Figure 1] between the city’s walls and the lakes’ shores. The construction had six bastions, joined by curtains, covering more than ten hectares. Between Ottoman and European empires, Tunis became a destruction and reconstruction site for military purposes and strategic control of North Africa. The Hafsid dynasty (12th to 16th centuries) was relatively stable despite their brutality towards Tunis’s natives, Les Tunisois. They established an architectural continuity with the Medina. Their urban politics focused on restoration and reconstruction, an idea that continued even in later periods. The Medina kept its original urban form during the Ottoman rule of Tunis. However, before colonization, the late period came with several challenges that threatened the historical city’s image.
The later period of Ottoman rule, starting in 1830, was crucial for the Ottoman empire and the largely autonomous Beylik of Tunis. Under the Ottoman Empire’s reign, the Husainid dynasty, of Cretan Turkish origin, ruled as beys. In the same year, Algiers’ conquest marked a new historical era where France made its way to the Maghreb. The Regence of Tunis, afraid of being controlled by the Ottoman empire, established more links with France to protect its independence. Complex layers that metamorphosed the city could not be seen yet, but fundamental military and urban changes occurred in the background.\(^{10}\)

On the other side of the Mediterranean and precisely in the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century, significant governmental reforms, influenced by Europe, took place between 1839 and 1876 in the Ottoman Empire. This period was called the Tanzimat, which meant reforms. The Tanzimat period of the Ottoman Empire is an example of how an architectural dialogue between
Islamic and western empires was established in the early modern history of the Empire. Professor of Ottoman Cultural History Ahmet Ersoy refers to the early Tanzimat architecture (1840s and 1850s) as a period of adaptation of European architectural forms. This adaptation valorises local design frameworks and comes from the Ottoman Baroque experiments of the 18th century.¹¹

Scholarly research has demonstrated that the publication of Usul-i Mi’ mari-i Osmani, Usul, translated as Fundamentals of Ottoman Architecture in 1873, is the moment when Ottoman architecture and its patrimony were theorized. The theorization emerged during the period of Tanzimat and modernization reforms. Ottoman architecture relied on modern principles and promoted as ‘a rational, an open-ended, and a universally applicable system of building that was subject to change and innovation’.¹²

There is something incredibly appealing to researchers who examine this phenomenon of expansion, learning, and adaptation. According to Ersoy, the Ottomans also attempted to bridge the civilisations’ gap in their Empire.¹³ The Ottomans learned from several cultures how to empower their society and architecture. This architecture is noticeable in Istanbul, particularly in buildings such as the Dolmabahçe Palace, built between 1843 and 1856. This building was the Ottomans’ chief administrative centre (1856 – 1922). The palace was built on the European coast of the Bosporus using diverse elements from the Baroque, Rococo, and neoclassical styles blended with traditional Ottoman (Islamic) architecture. However, similar reforms took a different architectural path in the fragile context of the Beylik of Tunis.

In its broader sense, destruction would be the term to possibly use in the context of so-called Tunisian reforms. Ahmed Bey ordered the construction of the Mohammadia palace to look like Versailles [Figure 2]. During a trip to Paris, invited by King Louis Philippe, Ahmed Bey was impressed by the palace. He dedicated many of his country’s limited resources to build the Tunisian Versailles to overshadow the Bardo Palace. Ahmad Bey did not necessarily pay enough attention to the Medina of Tunis. Instead, he reformed the army and created a few mausoleums (Sidi Ibrahim) instead of constructing more Medersas or mosques in the Medina.¹⁴ Such an attitude reflects an excess in reconstructing icons while using architecture as a medium to reflect power. This excess is also a reminder of how Tunisian scholar and philosopher İbn Khaldun (1332 – 1406) described these architectural emblems and palaces as spin-offs that reflect power acquisition.¹⁵ Political hinterlands were at the heart of cities of that time.

Reconstructing heritage was informed more by what European culture had to offer, in an attempt to imitate the scale and approach that shaped such European buildings. The traditional style was not disregarded in this palace, and imported European influences were remarkable. Marbles and ceramics
were imported from Carrare in Naples. Glass, furniture, and lighting features came from Venice. Excess was one of the architectural elements that led to reinventing a ‘new’ heritage in Mohammedia. This palace was never finished and fell into ruins after Ahmed Bey’s death in 1855. In her travel journal *Trois Voyages en Afrique du Nord (Three Journeys in North Africa)*, Emily Ward describes it as ‘a deserted Spanish city. […] Formerly, souks existed here, and the neighbouring buildings were, at the time of Ahmed Bey, military headquarters with barracks for fifteen thousand soldiers. Thus, the deserted city covered a considerable space and was built on several levels’. The lost town Mohammedia, reflects a frozen moment of an abandoned heritage in Tunisia’s Ottoman history. As architect and historian Jacques Revault calls it, Le ‘Versailles Tunisien’ is a vast ensemble of palaces and a chimeric achievement that reflects a spectacle of ruins and stands as a reminder of the imperial relics of Moroccan Sultan Muley Ismail in Meknes. Little has been written about the 17th century Al-Mansour Palace, equally in ruins, that reflects the same spirit of borrowing architectonic elements and decay.

Alternatively, perhaps the destruction and decay are part of the process of reconstructing or ‘recycling’ heritage in time and space, an idea that British author and soldier Lambert Playfair noted in his 1877 travels to Tunis and Algiers. He stated:

At eleven miles from Tunis is the Mohammedia, an immense ruined palace, or rather a mass of palaces [...], at an expense of many millions of piastres, and decorated with great magnificence, but which since his death has been allowed to go to ruin. It has served as an inexhaustible mine for materials with which to build and adorn other palaces; its marble columns have disappeared, its walls have been stripped of their covering of tiles, the roofs have nearly all fall in, and it is impossible to imagine a more perfect picture of desolation than is presented by this modern ruin.
At the same time in North Africa, more precisely in 1830, Algiers was invaded by France and the brutal colonial rule started. The colonial administration in Algiers, as noted by Matri, started large acts of destruction to ‘rationalize the traditional space, widening many streets, and reassigning many buildings after transforming them. Later, after the destruction phase, a protection phase started in 1865’.  

Constantly subject to French colonialist propaganda, it suffered throughout the colonial era (1830 – 1962) brutal destruction, negative representation, and ideological marginalization. Nevertheless, the Medina of Algiers emerged after Algerian revolutionary war against French occupation (1954 – 1962) as an icon of people’s solidarity, a physical landmark of Algerian identity, and an emblem of national memory. 

Interestingly, in neighbouring Tunis, the 1830s also marked a reform period and a modernization phase by the beys of Tunis who opened the country to European influences. According to Sebag, ‘after 1830 Tunisia was opened on a broader basis to European influences. On coming to power, successive beys undertook the mission to modernize and reform the country. The
Great Powers assisted this process through their technicians and industrialists’ participation. In this new context, Tunis experienced numerous changes.\textsuperscript{22} In Tunis, this period was followed by more of an illusionary desire by the beys to modernize the country and introduce reforms: huge expenses, high taxation, and destructive debts, somehow leading to foreign economic intervention. In this context, destruction was not physical but rather financial and administrative. To resist the Ottomans, Ahmed Bey (1837 – 1855) decided to modernize the country by reorganizing the army and reinforcing the military school in 1840.\textsuperscript{23}

The colonial powers had more radical influences on the urban fabric, the architectural identity, and the economy of Tunis. These influences started to happen before the actual colonization. Colonialism had its roots around the Medina. In 1859, French engineer J.Colin drew the first detailed map of Tunis, a city that retained its Middle Ages’ overall structure. Few new buildings were built in the Medina, and a few Zawiyas (Islamic religious school) of Sufi Mystics. Suburban buildings were growing too. During this same period, Mohamed Bey established the Municipality of Tunis to monitor public spaces’ finances and quality. The Direction d’Ingénieurs Français oversaw infrastructure.\textsuperscript{24}

The function of old buildings changed: The Sadiqi College, founded by the minister Khaireddine in 1875, was installed in the former Qashlat al-Zanaydiyya.\textsuperscript{25} It was the first ‘modern’ college in Tunis, attempting to introduce educational reforms and reconstruct the country’s national identity. Like reformists in other Ottoman provinces, the process of Tunisian reformists reflected their concerns, fascination, and fear of European powers. This real threat started to be seen in neighbouring Algiers. The Tanzimats, as Sraieb notes, introduced by the Sublime Porte (Ottoman Porte and its central government), was an essential reference for some Muslim states including Egypt and Tunisia.\textsuperscript{26}

Discussing this monument’s foundation and architecture, within the concept of reconstructing heritage, is of great interest especially during this sensitive economic and political transition. The Sadiki College [Figure 3], built at the Medina’s edge next to modern-day el Qasbah, reflected the idea of a modern institution. It reinstated the definition of modernization and reforms, including the traditional Zaytuna teachings’ reforms. The Sadiki College, built by architect Petrus Maillet, has a square minaret similar to North African mosques. One also notices the three repetitive small black and white arches of Hafsid style on each side. On the main façade the towers are marked by two white cupolas and a series of arches, reflecting similarities with the architectural vocabulary used on the façade of Ministère des Finances designed by architect Raphael Guy. Some researchers questioned the building’s identity/authenticity and established correlations between its architecture and the 1867 Tunisian pavilion in
It is worth highlighting that Sadiki College’s architecture revisits Tunis’s traditional architecture and reconstructs a new identity based on an eclectic approach. It is an educational institution at the Medina’s edge, exemplifying a new architectural thinking trend and extrapolating architectonic details once reserved to the courtyard, on the exterior facades. It is a building that reconstructs a modern Tunisian architectural identity of the late 19th century establishing a new dialogue with the Medina. One could even draw more correlations between the architectural trends in the Empire (Dolmabahçe Palace) where architecture was celebrated externally on the Bosphorus. Several architectural references were used, and as discussed previously, architects introduced European architectural references. However, Sadiki College’s architectural identity strengthens the ‘Tunisianity’ of heritage and its architectural references.

Figure 3: Yamen, Sadiki College, Tunis, Tunisia, 2012. Wikimedia Commons.

Foreign colonies continued to develop to the east in the lower city with the ‘Frank Quarter’. The Europeans started leasing property then later building houses which conformed to their needs, and where windows were open to the outside, an aspect seen previously in the Sadiki College. This era was marked by the new French consulate’s construction in 1861, replacing the old one situated in the Foundouk des Français. Most importantly, the ramparts of the Medina were demolished. Thus, a supposed continuity was created through destruction, and no barrier existed in the time between
the old Frank quarter and the new buildings. The only obstacle forming was that of colonialism. This era somehow began overshadowing the Islamic/Tunisian architectural heritage, the virtual destruction of emblems and historical symbols, and the reconstruction of a ‘French-like’ architectural pattern in the future territory. Exteriorizing architecture became the reconstruction pattern and paved the way for a new architectural model and a new form of dominance.

During the Ottoman rule, particularly the late Ottoman period, the Medina remained a ‘serene city’. Life inside its fortifications was autonomous with an ‘opaque cultural world hostile to foreigners’. The city’s structure remained stable: the permanence of about twelve centuries, where the city developed from the same centre, the same poles and the same spatial configurations. Despite the destructions, near-destruction and demolitions, architectural typologies were reproduced based on layouts known and accepted by the community. Mimetics was the rule, respect of the past rooted in a present that follows memory. The permanence of the structure is, at times, perceived as a rigid orientalist postulate by Maghribi scholars. However, it is essential to highlight, as Santelli notes, that this quality shows the value of continuity in Arab thinking during an extended period, a force but also a weakness. Unfamiliar with modernization and its impacts on their society, Tunisians only accepted this new phenomenon by abandoning purely and simply what they have produced throughout centuries. It is striking to see how fast Tunisians either left or destroyed their traditional structures. This scenario was reflected during the late period before colonization and after independence.

Colonial Era: Marginalization, Duality and Paradox

American art historian Ellen C. Micaud, who wrote about visual arts and crafts in North Africa, supports the idea of the uniqueness of the Medinas. He described the Medinas of the Islamic world as a ‘discrete part of the urban fabric which, while adapting somewhat to a larger milieu, still stands apart as a striking testament to a peculiarly local way of life’. In the Medinas, a historical core reflects the image of a shared heritage, which transcends the historical object and its material substance that has stood there for centuries. This heritage is about learning from the dynamic process that shaped the settlement socially and culturally. It is not about imitating stones, mortar, and geometry. Hidden layers shaped the urban form and the synergies that existed inside this historic settlement.

Historically, Islam did not prescribe specific architectural design guidelines, but it established a system of values and behaviours that generated site-specific and culturally-appropriate models for shaping space. In other words, Islam provided a ‘matrix of behavioural archetypes which, by
necessity, generated correlated physical patterns’. The Medina’s value owes to the specificity of its religious and cultural values within its site and the architectural and planning responses delivered by its architects. Micaud emphasized the importance of revisiting ancient cities’ properties and applying them to improve our modern cities. It would be of interest, in this context, to evaluate how the Medina of Tunis coped with a new era of French settlement and domination, and if the architectural and spatial qualities of the Medina could be the pattern that created a continuity of the urban fabric in Tunis.

During the colonial period (1882-1956), the Medina of Tunis was the settlement and the commercial hub for Muslims and non-Muslims in the area. Unfortunately, this place had a negative image due to disease and political instability. The French attempted to colonize the urban fabric and marginalize heritage into pastiche-like buildings. The signing of the so-called ‘Treaty of Protection’ (Mou’ahadat Bardo) in 1881 between the French and the Tunisians profoundly altered the urban landscape and character of Tunis. The expansion of a European city started competing with the existing traditional city. According to Sebag, the situation of the Medina was negatively shown to legitimize the protectorate in the name of hygiene and management. It was described as archaic and medieval to legitimize the French intervention. The French dominance (main mise) continued after 1881, with high debt, followed by administrative reforms replacing the Majlis el-Baladi with the French Conseil Municipal.

The early period of the French Protectorate was a turning point in Tunis’s transformation, with multiple waves of immigrants mainly from Europe, modernising the administrative, transport and services. The city became a dual city or a double city as Sebag calls it. In fact:

> Alongside the ancient city, which retained the features of an Arab town, a new city came into being having the characteristics of a European city, with its methodological planning, chequered pattern and the straight lines of its arteries’. The Medina was viewed differently by the Arabs and the French. They both ‘provided completely different ideological attributes. This duality of cities is a reminder of how Le Corbusier and Fanon described the colonial city’s dual structure as a tool for otherness, critical distance, and surveillance. As in French Algiers, the spatial separation was strongly present. Historical, cultural, and racial otherness were the dominant patterns in the city’s architecture.

Reflecting on the Medina of Tunis during this time, French Islamic scholar and sociologist Jacques Berque described it as:
Irrational, unreasonable: or at least what seems so. Such appears the Medina to its new occupants. This is how it appears, though, on our aside, the mistrust of the soldier and the fright of the engineer, respectively, in criticism of the urban planner and the aesthete’s emotions. The dangerous is thus changed to “unsanitary” or “picturesque”. 40

The Medina was viewed as an irrational enclave, a frightening and incomprehensible place, and a chaotic ‘hustle and bustle’ as Escher and Schepers interpret it. 41

Tunisian architect and researcher Jellal Abdelkafi explained how the Medina was viewed by the French as a Muslim ghetto and an accessory of the new French city. 42 The superiority of the French and the degrading image they established for the Medina, versus the European town, was in itself a malignant way used by urbanists and politicians of the time to marginalize the image of the historical city. One could even characterize it as a near-destruction of a physical entity through architectural and urban propaganda. The opposition between the new and the old was heightened with an opposition between the European and the Arab, the first defined as productive, towards the future, and the second, embedded in its history and totally out of place. This idea continued to survive with the pauperization of the Medina after independence. 43

Despite the different levels of propaganda and its pauperization, several liberation movements took place inside and around the Medina of Tunis led by intellectuals and youth against the French colonizers. This political and urban tumult created tensions with this Medina as Tunisians resisted. It was also home to the Liberal Neo Destour Party 44 and different anti-colonial youth movements. Since the 1930s, this enclave also accommodated several ethnicities including Europeans, Jews, new rural migrants, and the Tunisois (natives of Tunis). 45 Given its strategic location and importance, French colonials settled nearby and started building their European orthogonal city on the Medina’s edges.

The Medina’s image as a symbol of resistance and change is still present in architects and citizens’ collective memory. In 1962, Clement Moore Henry wrote about the party established by President Habib Bourguiba. Moore described the political party as the only mass-based party in the Arab world. It was founded in 1934 to oppose French domination that appealed to the masses and the educated Tunisian elite. 46

These political uprisings were opportunities for its empowerment. The Medina was viewed as a favourable structure by Tunisians and the political resistance movement in the country. The Medina image was ideologically reconstructed to become a national symbol for a population fighting for independence. Both Escher and Schepers 47 and Abdelkafi 48 agree that the
Medina served as an active a basis for action and a symbol for resistance against the colonial oppression. Interestingly, this same image still circulates in Tunisian media, movies, and Ramadan series. The theme of colonial resistance in urban spaces is associated with scenes of crowds of people running and fighting against colonization and colonialism in all its aspects.

The Medina continued to be a source of friction, antagonizing the French who built their city next to it. The concept of duality or dual cities, as used in urban geography, is exemplified in the case of the Medina of Tunis, where the French, unlike their urban colonization in Algiers, juxtaposed both towns sensibly. As Çelik notes, their conquest did not lead to destruction. However, its fortifications were destroyed to make way to boulevards and administrative buildings at its edge. The French co-opted the old Turkish Kasbah around the Medina as their administrative centre and replaced the ramparts with circular boulevards to access the Kasbah ministries. This decision was one of their fatal mistakes because the Medina could no longer expand. These events led to the first phase of marginalization and tension between these ‘dual’ cities, the Islamic and the European. The mediation between their urban fabric was interrupted due to political circumstances and a desire to hegemonize the area.

Despite its marginalization, the Medina continued to be celebrated outside the confines of Tunisia and international exhibitions. The same French architect Victor Valensi [1883–1977] who designed Tunisian pavilions internationally (1925, 1931, 1937, 1958), and studied Tunisian residential architecture, was involved in the planning and the extension of the city in the 1920s. The Tunisian section of the International Exposition of 1931 in Paris (Paris Colonial Exhibition) exteriorized a typical dwelling [Figure 4]. It was, as if one was looking at half a courtyard surrounded by arcades and open to the street. The building’s platform was elevated a few steps from the ground to give it more importance, an invitation to the visitor to appreciate the ‘displayed’ building. The Musharabiyyas and its wooden lattices garnished this ensemble. Besides, a minaret and a souk reflected the Tunisian life. A minaret added to this ensemble and showed similarities with the 17th-century octagon minaret of Hammouda Pasha Mosque in the Medina of Tunis. In Hybrid Modernities, Patricia Morton argues that ‘the Tunisian section was a deliberately picturesque assemblage of ruins and exotic fragments.’ Similarly, Jean Galotti was also critical of Valensi’s approach, fantasy, and wilful disorder, but most critics praised this Tunisian approach.

As Demerdash-Fatemi notes, the pavilion contrasted sharply with the clean and neat vernacular modernity of the buildings he designed simultaneously in Tunisia. Its exceptional character exemplified the network of diverse and intertwined allegiances and mediations (which are not just about the
relationship with the client or the sponsor).\textsuperscript{54} That said, his works on the Tunisian residences pushed the boundaries of reconstructing an architectural identity that mediated the intricate relationship between a Tunisian, local culture, and French, colonial culture. Considered as ‘neo-Islamic’ by Zeynep Çelik, the main pavilion was similar to that of 19\textsuperscript{th}-century palaces at the fairs. The market (Souk) was a reminder of Algiers and Cairo’s streets. Valensi recalled the propaganda behind such structures and such expositions based on spectacle.\textsuperscript{55} As aesthetically pleasing and appealing these ‘orientalist’ pavilions might have seemed, the Medina was increasingly marginalized by the French, and its near-destruction seemed imminent.

Editions Braun
Figure 4: Editions Braun, Tunisian Pavilion of the International Colonial Exhibition, Paris, 1931. \textit{Wikimedia Commons}.

\textbf{Postcolonial Era: Between Abandonment and Reengagement}

Following Tunisia’s independence in 1956, Tunis has seen substantial changes, including a need to ‘Tunisify’ the urban toponomy, streets’ names, and an exodus of Europeans. Habib Bourguiba (1903-2000) became the first president, and a new era arrived to push the boundaries of modernization beyond the Medina of Tunis. Defining its identity became critical. The Tunisian nationalism established by Bourguiba resisted colonial powers. It also created an identity that established Tunisia neither with the Orient nor
the Occident. It was a shared reformist current that Bourguiba hoped would help Tunisia find its place in the modern world.\textsuperscript{56}

At a social level, the Muslim population was redistributed in the urban area. Families who can afford it abandoned the ‘Arab city’ and settled in the ‘European city’. The Tunisois (natives of Tunis) began to move towards the European suburbs (Carthage, La Marsa). The Medina’s destruction seemed imminent. More dismantling occurred when the walls of the second perimeter enclosing the old city were pulled apart. The Qasba was destroyed. On December 17, 1960, Bourguiba organized an international competition to solve the problem and submitted 54 projects to a jury that included the famous Tunisian architect Olivier-Clement Cacoub.\textsuperscript{57} The \textit{Colloque International d’Architecture} (March 28-29, 1961) aimed to restructure the capital, and in this competition, there were mixed views about urban interventions. Traditionalists viewed urban changes to the Medina as an irreversible loss of collective memory. Modernists, followers of the tabula rasa, firmly insisted that what they referred to as ‘archaic urbanism’ should be destroyed and wiped out.\textsuperscript{58} There was even a suggestion to ‘run a thoroughfare through the Medina, from west to east, but fortunately this project which would have done irreparable damage to the historical nucleus of the city, was not pursued’.\textsuperscript{59}

From building a structure over the Medina [Figure 5] to building one underneath it, the different design proposals seemed unethical as they would undoubtedly lead to its destruction. The colloquium ‘has been remembered as an international competition for the opening of the Medina to traffic’.\textsuperscript{60} These rather destructive ideas did not aim to revisit this Medina’s architecture, a socio-cultural representation of Muslim society.\textsuperscript{61} They did not mediate between traditional and modern value sources in the built environment.
The ambitious utopia, ‘La Ville Spatiale’, of Hungarian-French architect and theorist Yona Friedman’s was exemplified in the competition [Figure 6]. To avoid demolition or cutting through the historical Medina, he proposed a second story to gain more space, an approach similar to the utopian proposals and megastructures in Europe [Figure 7]. Friedman’s proposal was primarily contested as it would obstruct the sun and harm the courtyards. One could even establish a correlation between this ambitious proposal, and Peter Cook’s the Plug-in City, a hypothetical and moving megastructure proposed by Archigram beginning in the 1960s and ending in 1974.
Yona Friedman

Figure 6: Y. Friedman, Plan of the design. The subject of the competition was to design a new route for a main business axis through the Medina (old centre) of Tunis (Tunisia), 1959. Yonafriedman.nl.

Yona Friedman

Figure 7: Y. Friedman, Photomontage of a Ville Spatiale over the Seine in the Heart of Paris, 1959. Yonafriedman.nl.
Such destructive approaches reflect another form of misunderstanding and further marginalization of the Medina’s urban structure. In a postcolonial context, the proposal was an earlier instance of the challenges of modernization. Such practices as master design competitions frequently came with their often-destructive aspects. Their inadequate proposals demonstrate the risk that the profession has been facing in Tunisia. Lack of architectural ethics could lead to an urban and architectural catastrophe and, planners and architects should understand the social and cultural impacts of their solutions. Political decisions also inform architectural practice as they emanate from the government and its public institutions.

The establishment of ASM (Association of Safeguarding the Medina) in 1967 was the result of a political decision that shaped architectural production ethics within the Medina’s boundaries. Indeed, the Municipality of Tunis and the Governor-mayor of the city, Habib B. Ammar, conducted this intelligent political decision. The association expanded and established an Atelier de l’Urbanisme (A.U.) to develop another city plan and seek international financial funds. These brave political decisions stem from a post-independence era that sought to establish new dynamics to revive the Medina’s value. This same decision seemed to come from a local will rather than an international effort. Ethically speaking, the establishment of this group of planners and architects reflected the Medina’s gained interest and the value judgment of the local professionals and citizens. These political decisions may also have been accompanied by strong economic incentives that may or may not have enhanced this place’s architectural ethics.

From 1961 to 1969, the post-independence period experienced an accelerated pace of economic progress. Progress happened under president Bourguiba and Minister of Planning Ahmed Ben Saleh. The political strategy in place encouraged mass tourism, even though the situation of the Medina was still marginalized. Multiple reasons caused this malaise, including colonialism, the flight of the bourgeois to the suburbs, and most importantly the high density and occupation of houses (Oukalas) by migrants (the process of Oukalization). This phenomenon refers to the ‘occupation of a formerly noble or bourgeois dar house by multiple poor families of rural origin’. Degradation and misuse were the main reasons for this ethical dilemma. The Medina continued to face historical and socioeconomic challenges disrupting its spaces’ architectural quality.

This phenomenon called Oukalization has affected the traditional houses and all kinds of buildings intended or not for habitation: palaces, mansions, madrasas, and religious buildings. In each room lived a family. While the building was not subject to prior planning, any development preparing it for his new role included toilets, water points and kitchens, which are common to all tenants. The rehabilitation of the project in the 1970s and the 1980s was a success. It attempted to mediate structural, urban, and architectural
morphologies added during colonization. On the verticality of the buildings and the blocks’ horizontality, Faika Bejaoui, one of ASM’s architects, explains

Main and secondary roads lead to alleys and homes. Each block has its square, closed to traffic, where children can play. Some of the houses have a central patio while others at the ground level have gardens or large terraces on the first floor. The patio houses, while preserving the advantages of traditional architecture, avoid exposure to open air in winter.\textsuperscript{70}

On an urban scale, the Hafsia Quarter or the old Jewish Quarter was the subject of urban renewal in recent decades. It faced the French tension and threats of demolition and disfiguration. It witnessed the early waves of destruction in the twenties and two more waves in the thirties.\textsuperscript{71} As Bardos notes,

In 1928 the French authorities declared the Hafsia quarter a health hazard, and many of the buildings were demolished between 1933 and 1939. Their plan for rebuilding the area used a grid design and was comprised of large housing blocks typical of European cities rather than the traditional urban fabric of the Medina. However, World War II interrupted this work and bombing resulted in further destruction of the area.\textsuperscript{72}

Two decades later, and in 1954, Hafsia was proclaimed a ‘renewal’ zone by government action, barring private maintenance and, in the meantime, further deteriorating the town. Due to its proximity to Tunis’s current evolving quarters, the vicinity grew in importance in the Fifties. The Municipality of Tunis had plans to improve the Medina with grandiose schemes after Tunisia’s liberation from France in 1956. The first slum clearance process in the Hafsia took place in 1960. This quarter’s renovation was the first large-scale project conducted in a Muslim nation.\textsuperscript{73} This same project that won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1983 exemplifies a synthesis of destruction, near-destruction and reconstruction that the Medina of Tunis had witnessed since the 1830s.

In 1893, the city walls were destroyed, and vertical buildings (two to three storeys high) were built on a cleared land near the east edge of the Hafsia. In the 1930s, five-storey apartment blocks were added, and in the 1960s, large blocks of buildings were added.\textsuperscript{74}

From 1985 to 2000, Tunis faced many modern challenges inside its Medina. PTC, known as the Project Tunis-Carthage, was the incentive of this period. UNESCO channelled its progress through the Ministry of Planning\textsuperscript{75} while ASM and PTC worked together on this project. However, there was little
focus on the Medina and more emphasis on the Carthage part of the project. If they did not cause its destruction, the PTC technicians contributed to a general romantic misapprehension of the Medina. ‘On the level of general urban planning, the goal was to make up a Carthage-Medina package for ‘cultural tourism’ that would contribute to the economic development of Tunis by making it a first-class tourist attraction’.76

Planners marginalized the economic, political, and social realities of Tunis in the post-independence period. Global priorities replaced the ethical importance of reviving the Medina to imitate an occidental approach and turn the Medina into a museum. Another risk factor of ‘globalization’ has been obstructing its ordinary evolution course. However, now, one needs to also consider the influence of mass tourism, which is a form of architectural globalization. Has it too represented a threat initiated by architects and planners?

**Afterword: The Life and Death of the Medina**

Various urban and architectural narratives which commingle in the Medina of Tunis have shaped its identity. There is a history of marginalization, deconstruction, and reconstruction of Tunisia’s urban fabric, particularly in the historic capital. The modernization of Tunis was a complex process of continuity and disruption, in which the negotiation of several architectural identities was a central issue. The Ottoman Beys of Tunis were impressed by the wonders of Europe and its architectural inventions. This exposure marginalized the Medina during their late period (1830 – 81). Under the French, the Medina was valued for its urban qualities but mostly marginalized and considered a chaotic emblem. Its image, however, continued to be associated with the leading figures and intellectuals who helped Tunisia become an independent nation in 1956. The same dialogue of marginalization and rethinking the Medina took place after independence. Abandonment was widespread amongst its original owners who fled to the suburbs of Tunis and left behind a still-standing structure. The Medina’s image and core features started to be appreciated after 1967 and the foundation of the ASM (Association de Sauvegarde de la Medina de Tunis). The coexistence of disparate narratives in the recent history of destruction and reconstruction of parts of the Medina, in addition to the threats the area faced often from political events and circumstances, activated not only its urban core but also its negative image in the collective memory of people, institutions, and architects.

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**Endnotes**

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13 Ibid.
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19 Robert Lambert Playfair, Travels in the Footsteps of Bruce in Algeria and Tunis: Illustrated by Facsimiles of His Original Drawings (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1877), 129.
20 Matri, Tunis Sous Le Protectorat, 73.
23 Matri, Tunis Sous le Protectorat, 71.
24 Santelli, La Ville, 34.
28 Santelli, La Ville, 54.
29 Ibid.
30 Santelli, La Ville, 55.
34 Micaud, ‘Urbanization’, 431.
41 Ibid.
43 Santelli, La Ville, 74.
Abdelkafi, ‘La Médina’, 251.


Ibid, 173.


Traditional rooming houses occupied mostly by people coming from rural areas. This phenomenon continues until today and especially after the Arab Spring, and it negatively affected housing of the Medina.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid, 441.