



The Walled Arab City in Literature, Architecture and History

The Living Medina in the Maghrib

Edited by **SUSAN SLYOMOVICS**

The Walled Arab City in Literature, Architecture and
History: The Living Medina in the Maghrib

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Introduction

SUSAN SLYOMOVICS AND SUSAN GILSON MILLER

Al-Madinah al-qadimah (the old town), Médina (French form), *madinah* (Arabic transliteration), *medina* (English usage), *m'dina* (colloquial Arabic), the walled city, the city centre, the historic centre, the Kasbah, the native quarter, the traditional Arab city, the Islamic city, the Arabo-Islamic city – are there new and unconventional ways to think of this space? Let us experiment with models originating from Western textual exploration of the medina and from architectural projects of contemporary urban planners in the Arab world.

Historians view the North African Arab medinas of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya as places to be mapped chronologically; architects survey the transformation of the physical space over time as sites to be revived and renovated. The medina has been studied with close attention to its formal organisation and less attention to its functionality. More recently, cultural and social imperatives have compelled cognisance of how people actually live in these places, how social relations were and are conducted, what the symbols of political authority and the boundaries of religious space were and are, and how the ambience, then and now, may be delineated by memory and identity. This more faceted, culturally aware approach emphasises the social use of urban space; it also distinguishes the categories of the 'map' and the 'building' to consider the role of literature and culture in the invasion, destruction and current rebuilding of the medina. Though the study of the medina is not new, much interesting work has emerged recently from a variety of disciplines: urban planning, semiotics, literary criticism, social history and anthropology. The medina, therefore, becomes a concrete case study for the comparative exploration of more general questions about representation by opening up to fields of research at the intersection of history, comparative culture and architecture.

Essays in this collection were presented at the conference 'The Living Medina: The Walled Arab City in Architecture, Literature, and History', held 26 May–7 June 1996. The conference, sponsored by the American Institute for Maghrib Studies (AIMS), was convened at the Tangier American Legation Museum (TALM), a building that the Moroccan Sultan Mawlay Sulayman gave to the United States in 1821 for its legation; TALM is the only national

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historic landmark situated outside the United States. Located centrally in the historic old medina of Tangier, TALM is surrounded by other historic monuments – mosques, saints' tombs, old synagogues, and the nineteenth-century Moroccan Foreign Ministry.

The cross-fertilisation of ideas exhibited in this collection of essays enriches understanding of the city and has import for the study of space and social relations. The medina, once defined in terms of demography, can also be looked at through the lens of 'structural' urbanisation: the concentration, not of populations, but of activities, an approach that, following the work of Michel de Certeau, shifts the emphasis from the 'fact' of urban life to the 'concept' of the city.¹ Essays bring to light recent architectural fieldwork that opens a portfolio of case studies on the urban form, expose current trends in historical research on North African medinas and demonstrate the variety of new sources and theoretical approaches to the historical narrative of the city space, and champion new studies by anthropologists and sociologists regarding social praxis within the urban context.

There are those who argue that the body of recent research on the North African city has overemphasised the search for answers to the question of what constitutes the 'Islamic' city in its North African version. The search for theoretical insights is important; unfortunately, it has taken precedence over individual case studies needed to conduct basic comparative work. Concentrating on generalities, scholars have lost sight of the importance of discerning how a North African city 'works', both in the present and in the past and in reality and imagination. Many structures and practices repeat across the region, but little effort has been directed to discussing recurrent formal and functional aspects of North African cities across disciplinary boundaries. By presenting their findings in readily accessible and useful forms to those who are directly engaged in the work of revitalising the North African city, authors in this volume cross the gulf between the abstract and the practicable. Indeed, since one of the purposes of the conference was to encourage the revitalisation and preservation of the environs of the Legation in the Tangier medina, it was essential that the conference be held *in situ*.

Cultural Issues

One approach represented in this issue is to consider relationships among different branches of the humanities – literature, history and architecture – and their interrelationships with the social sciences. Literary and artistic texts are not produced or read independent of social and economic processes; more than merely reflecting the life of the city, they also interact with and produce culture and social life. One of the questions this volume addresses concerning the

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medina and its relation to literary and artistic production is: how have writers and intellectuals reacted to the medina as the epitome of the 'traditional'?

Historical Issues

Historical continuity is a fundamental concern in revitalising decaying medinas. In this volume, the problem of recovering the historical medina is considered in several categories of analysis:

- (1) Topographical studies: uncovering the topography of the medina at a given time. Where were the mosques, the coffee houses, the markets, the cemeteries, the residential quarters? What patterns or relationships existed among these various elements in the urban fabric? Questions regarding property ownership, sources of patronage, the organisation and funding of municipal services, and the role of colonial authorities in 'managing' them can be answered through historical research. This information is often found in documents located in both European and local archives, and in Arabic manuscripts that are difficult to read and often incomplete. Where are the relevant sources located, and how should they be used?
- (2) Identify typologies of cities based on location and function. In the pre-colonial period, North Africa was the site of important port cities; some of them, such as Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli and Casablanca, continue to be commercially viable today, while others, such as Essaouira, Tangier and Constantine, are no longer entrepôts of long-distance trade. Other cities such as Marrakesh, Tlemcen and Qayrawan were junctions on main trade routes of the interior; frequently, functions overlapped, and cities were centres of religious life as well as foci of commercial activity. Categorising a city by type improves our ability to understand how formal urban design interacted with the economic, social and political activities of a given urban centre.
- (3) Inquiry into the social life of the city in order to understand the various classes, interest groups and elites that made up the social fabric and shaped the use of space. Who led? Who followed? Where and by whom were important municipal decisions made? How much authority was distributed to non-official organisations, such as religious brotherhoods and trade guilds, and how was it wielded? What ideologies emanated from different parts of the body politic that influenced urban design?
- (4) Study the body of laws, ordinances and legal precedents of urban organisation. What rules governed alterations to the face of the city and the activities that took place within it? What needs and interests inspired the making of those rules, and what individuals and groups reinforced them?

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Historical inquiry begins with a study of the city in its present form. Through a judicious use of textual sources and oral testimony, the historian as investigator can begin to ‘peel away’ the layers of urban landscape and, working backwards in time, develop a sense of how the city evolved.

Architecture and Design Issues

What are the formal aspects of the city, and how is it created in space? More important, what is the urban process, the integration of the specific social, political, technical and artistic forces that generate any given city’s form? How may the architecture of a city be situated within cultural discourse and how may the city be explained both formally and culturally as lived-in space? An understanding of urban fabric evolves from a consideration of all features of the landscape, both humble and exalted; every city generates its own morphology through its own unique setting in space and time. Before attributing the urban fabric to some overarching cultural determinist explanation such as Islam, shared topographical features of the North African city should be examined first in their specific context in order to see what social, geographical or political factors may have inspired them.

In the opening section, the urban experience of the city as a text is illuminated in an essay by James Housefield, an art historian. According to Housefield, French colonial policy emphasised the preservation of medinas at the same time as Europeans were building modern cities alongside the older city centres, adopting practices that preserved the old medina to such a degree that guidebooks still refer to certain medinas as ‘living museums’ – places, as Housefield notes, for tourists to enact ‘an almost Dantean passage into a living ancient or medieval past’ today. Such wilful aestheticisation dehistoricises the medina as a site for living out contemporary lives, concerns and histories by distinguishing between two urban spaces – the new European city or *ville nouvelle*, a place that has become a symbol of modernisation and innovation in opposition to a fixed and timeless past circumscribed within the walls of the medina. Using Gérard de Nerval’s nineteenth-century novel *Voyage en Orient*, Housefield aligns Nerval’s voice with contemporary painting in which folkloric scenes are enacted on the streets of supposed medinas that have become stage sets.

The essays that follow treat country case studies of the Maghrib, the medinas of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya characterised through history and architecture.

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Morocco

Studies on the Moroccan medinas of Tangier and Fez by Susan Gilson Miller, Diana Davis and Denys Frappier involve new approaches to the concept of 'the Islamic city'. One distinctive means of writing about a city, according to historian Susan Gilson Miller, is by looking at its use of water. To recreate an image of daily life in Tangier at the end of the nineteenth century, Miller narrates the story of the city's need for water, in order to recreate not only a functional image of the sacred and social character of the Tangier medina, but also to discuss the question of modernisation and the colonial encounter. Some of the issues touched on in this essay are: how were social and political hierarchies constructed through the location, design, management and use of water? What ritual and symbolic processes defined the city for Muslims? How did Muslims 'share' a multi-ethnic city such as Tangier with its Christian and Jewish inhabitants? And how did conflicts over the use of water underscore the differences between Moroccan and European conceptions of urban space?

Much of the colonial literature on urbanism equates the Moroccan walled city of Fez with the archetypical medina. In the essay by Diana Davis and Denys Frappier, 'The Social Context of Working Equines in the Urban Middle East: The Example of Fez Medina', the authors argue that any analysis of the evolution of medina architecture must take into account the muscle power of animals – the donkey, mule and horse – that provide the economic and transport infrastructure for its inhabitants. Furthermore, they maintain that any revitalisation of the Fez medina in particular, or North African medinas in general, must include the need to take into account the significant impact of working equines on everyday life.

Algeria

How to link the formation of a nationalist Algerian identity to the emergence of modern elites from the 'debris' of the Algerian medinas is the work of geographer and historian, Djilali Sari, in 'The Role of the Medinas in the Reconstruction of Algerian Culture and Identity'. Sari meticulously chronicles the French colonialist destruction of the urban fabric, a process unlike the experience of neighbouring Moroccan or Tunisian medinas. How, he asks, was this situation reversed in Algeria? Drawing on examples from various urban sites, Sari situates the ways in which the heritage and cultural preservation movements in Algeria also drew strength from the Algerian understanding of its own nationalist cause.

The nature of collective memory, according to anthropologist and folklorist Susan Slyomovics, is represented in descriptions of the Jewish

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experience of the old town of Tlemcen, Algeria, as well as in the ways in which a collective construct is translated into a corresponding spatial one: for Tlemcen Jews, individual and social memory of a particular place has been reproduced, replaced, supplemented or complemented by commemorative ceremonies at a new site, their synagogue in Paris, which functions as recreated space for the sacred history of Tlemcen Jews brought together after the 1962 exodus from Algeria. In what ways have the Tlemcen Jews of France replicated Tlemcen the place? How are images and recollected knowledge of a destroyed past transmitted spatially?

Tunisia

In 'Neighbourhood Notes: Texture and Streetscape in the Médina of Tunis', Justin McGuinness analyses the concept of 'neighbourhood' in Tunis. Thirty-five years after Jacques Berque's 1962 *Le Maghreb entre deux guerres*, McGuinness takes up again two neighbourhoods in the same historic city, the rue du Pacha and the rue Marr, looking at the sights and sounds which, along with the people and buildings, make up the identity of the changing streetscape. Drawing on De Certeau and the notions of space versus place, McGuinness arrives at the notion of 'texture' as a possible approach to the sensory richness of medina neighbourhoods, arguing that such an enhanced awareness of the 'texture' of streetscape may have implications for future initiatives for the conservation of the old city.

Libya

Mia Fuller's 'Preservation and Self-absorption: Italian Colonisation and the Walled City of Tripoli, Libya', directs attention to an understudied area, namely, the approaches of Italian administrators and planners to the medina of Tripoli (Libya) during their colonial tenure in the period 1912–43. Based on her study of Italian primary sources, Fuller compares the Italian stance of 'apolitical-ness' *vis-à-vis* the medina, inconsistent as this stance was in the light of larger Italian policies, with the better-documented French interventions and approaches towards medinas. Fuller asks why Italian occupying forces did not see the medina as the site of local anti-colonial menace; instead, they located indigenous resistance and strove to conquer it by saving their most oppressive policies for the rural areas. Fuller documents the ways in which Italian colonialists pursued a generally non-interventionist policy of enjoying the picturesque medina, while focusing instead on the construction of the 'new European city'.

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The Opening Speech of Mohammed Serifi Villar, Citizen of Tangier

Just as Mohammed Serifi Villar inaugurated the 1996 AIMS conference in Tangier, so too do his words introduce this volume. Serifi, a native of Tangier, self-described as a child of both sides of the Mediterranean – born to a Moroccan father and a Spanish mother – belongs to many cultures: a poet in Spanish whose prose writings are in Arabic and French. Arrested in 1973, Serifi was tried during the 1977 Casablanca mass trial of Marxist–Leninists for the crime of ‘plotting against the state’. Evidence against him consisted entirely of literary material, for example, his articles and broadsides. He returned home to Tangiers in 1991 after an absence of 19 years incarcerated as a political prisoner in Kenitra Prison. He opened the conference thus:

To speak of Tangier is quite simply to love.

To speak of Tangier, is to be in search of a Tangier buried somewhere in the memory of every citizen.

Today I tell myself that perhaps this Tangier only exists in this quest, in the distance separating the Tangier of daily life from this Tangier where we have such difficulties in surviving. To survive, our memory and our eyes surrounded with images, traces of the past, remains, which persist and fail to fall away, memories which resist and refuse to die. I have mentioned death too much, but perhaps life can only really be possible through this acute conscience of death. On my return to Tangier, after 19 years of absence, long years when I would dream of sitting on the terrace of a seaside café, I first wrote with tears in my eyes, about the assassination of the sea. The beach was stifled, suffocated, and in the waters of the sea, life was destroyed by polluted water carrying lead, zinc and arsenic.

To speak of Tangier is to see its historic heritage fall in ruins under the fist of ignoble speculation, it is to see the Phoenician tombs buried under rubbish, the Teatro Cervantes left derelict, buildings abandoned, forgotten, all the better to be swallowed more easily by the uncultured voracity of our speculators and their accomplices.

To speak of Tangier is to keep in one’s memory the voice of the muezzin in the mosques intermingling with the church bells ringing for matins. Those bells are silent today. To speak of Tangier is to see once more the Easter procession at the cathedral and the young Jews in the streets wearing their headgear, to see the pilgrims of Bou Arraquia crossing the same rue Siaghine, at the same time, in a single heart, the heart of Tangier.

To speak of Tangier is to reveal the old adage as a lie, that the absentee is wrong to come back after a long absence. Tangier knows

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how to wait for its own in silence, it knows how to fête their return with joy and human warmth.

To speak of Tangier is to fall into a dream where at each turning a face, a narrow street, a monument in this medina rises to bring us to order, to tell us that the massacre is impossible, that we are alive, bearers of a past which is forever crying out, telling us to wake up.

To speak of Tangier is to claim responsibility for the city: a quality of life, mutual respect between communities.

To speak of Tangier is to remember the first official cry for the independence of Morocco made here by King Mohamed V in 1947, it is to live at the heart of resistance to the colonial yoke.

Today, an active conscience is born once more. The grain of sand (which we are) remembers having belonged to a pyramid built thanks to effort and friendship, the drop of water carries within it the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean, the dust of the land covering our neglected façades, vilely disfigured, bears witness to Adams and Eves, dreamers and lovers, now lying in our cemeteries.

Tangier is ravaged by the *chergui*, the Mediterranean wind, shaken by the air it breathes, by this southern European coast which is ever present, a reminder of order and liberty to the point of insomnia. Like Prometheus, this Tangier, this insomniac city of ours, loved, hated, banished, forgotten by God and the Gods, prefers to remain riveted by chains to the rock, rather than to kneel before the messenger of the Gods, Hermes. Perhaps the salvation of Tangier lies in this intransigence, in this rebel beauty, in its universal character. I take the liberty of addressing the international community, UNESCO, to ask whether it is possible to let such beauty decay, beauty which refuses to die despite the relentless attacks upon it.

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This conference brought together scholars from the Maghrib and the United States. For their contributions to discussions on the North African medina, I thank participants to the conference, whose papers are not included in this volume: Nezar Al Sayyad, Taoufik Bachrouche, Reda

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NOTE

1. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1984).

Orientalism as Irony in Gérard de Nerval's *Voyage en Orient*

JAMES E. HOUSEFIELD

'The mores of living cities are more interesting to observe than are the ruins
of dead cities'
Gérard de Nerval¹

Any literary or artistic representation of a place necessarily deviates from the site it describes, for images and words can answer to the demands of the place only in part. Gérard de Nerval's *Voyage en Orient* is a book that highlights such disjunctions to a greater degree than has been recognised. In it, Nerval mixes literary genres as he intersperses his lived experiences with fictions and supposed facts drawn from his broad readings. As a site of storytelling within Nerval's narrative, the old city or 'medina' becomes inherently entangled with the fictions produced therein. Fictions dominate Nerval's medina. Yet in his *Voyage en Orient* Nerval humorously debunks the Orientalist expectations of his readers, thus reminding us that a *living* medina rarely matches one's preconceived notions of what a medina should be. While considering the living medina it is an opportune occasion to examine Nerval's reminder that representations may build expectations that are not always borne out by lived experience. In the work of Nerval, irony adds a level of complexity that should challenge our contemporary understanding of Orientalism.

Although his book distinguishes old from new quarters of the cities he describes, Nerval did not use the term 'medina' to define any of the urban spaces through which he travelled.² Yet his *Voyage en Orient* is worth consideration as a central and influential example of nineteenth-century French literary representations of an 'imaginary Orient' upon which artists, writers and others based their notions of the life of the medina. Art historian Linda Nochlin has usefully acknowledged the dilemma that although an artist's view of a previously unvisited place is bound to be conditioned by previous representations of that locale, no matter how imaginary, we must

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Gérard de Nerval's Voyage en Orient

ultimately consider each artwork in its own context and not only under the umbrella term 'Orientalism'.³ Nerval's *Voyage en Orient*, based on literary, anthropological and visual representations of the East to which he travelled, merits such focused examination.

Edward Said has famously characterised the pervasive forces conditioning Occidental thought about the Orient as 'so authoritative ...' that 'no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking into account the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism'.⁴ Nerval recognised the importance of his sources while occasionally acknowledging their limitations. In August 1843 Nerval wrote to his friend Théophile Gautier, 'I have already lost, Kingdom after Kingdom, province after province, the more beautiful half of the universe, and soon I will know of no place in which I can find a refuge for my dreams; but it is Egypt that I most regret having driven out of my imagination, now that I have sadly placed it in my memory'.⁵ Said's reading of this last phrase condemns Nerval for an Orientalist preference for imagination or fantasy instead of experience and recollection. Yet the attitudes Said singles out were Nerval's attitudes towards Occident as well as Orient. A distinctly Romantic sentiment produces the sadness and nostalgia that arise in recognition that the world will never be as one once imagined it through history, art and literature. Romanticism exercised a force that shaped the thought of Nerval and his contemporaries with no less strength than did the 'authoritative' force of Orientalism. What has been called 'Orientalism' could be seen, in fact, as the gaze of Romanticism focused on the 'Orient'. Now, as in the nineteenth century, the enduring gaze of Romanticism shapes our visions of the West as insistently as it does our views of the East. This very same Romanticism grew alongside the early museums and modern disciplines of history, anthropology and folklore.⁶

Representing the Medina: Museum, Exhibition, Preservation

Residual Romanticism most likely played a role in French colonial building practices in Morocco, where resident-general Maréchal Louis Hubert Lyautey emphasised the preservation of medinas while building modern European cities at some remove from older city centres. These practices preserved the 'traditional' cities to such a degree that guidebooks today continue to refer to medinas as 'living museums' in which the tourist may enact an almost Dantean passage into a living ancient or medieval past. Writing in London's *Sunday Express* newspaper (9 January 2000), Michael O'Dell proclaimed that 'the fact is the medina is a perfect working museum and a modern Fès has developed outside its walls'. 'Entering Fès el-Bali is like stepping into a time warp back to the Middle Ages', one recent guidebook claimed.⁷ Descriptions