



American Transactions on  
Engineering & Applied Sciences

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## The Casbah of Algiers, in Algeria; From an Urban Slum to a Sustainable Living Heritage

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### ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*

Received 10 October 2011  
Received in revised form  
1 July 2012  
Accepted  
Available online

*Keywords:*

Urban management;  
historic buildings;  
cultural sustainability,  
urban strategy

### ABSTRACT

In the face of rapid economic development, people increasing needs and changing lifestyles, most historic centers in the Arab world have experienced problems in making the necessary adaptation to the present needs and change. In the Casbah of Algiers, while the number of houses was reducing due to dereliction the density was rising and reached 4,000 persons/ha, making it one of the highest densities in the world. In addition, lack of services and poor sanitation has accelerated the dilapidation and decline of the Casbah, to become an urban slum in the heart of the capital Algiers. The Casbah of Algiers presents an urgent case for urban conservation. UNESCO inscribed it on the World Heritage list in December 1992, but since then there has been continuous disrepair, from 1,200 historic buildings in 1962 only 400 have remained and the number is still decreasing. The cultural heritage of the Casbah should be recognized as a valuable resource for future development. This paper attempts to propose an urgent integrated urban conservation action to rescue the Casbah from vanishing to become a sustainable living heritage.

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## 1. Introduction

In the face of rapid economic development, population growth, people increasing needs and changing lifestyles, most historic urban areas in the Arab world have experienced problems in making the necessary adjustment and adaptation to the present needs and change. Today, these historic centres are not only a shelter for migrants but are also very productive. Located in a central position in the growing urban areas, they have to function as a city centre. Consequently, they keep the medina alive and they participate in the economic growth of the city. From the view of experts, people choose travel destinations where they can learn about traditional and distinct cultures in their historic context. In view of the importance of 'heritage' to the development of tourism, hotels and catering and the scant attention given to heritage raise the issue of heritage tourism.

There is a growing belief that most of the historic city centers in the Arab world are facing multiple pressures to sustain their characteristics and values. Competing demands for land use, the introduction of new economic activities, and the marketing of heritage resources places an important burden on the local heritage players. These are striving to find appropriate ways to manage these historic assets, in order to save them from the threats of mass tourism and over-consumption. The balance that must be maintained is between visitor access and conservation needs.

During recent years new policy mechanisms have emerged to reconcile the conflicting demands of conservation and development by applying sustainable development policies in historic cities. These issues will be explored through the case study of the Casbah of Algiers in Algeria, a World Heritage Site at risk. Throughout this case study, this paper will conclude with a discussion of the more general implications of the sustainability/historic city centre debate.

## 2. Urban Conservation and Sustainability

What is sustainable development? The 1987 report "Our Common Future" from the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) set forth the most widely used definition of the concept: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". The Brundland Commission lists food, water, clothes, shelter, work, energy and hygiene as examples of what is termed 'basic needs' (Brundland Commission, 1987: 8 & 44).

Sustainable development can be seen today as a powerful motivation for urban conservation planning. Basically, it consists of a process of urban development based on the constant reuse of existing built resources, associated with a low input of energy for adaptation to new requirements conceived in society. It is also viewed as a process founded in the local culture, in an equitable distribution of urban services, the use of democratic principles of management, the maintenance and regeneration of traditional social values and practices.

From the perspective of sustainability, cultural heritage is understood as a non-renewable resource. It includes some of the most important intangible values of society (identity, memory, self-consciousness and history). Moreover, it is an asset capable of attributing value to new things through the creation of new processes based on established values. As a man-made product, a city is an artifact composed of various historically recognizable parts.

In a progressively competitive global market where spatial and temporal barriers are disappearing, the identity of a place – its character, history, buildings, culture and distinctiveness – becomes crucial (Boussaa, 2003). With a rapidly globalizing flow of resources, information technologies and know-how, the distinctiveness of a specific historic city assumes greater significance in attracting both financial and human forms of investment (Urry, 1995). This local-global dimension of exchange contributes to explain why the local heritage players seek a competitive advantage over similarly historic areas. Cities that demonstrate through promotion and marketing their historical richness are more appealing to those with capital seeking attractive locations, especially for visitors and tourists (Strange, 1997).

In heritage cities, history and heritage have become the dynamic assets that combine the local and the global. They establish the local specificity and distinctiveness so attractive to a globalizing tourist market. Furthermore, they structure the localized patterns, which are brought about by a combination of national and international money exchange. However, the consumption produced by the com-modification, interpretation and replication of a place's history is not infinite. Rather, the historical relics of a city are liable to deteriorate when 'over-consumed' by increasing visitors and the city is pressured for new forms of development.

In many historic cities, a 'local fatigue' results when consuming local infrastructure, historic buildings versus a demand on land, growing social conflict between visitors and local inhabitants, as well as the environmental impact of tourism (Glasson & al, 1995). These tensions between the demands for development and conservation in historic cities have raised the issue of introducing sustainable development policies to counter the consequences of diminishing resources. Such an interpretation implies that there are limits to growth that must not be breached within a historic city as stated by Jacobs:

“A limit to the amount of development which an area can take over time, determined by its environmental characteristics...[and]...that if development exceeds a particular level, the loss of or damage to these features [environmental characteristics] will be unsustainable or otherwise unacceptable, and should therefore not be permitted" (Jacobs, 1997: 6).

Historic cities have unique characteristics that guarantee their special conservation and sustainability. On one hand this implies that development in these historic cores should be limited, while on the other hand the issue of maintaining local economic vitality cannot be undermined. Most of heritage players recognize that such places cannot reproduce themselves without some kind of intervention. These are meant to regulate and manage the physical and social fabric upon whom their local identity and economic success is predicated. In this way it is possible for a range of sustainable economic development approaches to co-exist within and between cities-those which may be growth limiting, growth enhancing, or an integration of both (Strange, 1999).



**Figure 1:** View of the Casbah from the lower part, at the foreground we can see the Ketchaoua Mosque, one of the main landmarks in the historic center.

### 3. The Casbah of Algiers and Rapid Change

Algiers has an area of 276 Km<sup>2</sup> and a population of more than 3 million. The Casbah is situated on the coast to the north of the city. The complex labyrinths and a fortress from the 1500s remain as reminders of the past. The Casbah of Algiers (Figure 1) was founded in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC, and was constructed on a steep slope (118m.high), facing the harbour bay and the Mediterranean Sea. Its historical function was military and trade.

The Casbah of Algiers, a landmark of Algerian history in the heart of the capital city, presents an urgent case for urban conservation. UNESCO inscribed the Casbah of Algiers on the World Heritage list in 1992, but since then there has been continuous degradation. The population grew from 60,000 in 1969 to reach 70,000 in 1980, a double of what was in 1830. While the number of houses is reducing, the density is rising and reached 4,000 persons/ha in several districts, making it one of the highest densities in the world (Lesbet, 1987: 67).

Since independence, the original urban and traditional families have been progressively abandoning the Casbah and moved to modern villas and flats on the outskirts of the city. In 1962 there were about 1,200 traditional buildings in the Casbah, going back to the Ottoman era. Thirty years later, 250 traditional dwellings disappeared, giving an average loss of 20% of the initial number (Ministry of Culture and Communication, 1992: 27). The old houses have been rented to rural families migrating to the city. In the meantime the number of houses rapidly diminished due to deterioration and collapse. About 50 dwellings collapsed between 1975 and 1979 (Lesbet, 1985: 101).

In addition to the problem of dwellings collapse a large number of significant public facilities disappeared (Figure 2). Mosques and *Zaouias* (Coranic schools) have been subject to major loss, from 130 mosques and 18 *Zaouias* only 10 mosques and 2 *zaouias* survived, while only six *hamams* (public baths) remained from an original number of about one hundred. With the absence of any legislation and planning control to protect the Casbah, each time a house was demolished, it was replaced by an apartment block, which destroyed the historical townscape and obstructed views to the sea for the adjacent neighbours.



**Figure 2:** Showing the state of deterioration and dereliction making the Casbah an urban slum in the heart of the capital.

This cycle of deterioration and disrepair resulted in a situation in which the Casbah is perceived as an urban slum in the heart of the capital. It is seen as the home of low income and desperate families, a place of misery, overcrowding, violence and insecurity. The present population of the Casbah is 70,000 concentrated on 37 hectares (13 hectares representing the vacant land of the buildings collapsed). With an average 12 persons/per room, the traditional house originally designed for one family, now is sheltering around 6 families, an average of one family per/room. This situation has meant that even the common spaces, such as the central courtyard, the surrounding corridor and kitchen have been occupied and subdivided. Only 400 dwellings have survived. This number is due to decrease dramatically if no urgent rescue and salvation action is undertaken. Sustainable development and heritage tourism can form the main catalyst for the revitalization of the Casbah, both socially and economically. After long years of neglect and marginalization this strategy might help the Casbah regain its legendary place within the new growing metropolis of Algiers.

#### **4. The Need for a Sustainable Development Approach**

Since 1962, the state has been trying through a multitude of conservation plans to conserve the Casbah, but all these plans were not implemented. Apart from restoring a number of monuments and dwellings, no comprehensive action was undertaken to cover the whole urban center. The dilemma of conserving the Casbah is too complicated; it presents one of the rare dichotomies between providing a decent shelter to the low income inhabitants and the need for urgent rehabilitation. Now that the Casbah is on the “world heritage list”, it should not be left to become



a “world heritage at risk”.

As a starting point, a number of steps and measures should be taken to make the conservation of the Casbah a reality. The first step would be a comprehensive survey and inventory of the remaining buildings. Secondly, selecting of what should be conserved based on the conditions of each building and the values it reveals. Thirdly, a typological analysis of houses and other monuments should be identified and surveyed to be used as a guide for future design, especially in the case of infill and reconstruction projects. Finally, a participatory approach should be promoted to involve the local inhabitants in the rehabilitation process.

In addition to housing, heritage tourism can be a major way of intervention in the Casbah. The historical separation between the private part (residential) and the public part (commercial), in the Casbah should be sustained. There is a need to rehabilitate the higher Casbah for housing, while the lower part for tourism and commercial activities. In this context, the infill projects and reconstruction work should be planned to provide adequate shelter for the local inhabitants, while promoting tourism in the Lower Casbah. Heritage tourism can be a catalyst to sustaining the heritage center by introducing the hard currency. In this way, revenues generated from tourism could be used to finance the restoration and upgrading of the remaining dwellings in the Higher Casbah while regenerating life in the historic center.

The heritage players should bear in mind, that the Casbah is meaningful only if it is inhabited; it is the reflection of the past and the people who live and work there. As such, the Casbah must work in a way to upgrade the living conditions of its inhabitants which form the basis for any sustainable development strategy. While tourism can be promoted, consuming and marketing heritage resources should be kept to the level of not threatening the identity and distinctiveness of the Casbah.

In order to change the image of the urban slum, there is an urgent need to inject a new heart in the Casbah. It is important to stress that the residents of the Casbah have the right to live in a decent shelter, work and be proud of their historical setting. Therefore, the first action to be taken is to stop the drift of rural migrants to the Casbah. The second one should aim to reduce the occupancy of

houses by half from 6 to 3 families per house. This can be achieved by reconstructing the demolished houses in the vacant lands.

The right to work is another imperative of sustainable development; therefore as a third measure, there is a need to encourage the revival of the vanishing traditional crafts in the Casbah. These will give a new breath of life to the Casbah, and will contribute to its economic and social sustainability (Figure 3). This approach will enable the creation of jobs for a large number of people unemployed. Once the main heritage resources are conserved, and the cultural and economic activities enhanced, it is possible to present these heritage assets to visitors and tourists.



**Figure 3:** Showing the possibility of injecting new lease of life in the Casbah streets.

The situation of the Casbah along other historic city centers in the Arab World is particularly alarming. The historic town is both the content and container of urban heritage. While heritage tourism is an important and desired activity for both visitors and hosts, the challenge to cultural resource managers is to minimize the amount of damage that visitors may cause to sites. The following points emerge as principles for an appropriate visitor management to the Casbah and other historic areas:

- Comprehensive tourist development plans are essential as the pre-condition for developing



any tourist potential;

- It should be a fundamental principle of any tourist development plan that both conservation, in its widest sense, and tourism benefit from it;
- The best long-term interests of people living and working in any host community should be the primary determining factor in selecting options for tourist development;
- Educational programs should insist and invite tourists to respect and understand the local way of life, culture, history and religion;
- The design of buildings, sites and transport systems should minimize the potentially harmful visual effects of tourism;
- Pollution controls should be built into all forms of infrastructure;
- Adequate management should define the level of acceptable tourism development and provide controls to maintain that level;
- Enable the local population to participate during the selection process and development phases;
- Develop adequate protective measures to keep visitors away from sensitive parts of the historic centre.

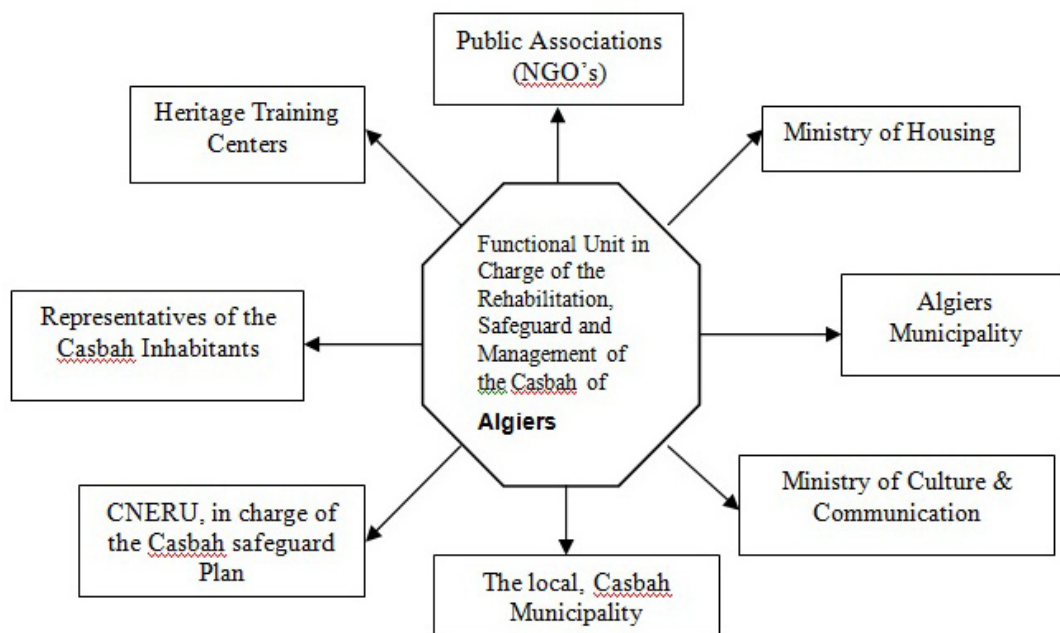
These principles are crucial for tourism development in historic urban centers. While in most urban cores lacking enough funds to save their cultural heritage, tourism can provide the necessary hard currency to finance the restoration work. In this way, conservation and rehabilitation can be pursued to cover the entire historic urban center. In short, these principles aim to prevent heritage tourism from becoming blight but blessing for all, the host community and tourists.

The concept of sustainability in historic city centers is still under scrutiny. Further study and analysis is required for the application of sustainable development approaches in the Arab World. So far, no precise indicators have been developed in relation to the built heritage. Nevertheless, some general guidelines can be proposed that might be relevant to achieve sustainable conservation and development of the Casbah and other historic city centers in the Arab world:

- Respect community life, with specific emphasis on the local values and traditions;
- Improve the quality of life;

- Maintain identity, diversity and vitality;
- Minimize the loss of non-renewable heritage assets;
- Involve different actors from both the public and private sectors in the conservation process;
- Empower community action and responsibility through participation;
- Provide an appropriate strategy for integrating conservation and development;
- Define the capacity by which change can be allowed in historic centers;
- Issues such as gentrification and authenticity should be taken into consideration when applying a sustainable development approach in the historic city.

The above actions cannot be implemented without an active participation of the local inhabitants. Therefore, there is need to encourage community participation and involvement of the heritage associations and the larger community. This should be done in collaboration with the local authorities that have the duty to manage the remaining 400 buildings. Heritage management is essential for regulating and maintaining an appropriate level of marketing and reusing the heritage assets.



**Diagram 1:** A Proposed Organisational Framework in the Casbah of Algiers.

Diagram 1 attempts to propose a management framework for the conservation of the Casbah. The Functional Unit in Charge of the Rehabilitation, Safeguard and Management of the Casbah of

Algiers is the main coordinator body between the other heritage players. In order to implement the recent Casbah Safeguard Plan, this coordinating body should be in close contact with the Algiers Municipality as well as the ministries of Culture and Housing. In addition, this unit should be open to the Casbah inhabitants and the general public, the different associations, as well as the training and research centers. Therefore, it should be located in the heart of the Casbah.

## 5. The Casbah: A Living Heritage

The citadel was the first restoration project undertaken in the Casbah. This heritage complex encompasses the Dey Castle, castles of the Beys, two mosques, gardens and annexes lying over an area of 11,000 m<sup>2</sup>. Restoration work started in the late sixties and is still underway. The restoration of the historical monument (Bastion 23) was the second major operation; it was launched in July 1988, and it is now open for public as a museum (Figure 4). This historic monument is an ensemble composed of three palaces, nine houses and defense batteries. It represents the last testimony of the destroyed marine district and lies on an area of 4,000 square meters. These two landmarks, forming two main boundaries in the higher and lower parts of the Casbah are being re-used as museums and cultural centers, and have become two main attractions for both the local and foreign visitors.

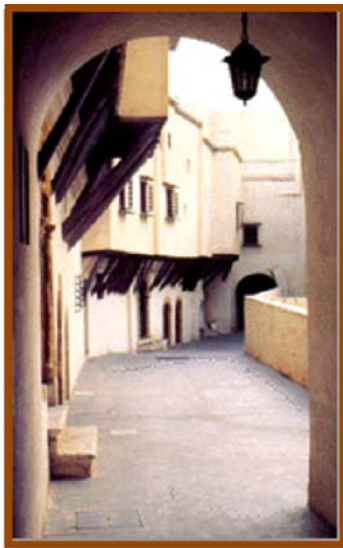


**Figure 4:** Showing an Internal View of the Bastion 23.

In addition to these two major projects, around 37 dwellings were restored. A number of new public facilities were introduced in the Casbah, namely 3 libraries, 2 kindergartens, and 16 open-air

areas. These new infill projects are meant to revitalize and enhance the living environment of the local inhabitants as a basis for sustainable development. Furthermore, two main streets (Figure 5) in the Casbah (Rue *Rabah Riab*, and *Sidi Driss Hamidouche*) have been rehabilitated along with the reconstruction of five public fountains (Ministry of Culture and Communication, 1992). While these projects are intended to upgrade the living conditions they can also form a major catalyst for a sustainable living heritage.

Despite the problems of insecurity encountered during the last ten years, the Ministry of Culture and Communication succeeded during the period 1994-2000 to implement 13 restoration projects with the assistance of Italian experts. These are mainly monuments: 10 mosques, one castle (*Dar Aziza*) and the Bastion 23 complex. In addition, few refurbishment works were undertaken on the main buildings in the Basse Casbah, in an effort to recreate the historical link between the Casbah and the sea which is its "Raison d'être" (Zadem, 2002: 147). This link has been revived to become a main hub for tourists with its shopping and a wide range of restaurants.



**Figure 5:** Showing a Rehabilitated Street in the Casbah.

It can be noticed that there has never been any comprehensive intervention in the Casbah. Most of the work was piecemeal without any considerable effect, and not worthy of the World Heritage status of the Casbah. An insignificant number of buildings have been restored and rehabilitated since 1962; most of them are monuments, while dwellings are still struggling to survive due to their advanced state of dilapidation and decay. This process of work cannot rescue

the Casbah nor can it sustain it for the present and future generations. While neglect is due mainly to a lack of political will, lack of funds is another obstacle. Therefore, heritage tourism can play a major role in reviving the Casbah socially and economically. In addition it can generate the necessary funds to pursue the conservation endeavor for the entire world heritage center.

In the light of the problems facing historic cities in the Arab World, further study and research is needed. The idea that effective action to promote conservation and management of historic centers requires the implementation of a common strategy which can be based on the following assumptions:

- Historic centers are meaningful only if inhabited; they are the reflection of the past and the people who live and work there;
- Consuming and marketing heritage resources should be kept to the level of not threatening the identity and distinctiveness of the historic cities;
- Historic centers must work in a way to upgrade the living conditions of the local inhabitants, and should therefore contribute to ensure their basic needs.

The alarming situation of the Casbah demonstrates that the fundamental problem in urban conservation is the establishment of urban management policies and community development actions. These measures can play a major role in sustaining the conservation and regeneration of this historic city. Obviously this can be achieved by the close cooperation of the private and public sectors, as well as the NGO's associations, for the safeguard of this nonrenewable cultural heritage. The trend should be to reverse the situation from a world heritage at risk to a lively and bustling urban centre with a new beating heart.

In order for the built heritage to be incorporated in the aim of establishing a sustainable society, the 'static' goal to protect must be married to the managed 'processes of change. The capacity of the historic center to accept change will depend on relative values that are placed on heritage assets and the priorities of each society (Pickard, 2001: 290).

## 6. Conclusion

The paradox of conserving the Casbah is too complex; it presents one of the rare dichotomies between providing a decent shelter to the low income inhabitants and the need for urgent rehabilitation. Now that the Casbah is still on the “World Heritage List”, it should not be left to become a “World Heritage at Risk”.

This paper attempted to propose an appropriate conservation management strategy for the Casbah of Algiers. The Functional Unit in Charge of the Rehabilitation, Safeguard and Management of the Casbah of Algiers is the main coordinator body between the other heritage players. In order to implement the recent Casbah Safeguard Plan, this coordinating body should be in close contact with the Algiers Municipality as well as the ministries of Culture and Housing. In addition, this unit should be open to the Casbah inhabitants and the larger community.

As a matter of urgency, a number of steps and measures should be taken to make the revival of the Casbah a reality:

1. Undertaking a comprehensive survey and inventory of the remaining buildings;
2. Selecting of what should be conserved;
3. Identify and survey the rescued structures for use as a guide for future design, in the case of infill and reconstruction projects.
4. Promote a participatory approach to involve the local inhabitants in the rehabilitation process.

In order to make the Casbah a living heritage, there is a need to rehabilitate the higher Casbah for housing, while the lower part for tourism and commercial activities. In this context, the infill projects and reconstruction work should be planned to provide adequate shelter for the local inhabitants, while promoting tourism in the Lower Casbah.

The heritage players should bear in mind, that the Casbah is meaningful only if it is inhabited; it is the reflection of the past and the people who live and work there. The right to work is another imperative of sustainable development; therefore, there is a need to encourage the revival of the vanishing traditional crafts in the Casbah. These will give a new breath of life to the Casbah, and will contribute to its economic and social sustainability.



Conserving the Casbah is not a matter of restoring few houses but a question of maintaining the vitality of the entire historic centre. The problem of the Casbah is a shared one; there is a need to save it so it can act as a model for other historic centres in Algeria, like Constantine, Temacine, Ghardaia, Dellys and so on. The Casbah is an example which can provide hope or defeat for the future of historic centres in the Arab World as a whole. Therefore, the proposed strategy should be implemented urgently before witnessing more losses in the Casbah cultural heritage.

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**Peer Review:** This article has been internationally peer-reviewed and accepted for publication according to the guidelines given at the journal's website. Note: This article was accepted and presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference-Workshop on Sustainable Architecture and Urban Design (ICWSAUD) organized by School of Housing, Building & Planning, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia from March 3<sup>rd</sup> -5<sup>th</sup>, 2012.