

The Medina of Tunis ...

An inclusive Heritage Policy for Resilient Sustainability

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In a global context shaped by the rise of urban and environmental issues, the need for an "image of the city" - through a development of its assets- is increasing.

In this context, the Mediterranean city offers a great diversity of urban sites where history, modernity and functionality meet. The Medinas of the Maghreb constitute an important heritage wealth and a living testimony of Muslim urbanism, and the rehabilitation of these historic centers represents a major challenge for the conservation of a cultural and social capital.

Saving the historic centers impregnated with culture, full of history, collective memory of a whole population, and integrating them into a world called "modern" mechanized and in full technological change, is not an easy task. But the challenge has already been launched in Tunis, like many other Mediterranean cities.

It is therefore necessary to continue to find operational translations, particularly in terms of urban services, which must also meet the objectives of sustainability. The issue is quite delicate when it comes to a historic center, world heritage since 1979 and enacted safeguarded sector since February 2020. How to manage it, preserve it and plan its development in the face of the changing needs of its inhabitants and their perceptions of notions such as housing, activities, infrastructure and equipment? How to manage the urban mutation and the disturbances that the medina of Tunis undergoes on a daily basis in the face of maintaining a balanced local economic, social and environmental development?

But before talking about the efforts made in this area, it is useful to present briefly, the Medina of Tunis, which is the subject of this intervention.

Tunis was a town of Utique or Carthage and became a capital only in the twelfth century during the Hafsid reign. Indeed, the entrenched position of the city of Tunis which was hardly to its advantage during antiquity, gave it, after the Arab Conquest, a defensive and strategic position of the first rank. Tunis inherited the advantages of Carthage without having the disadvantages of its position, neither too far from the sea nor too exposed to its dangers.

Like all cities, Tunis is a stratification of its history, it bears the traces of its Phoenician, Roman, Spanish, Ottoman or French conquerors. The reading of its spatial structure gives an account of the testimonies that it has kept from the civilizations that have crossed it.

The general configuration of the site (caught between the lake to the east and the lagoon to the west, which constitute natural obstacles that are reinforced by the hills surrounding Tunis), determines the north-south direction of its urban expansion.

This site includes a central core, commonly called Medina, and two suburbs, Bab Souika to the north and Bab El Jazira to the south.

The boulevards built on the site of the demolished ramparts materialize the limit of this urban complex and make it a neighborhood distinct from the rest of the city.

During more than 13 centuries of existence, the medina of Tunis has not ceased to evolve without losing its authenticity and its heritage and historical values. It has preserved its urban morphology and the original typology of its Arab-Muslim architecture, "indeed, the whole city is ordered around the great mosque and the network of souks that surrounds it. From this pole, the place of maximum intensity of public life (religion, administration, crafts, trade), the public space extends and joins the gates of the city by the main axes where are located the activities common to all citizens as well as to people from outside. These main roads connect the gates passing through the center of the city."¹

It is presented in the form of an urban morphology that is essentially based on functional segregation and on the hierarchization of public/private spaces according to a rather specific road network that emphasizes the separation of functions between the linear network.

This is the area where public facilities and shops are located, and the private residential areas. "Between the two spaces there is both juxtaposition and separation."²

This functional segregation is a model of social cohesion and harmonization between inhabitants, there are never neighborhoods for the rich and others for the poor. The "Mediterranean" space offers, then, a symbiosis and coherence between urban model, lifestyle and environment.

In addition to its wealth of monuments, the Medina is one of the rare testimonies of a homogeneous Muslim urbanism, which has reached us in its integrity. It is these values that initiated the classification of this city on the list of the world heritage by the UNESCO in 1979.

In the sixties, the Medina of Tunis appeared doomed to decline. It was in the situation of historical European cities hit by the threats of Haussmannian urbanism and devalued in every respect. A series of factors, linked on the one hand to the intensification of the rural exodus from the 1950s, and on the other hand to the modernist ideal of the time, contributed to the strong devaluation of the historic center: decrepitude of infrastructure, abandonment or on the contrary over-densification of housing, impoverishment of the population, so-called "renovation" operations, i.e. demolition-reconstruction and the widening of roads through breakthroughs to promote car traffic around the historic center.

Fig 4 Urban mapping (photo ArchivesASM) An orthogonal and modern urbanization juxtaposed with a traditional and dense urban fabric a duality that the Medina of Tunis does not cease to manage for a better resilience...

The idea of the controversial breakthrough is that which consisted in the realization of the large boulevard of 60m connecting the kasbah to the Avenue Habib Bourguiba. This breakthrough could have resulted in splitting the medina in two and demolishing a large part of the original central core which is located around the great mosque Ezzitouna.

In 1967, to counteract this modernist project and harmful to the medina, and under the impetus of the mayor of the time that the Association Safeguarding the Medina (A.S.M) was created to set up the fundamental foundations of the heritage of the medina of Tunis and to make recognize its specificity and its cultural importance. Its essential role is to show the intrinsic value of the medina as a traditional historical ensemble in the process of urban planning: ideas that seem obvious today, but which were far from obvious then.

The ASM was, thus, governed as an association by the provisions of Law No. 59-154 of November 7, 1959, but to avoid its marginalization and ensure the sustainability of its activities, it became in 2016, governed by Law 88 of the year 2011 of Associations when updating its status.

Its mission, according to its statutes is "to work to preserve, by all technical and legal means, traditional urban ensembles, historical monuments and all objects of cultural heritage in the city of Tunis and to carry out any action likely to ensure the preservation and development of the Medina and the promotion of its inhabitants."³

Throughout its journey of safeguarding the heritage, the ASM of Tunis has led a fight that aims to reclaim the architectural and urban heritage as a factor of civic construction and social inclusion. Its vision is based essentially on the preservation, requalification and revaluation of heritage in the sense of human development and improvement of the quality of life of the inhabitants of the historic center.

How the ASM of Tunis in 54 years of existence, has been able to carry out its task of safeguarding, in the absence of a fundamental legal text such as the Code of Heritage and the promulgation of the protected sectors?

What are the historical research and legal instruments that justify the heritage and authorize the protection and conservation in a framework of sustainable development?

What are the stakes of safeguarding at the urban, architectural, social and economic levels?

Do the safeguarding objectives meet the expectations of the inhabitants and their needs?

The ASM has set up a safeguarding strategy by equipping itself with an architecture and urban planning workshop and a company specialized in restoration. It has gone beyond the stage of surveys, diagnosis and pure technical and strategic studies to that of concrete interventions on the ground.

The WSA Urban Planning Workshop has become a de facto public design office. It became the subcontractor, the advisor, the associate, and even the contractor of various public partners while maintaining its mission as advisor for the inhabitants.

Thus, for five decades, the role of the ASM has evolved from adviser of the City for building permits, provider of expertise on the condition of old buildings, architecture and urban planning workshop, or

³ The WSA Statute of April 16, 2016, Art 3

initiator of ideas for the protection of the Medina (identification of projects and preparation of financing files) to a de facto public operator.

In the absence of institutions that initiate and deal with heritage issues, the ASM has become a school of reference on a national and international scale by training young intern architects and students and by gathering researchers around meetings on heritage.

In close collaboration with the ASM, the Municipality of Tunis has assumed its responsibility towards the heritage of the ancient city by preserving it according to a global vision that considers the interventions carried out, within the framework of the enhancement and preservation of the heritage, had allowed to establish a sustainable safeguarding policy considering the social and patrimonial imperatives.

The interventions carried out, within the framework of the valorization and the preservation of the heritage, had made it possible to establish a policy of durable safeguard paying attention to the social and patrimonial imperatives, a policy rewarded by several international prizes of which:

- 4 Aga Khan Awards for Architecture: Hafsia, phase I (1983) and phase II (1995), Sidi Alaoui School (1989) and Revitalization of the hypercenter of Tunis (2010).

- The Arab Towns Organization (ATO) prize in 1986.

- The Jean-Paul L'Allier Heritage Award (OVPM) in 2011 for the project of restoration and beautification of an urban circuit entitled "From Zitouna to Sidi Ibrahim". And in 2019 the honorable mention for the project of restoration and conversion of the presbytery holy - cross.

This policy of sustainable safeguarding of the Medina of Tunis is articulated, mainly, around 5 major themes in this case:

1/ Elaboration of an integrated strategy of intervention at the urban scale for the safeguard of the real estate and social heritage.

The historic centers, in this case the medinas can no longer be marginalized and considered as neighborhoods of traditional fabric as an integral and inseparable part of the city. They must be treated as an integrated entity in the process of urban, economic and social development, with what they present as economic potential and political and social opportunities and as a vector of recovery for the promotion and cultural revaluation.

Saving the stone and the person by integrated approaches aiming at both the social and the patrimonial, is likely to bring the citizen closer to the process of integrated development of old popular districts and to guarantee the sustainability of the project over the years.

I will quote as examples, the urban restructuring project carried out in the popular district of Hafsia in 1983 within the framework of the "3rd urban project" and that of the cleaning of the insalubrious and over-densified habitat called the project "Oukalas" in 1990.

A- Hafsia project

The approach adopted in the Hafsia project in its two phases has succeeded in reversing the process of degradation in the district since the early twentieth century, despite the magnitude and duration of the project (14 million dinars over nearly 12 years),

It is the urban restructuring of an entire popular neighborhood, the "hara" of the Jews, located in the lower part of the medina, whose population lived in unsanitary conditions.

This integrated social project was essentially based on:

- An operation to repair the urban fabric: the reconstruction of the road network, the demolition of buildings threatening ruin and the rehabilitation of the non-demolished housing.
- The rehousing of low-income families, initially living in the demolished buildings.
- The construction of 100 economic and social housing units respecting the typology of the medina (courtyards, wooden carpentry, covered passages etc...)
- The construction of new commercial arteries in continuity with the existing souks nearby (souk jedid).
- The implementation of a financial equalization system guaranteeing the financial closure of the project: equalization of the costs of rehabilitation of the roads and utilities between the new housing and the rehabilitated housing.

At the urban level, the Hafsia project was designed to ensure urban homogeneity between this new development and the old fabric surrounding it, through a double continuity: that of the road (planned and existing) and that of the buildings (new and old). It also succeeded in revitalizing the commercial activities of the neighborhood, in rebuilding or rehabilitating several of its ruined houses and in encouraging exchanges between inhabitants of different social backgrounds.

The success of the Hafsia operation is certainly due to the good architectural design and the seriousness of the execution, but one should not forget the opportunity of having the WSA on site to:

- assist, in addition to its role as design office, the delegated project manager in the mission of animator and mediator in the neighborhood.
- proceed rapidly to the necessary modifications to the minor changes of the program.
- to ensure, in fact, daily the cohesion and the coherence of the project and this, for 10 years, what no private engineering office could have done.

B- Oukalas project

The Oukalas project, launched in the 90's, and in its 4 executional phases, is a great social project which aimed at improving the quality of old housing as well as the life of its inhabitants. It also allowed to re-establish the relationship between the citizen and the State, and there, it should be well insisted that man was the center of interest in all the operation and that all the interventions made had for goal to reconcile the inhabitant with his environment and the patrimonial space where he lives.

It consisted essentially in:

- The cleaning up of the unhealthy and over-densified habitat by the rehabilitation and the redevelopment of the buildings
- The definitive rehousing of more than 2000 low-income families in progressive social housing built on municipal land in the outskirts of the city at first, then in the medina, after the demolition of buildings threatening ruin (IMR) and the recovery of bare land. The dwellings were either rented or transferred to the beneficiaries, called to become owners (42m² on a plot of 80m² with the possibility of extension on the floor, and this in rent-sale over 25 years and without interest (monthly repayment as rent of about 32 to 40 TND).

- The recovery and restoration of buildings of architectural interest and historical monuments (adapted, "oukalisés") and their conversion to breathe new life into them, according to a program of reallocation in cultural or socio-collective facilities (kindergarten, youth club, seats of social or cultural associations, etc.).

- The granting of a municipal credit to private individuals for the rehabilitation and restoration of their houses: A line of credit for rehabilitation was made available to building owners with a subsidized interest rate of 5%, repayable over 15 years and with free technical assistance provided by the ASM.

- to save the rental housing stock of the State and the municipality by rehabilitating 40 buildings, while keeping the inhabitants in place.

- Restoration and enhancement of the sabats (covered passages) which constitute symbolic urban elements in the medina.

This project has had the merit of raising awareness of the citizen so that he realized the importance of the architectural and cultural heritage of the medina and the potentialities that arise from them and that thanks to them, his social and economic life could change.

The "Hafsia" and "Oukalas" projects have made it possible to rehabilitate entire neighborhoods defined in the Medina Development Plan as priority areas for urban restructuring because of their state of degradation, insalubrity and the failure of their infrastructure and above all in the hope to find adequate solutions to the problems concerning the mechanisms of intervention both technically and institutionally, financially and legislatively.

Thus, these two major urban projects are concrete examples of the beginning of a policy of resilience of the Medina of Tunis, and this by rethinking the "medina" space as an exceptional heritage to be enhanced, by carrying out projects of urban restructuring and reallocation of historical monuments, rehabilitation of social housing or re-creation of a local economic dynamic.

2/ Establishment of the legal framework and implementation of specific legal instruments to promote the management of historic districts:

Since its creation and under the supervision of the municipality, the association has carried out in-depth field studies (architectural and social) to define the components of the old town and understand the characteristics of its urban system, its mode of growth, the distinctive character of its construction, its economic, social and cultural role.

These studies resulted in:

- the elaboration of a general diagnosis of the state of the built environment covering several fields: architecture, urbanism, heritage, sociology, archaeology, history, and economy.

- the development of intervention options in the urban restructuring zones and the constitution of a first data bank considered very important in the framework of the preparation of the urban development plan for the city of Tunis.

- the elaboration of the first "safeguard and revitalization plan" before its promulgation in the Tunisian legislation.

In 1980, the ASM of Tunis had the mission of elaborating the first urban development plan of the historic city, which was accompanied by the "Règlement d'Urbanisme de la Médina". One of the merits of this regulation is to have succeeded in safeguarding the urban order of the traditional fabric, its road network, its continuous horizontal building and the introverted character of its buildings, always appropriate for the local climate, effective in protecting from street noise and compatible with the forms of social organization of its users.

Despite all the steps taken, this regulation has not produced a restoration plan as a legislative tool for the historical centers and districts. This issue was particularly rectified in the context of new reforms of the urban code and the creation of the law n°35-94 of 24 February 1997 in relation to the heritage code. With no application text, nor means to assist and encourage the inhabitants to preserve architectural heritage, managing historical building becomes rather complex and difficult.

In the context of revising the urban development plan of the municipality of Tunis (PACT), ratified in February 2017, ASM was assigned the task of creating an updated development plan of the Medina if Tunis.

Thank to this review, the PAD Medina became an integral part of PAU. In this context, all classified monuments were located on the map to take them into account at the level of building permission applications and during development operation. ASM also prepared the terms of reference specific for the old town; colors, construction materials, decorations etc., are examples of what was set to be respected.

3/Protection and Restoration of Architectural Monuments:

The Medina of Tunis flows with historical monuments; it has around 670 monuments including religious buildings, palaces, and mansions. Only a few of these have been renovated during the last 30 years.

The challenge raised by ASM, as well as the Municipality of Tunis, was how to integrate the Medina in the new urban expansion, and the social and economic dynamic all while preserving its uniqueness, soul, and authenticity. It was necessary to, first, dismiss the theory of turning it into an open sky museum, or making it a purely touristic attraction and relocating all its inhabitants. Second, it was crucial to ensure that its exceptional heritage is marginalized.

The idea was to put in place a sustainable strategy of local development that aligns the cultural and the social. Thus, the adequate equalization had to be found in order to keep the historical buildings as monumental heritage of cultural values, and preserve this heritage built as real estate and cultural heritage. Viewing the Medina of Tunis from a sustainable development perspective is at the core of a

major, and fast rising, challenge. Here, the know-how and the technologies of the past constitute a source of inspiration that should be emphasized.

Since the 1980's, punctual restoration projects targeted mainly some big mansions, and religious buildings (mosques, zaouias, and coranic schools also called Medresas) the restoration of these monuments took place following functional programs based on reconversion and reassigning collective facilities (associations headquarters, sociocultural facilities, training centers) which are capable of adjusting and integrating in the buildings' structure without disfiguring them. It was about creating new activities in an already existing space, and respecting the value of its monuments.

The following is a set of examples of monument restorations and their transformation into cultural, public, or entertainment spaces.

A- Medersa Bir Lahjar :

It was built during the Husseinite dynasty by Ali Pacha, in 1757 (1170 Hegira). It is the only medressa that is situated on one of the main axes linking the central medina to the northern suburb.

In 1995 the Municipality of Tunis converted it into a cultural center following a first restoration lead by ASM, which saved the deteriorating historical monument.

In 2016, thirty years after its initial restoration, the Municipality of Tunis assigned ASM the task of carrying out architectural research and leading a new intervention following a water infiltration issue, decay of the premise, and its misuse.

This intervention breathed life again in the monument; it optimized its spaces for a better cultural and artistic use.

B- The Boys' School (former Danish consulate) :

This monument, which was the Danish consulate, is located in the former consul district in the commercial center of the Medina. It holds an undeniable architectural and historical value. It is considered an architectural artifact from XIX century, and it could host ceremonies like that of the municipal district of the Medina.

It was a project of revitalization of a building that was close to becoming ruins. Its restoration also paved the way for the restoration and the repurposing of the church into a Mediterranean center for applied arts, which histed the former district.

C- The Chaouachi Souk:

The soukier complex of Chawachias was built by Mohamed Bey in 1691, and it the most extravagant one in the Medina. It is located in the district of the noble close to Kasbah, the grand Zitouna Mosque, and the mosque of Mohamed Bey's grandfather, Hammouda Pacha. It is a historical monument of high importance having exported chachia to the Mediterranean for 3 centuries. In addition, it continues to host dozens of artisans and is visited by thousands of people for its craftsmanship and cultural activities during the month of Ramadhan.

The restoration of the souk is part of the recovery of historical centers through promoting and valuing craftsmanship. There was a realization that an intervention was crucial for the complex itself and for the craftsmen guild "Chaouachi" who had been suffering for decades from the decline of sales of "chachia", the emblematic hat of Tunisia. The souk needed to gain its value again, recover its past image, and enhance its visibility to optimize the number of its visitors.

4/ Implementation of urban restoration and redevelopment projects:

Enhancing the cultural heritage does not stop at the level of restoration of historical monuments, it goes beyond its direct environment and englobes the urban routes leading to it.

In the spirit of improving the urban esthetic and aiming to create a quality urban landscape in the Medina, the Medina of Tunis, and ASM launched a pilot project of urban restoration to develop a circuit that serves as both a cultural and touristic destination.

The first itinerary linked the grand Mosque of Zitouna to Zaouia Sidi Ibrahim Riahi, going through Sidi Ben Arous, Pacha, The Hafsia, and Tribunal. This route, that covers the heart of the Medina center is usually very busy.

This new route aims to create balance and coherence with the existing touristic circuits: Dar Ben Abdallah in the southern part of the old town, and the souk circuit which is about trading and craftsmanship. Two important squares were integrated into this route: the Romdhan Bey square, and the Hafsia square. Both squares had great potential to be repurposed with the creation of a third.

The second itinerary « Houmet el Andlous" allowed us to ensure continuity with the already existing circuit in the southern part of the Medina, which was "Dar Ben Abdallah" which can last with some modifications as well as the typical commercial circuit supported by the streets housing the souks.

The goal of these projects was to promote the cultural heritage concept. The medina is not just a juxtaposition of prominent buildings. It is an urban environment; it's lively, unique, and presenting impressive coherence between its structures and functionalities. This change of scale of conception must go through the development of individual buildings as part of a unit, but also through the attention given to contextual relations that generate homogeneity (paving, street lighting, facades). The challenge faced was one of an important pedagogical dimension for its core was to sensitize the locals about the value of their town and offer the visitors and residents alike an open catalogue of possible interventions to restore the ancient buildings.

These restoration projects thoroughly improved the built environment and the life conditions of the inhabitants and breathed a dynamic local economy. They closed years ago through the will of taking in charge recent heritage, that of the XIXe et XXe century.

The municipal project of reclassifying the artery of the European town, Avenue Habib Bourguiba, carried out between 2001 and 2003 make a good example of daring repurposing the main public space of the city center. The objective was to enhance the quality of daily life, preserve the environment and save the remarkable buildings that have a historical and architectural value.

The ASM lead the architectural studies, the contractual requirements and the terms of reference. At the same time, they restored historical buildings and classified monuments such the Municipal Theatre (2003, 2005); the last intervention was in 2017 and its subject were the central market, the administrative cemetery, the ancient Italian theater that was called "Politeama Rossini". ASM also collaborated with municipal organisms to supervise and follow up with these projects.

5/ Training and Raising Awareness :

The best way to defend heritage, improve it, and reclaim it, is to raise awareness, educate, train, and involve the civil society in the development projects targeting heritage, because it is the people who can save the heritage and not legislations.

To bring this idea to life, ASM initiated a project called "What can be said about the Medina of Tunis". The project was launched in 2017 with MedCities, with the support of the Barcelona Delegation, and it aimed to increase the visibility of the Medina of Tunis and make a platform that attracts tourists and potential investors alike. This program is based on information technology and communication by creating tools to value the main historical buildings of the Medina, and cultural spaces (some of which are linked to creative vocations) all while new thematic circuits. It is about promoting the Medina through the production of 5 thematic cards about the Medina and its suburbs, and the installation of nameplates with QRcodes on 60 historical monuments.

The restoration and repurposing of the Presbyterian church "Sainte-Croix" is another cultural project. The church was turned into the Mediterranean Center of Applied Arts. This is part of the same policy of saving the historical monuments of the Medina of Tunis. The latter is about restoring the main architectural and historical buildings of the XVIIIe century. Its main objective was to create a cultural core and a training center in the field of applied arts which are apt to strengthen the links the Mediterranean cultures.

The complex Saint-Croix allows us to reach the cultural development objectives of the town, and affirm its Mediterranean identity through two main structures:

- The already restored presbytery was destined to host the "Mediterranean Center of Applied Arts" which mission is to provide trainings artistic jobs and cultural animation, as well managing the museum. This training is directed at artisans, art students, and arts and crafts. The objective of the center is to create an exchange and transfer experiences among Mediterranean cultures, contribute to the development of research in the field of applied arts and artisanal jobs, and organize permanent and temporary exhibits of artisanal production and the evolution of techniques and models of products manufactured in Tunisia and other Mediterranean countries.

The church restoration is in progress to host a big concert and exhibits, and reception hall that will function in harmony with the center.

Following the same conceptual approach, and to reach the objective of the complex of Saint Croix, ASM collaborated with the project MEDNETA - Réseau culturel méditerranéen pour la promotion de la créativité dans les arts, l'artisanat et le design pour la régénération urbaine dans les centres historiques – chosen by the European Commission as eligible for a grant. The aim of the project is to promote the cultural dialogue and cross-border economy and encourage artistic creativity for urban recreation in the historical centers of the Mediterranean.

The program highlights the role of craftsmanship and the artistic creativity in historical spaces. It tends to increase the contemporary artistic competitiveness in order to create a leading economic agent in the revival of historical spaces.

Segments that are targeted by this project include young artists, public institutions, and private specialists in artistic promotion, colleges and universities (art, architecture, urbanism), and local and national authorities. Thus, the center permits the sustainability of these actions through the MEDNETA project and beyond it.

The Medina of Tunis succeeded during these years at avoiding big demolition projects that threatened the existence of its urban model. Simultaneously, it managed to avoid mummification: it is indeed the city center and a life center and not a cultural ruin. Finally, it managed to avoid marginalization by opening up to the European town to become the beating heart of the capital.

The strategic process adopted is commendable, and the resilience of the Medina of Tunis cannot exist unless the importance of sustainable development -and its direct impact on locals- is highlighted

Undoubtedly an impressive step has been taken toward restoring and protecting the traditions, installation and enhancement of infrastructures, soothing social problems of over-population and unhealthy housing, valuing the image of the Medina and raising awareness among investors.

However, tremendous efforts need to be made and Tunisian heritage still belongs to all Tunisians, especially during the current stagnant financial and economic situation which prevents all initiatives of architectural and historical restoration

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