al-Madīnah or la ville? An architectural & urban “clash of civilizations” – the example of the city of Algiers

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Abstract: The main aim of author was to present the specific features of the architecture and urbanisation of Algiers – the capital of Algeria. The history of the city was marked by two great periods: Muslim domination (especially from the 15th century) and French colonialism (in the years 1830 – 1962). Both of these have left behind numerous traces of architectural and urbanistic thought. The material effect of French domination is the architecture of modern Algiers, which took the form of a French ville, similar to Paris, Lyon or Marseille. On the other hand, the architecture of Algiers also includes the old Arab district – Casbah, that resembles the cities of the Middle East (Madīnah in Arabic), like Istanbul, Cairo or Damascus. Both architectural traditions give the city of Algiers a cosmopolitan and universal character. The threat to the peculiar coexistence of these traditions is the progressive migration from the countryside to the city, which results in the expansion of area of slums, called bidonvilles.

Keywords: Algiers, colonial city, Muslim medina, architecture, urban development, colonialism

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Introduction

For an average European who comes to Algiers for the first time, the capital of Algeria can seem both ordinary and unique. On the one hand it is a city like many others in Africa and in the Arab World: neglected, chaotic, without a clear character and a little dirty. On the other hand, Algiers seems to be an amazing city where it is possible to travel between cultures and civilisations. In this metropolis of almost 3.5 million inhabitants there are places where man can feel like “a slightly warmer Paris” and after a few moments spent in a taxi, one can move to places reminiscent of Istanbul, Cairo or Damascus. The architecture and the urban planning of Algiers clearly illustrate the specificity of Algeria as a country located at the crossroads of three civilizations: Western, Islamic and African. On the example of Algiers, we can clearly see the “clash” of the first two. Due to its history, the western part of the Islamic world is considered as “the least Arab”. This point of view is due to the still living legacy of French colonialism in this region of the World, both material and non-material. The material effect of French domination is the architecture of modern Algiers, which in 132 years of French domination took the form of a French city (la ville in French), like Paris, Lyon or Marseille. On the other hand, the architecture of Algiers also includes the old Arab district – Casbah, resembling the cities of the Middle East – Medinas (madīnat in Arabic), like Istanbul, Cairo or Damascus. Both architectural traditions give the city of Algiers a cosmopolitan and universal character. The aim of the author is to present the architectural specifics of Algiers both as a European and Eastern city.

This article is of the nature of a review. It is a synthesis of two types of scientific work. First of all, the study deals with theoretical and architectural concepts in the colonial era, especially those concerning the architecture of French Algerian towns. Therefore, numerous references to works by authors in the field of traditional Arab-Muslim architecture appear in the text. Both French and English publications were used in the article. The main idea of the article is a methodical assumption that the city as an urban and architectural unit reflects the culture of its inhabitants. This methodological approach was first presented by F. Znaniecki. One of the most well-known Polish sociologists believed that an urban space under study should be understood in the same way as are its inhabitants (Zaniecki 1938). The city of Algiers as a place of mixture of two cultures is not only a reflection of its turbulent history, but also a manifestation of the nature of the diversities within the Algerian nations.
Algeria – a country shaped by many cultures and traditions

Algeria, a country in the western part of North Africa (Maghreb in Arabic), is full of contrasts and paradoxes. For centuries, these lands were plagued by successive conquests, the effect of which was usually foreign domination. From time immemorial, North Africa has been an area of expansion of various Mediterranean Nations and Empires, like the Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, Ottomans and French. In today’s Algeria there are many material examples of the turbulent history of this country. Numerous coastal towns in the region of Kabylia have essentially Phoenician or Greek origins, for example modern Ijil is an ancient town Igil-gli; Azeffoun – Rusazus; Dallis – Rusuccuru (Meynier 2010: 34–44). Many cities of ancient Numidia (modern eastern Algeria) have a Roman pedigree like e.g. ancient Hippo Regius and Cirta are modern Annaba and Constantine. In most cases, the traces of ancient buildings have been obliterated by progressive housing development typical of Middle Eastern cities. However, the process of displacing old Greco-Roman buildings did not proceed to the same extent everywhere. An example of a city which has preserved Roman architecture is Tebessa (ancient Theveste), where one of the symbols is the former Roman triumphal arch (Lazhar & Belkacem, 2013).

The contemporary architecture and urban planning of North African cities have been shaped by two great historical events. The first was the Arab conquest of Latin Africa since the 7th century, while the second was the French colonial events. The first was the Arab conquest of Latin Africa, North African cities has been shaped by two great historiographies of cities such as Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Cordoba, Fez or Kairouan fully confirm the above thesis.

How can one characterise the typical city of the Islamic East? The study of Islamic urbanism, like many Islamic topics, oscillates between attempts to define what is fundamental and universal in Islamic city life, and what is ineffably individual about each locality (Lapidus 1973: 21). Nevertheless, it is possible to indicate the common features that connect the cities of the widely understood as Islamic World. First of all a typical Arab city is, above all, a “market-city”. Trade has always been an important part of Arab culture. The Prophet Mohammed himself was, incidentally, a merchant. The importance of the economy and the marketplace (suq in Arabic) in the formation and development of the cities of the Muslim East was recognised long ago by one of the first European orientalists – L. Massignon – who studied the urban planning of Iraqi cities at the beginning of the 20th century (Reymond 2008: 731). In addition, the typical Islamic city of the East had another important element: the main mosque where Friday prayers were held. This remarkable element was pointed out by an Austrian orientalist G. von Grunebaum, who defines the “fully-fledged Muslim town” as a city which has two focal points – the Friday mosque and the marketplace (Falahat 2014: 18). In fact, the mosque is the heart of a Muslim city. The minaret adjacent to the mosque is a kind a spiritual lighthouse that informs the faithful that the hour of prayer has come. It can be considered that the mosque is a materialisation of the concept of the Muslim community. Next to the mosque were also the Quranic schools (madrasah in Arabic) and the baths (hammām in Arabic), which played an important role in pre-
paring for prayer. Usually, the local administration was also located in the vicinity of the mosque, as in the Muslim World power and religion were closely related. Another symbol of power in the typical city of the Islamic East was the citadel and defensive walls designed to assure the safety of the inhabitants. In North Africa there were two types of citadel: Ribāt and Qasbah. The former had the form of a fortified monastery that played an important role in the Islamisation of the Maghreb (Mercier 1900: 149). The latter was a military garrison, a role which increased significantly with the rise of Ottoman rule (Mercier 1900: 149). The latter was a military garrison, a role which increased significantly with the rise of Ottoman rule (Mercier 1900: 149).

The cities of the Western world.

In the concept of European planners, la ville coloniale was to dominate the surrounding indigenous tribal areas. It was not only meant to symbolise Europe’s civilisational supremacy over Islam but also to be a prelude to further colonisation (Bekkouche 2011: 55–56). The colonial city had to stand out in spatial order, which, according to French urbanists and architects, was not known in pre-colonial Maghreb. For this reason, new urban arteries and smaller streets were designed with straight lines and at angles of 90° (Bensmail 2009: 57). One may even acknowledge that the hallmark of the colonial city was the widespread surveillance of its inhabitants by the municipal police. Nevertheless, the provision of a wide range of urban services (water, electricity, sewerage, the leisure industry) increased the social status of the city dwellers (Goerg 2006: 40). For this reason, many North African Muslims (especially Algerian Berbers from the Kabylia region) who had completed French-language schools and colleges were willing to move there. In reality, la ville coloniale was not, paradoxically, the place where the colonial elite lived. These elites were mostly landowners who, although they enjoyed the amenities of urban life (theatres, restaurants, etc.) preferred to live in the provinces. Colonial city dwellers would therefore be a colonial proletariat, which did not bother the ideologists of imperialism in treating them as the avant-garde of the mission civilisatrice.

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El-Djaza’ir al-‘āṣima – Algiers as a city of the Muslim East

The history of Algiers is as complicated as the history of the state of which it is the capital. The beginnings of the town’s location date back to Punic times, as indicated by numerous archaeological finds in the area of today’s port district (Cantineau & Leschi 1941: 268). In Roman times, the city of Icosium existed within the area of contemporary Algiers. Its ruins can be found in the foundations of most of the houses of the old medina quarter. Historians agree that the real founder of the city was Buluggin ibn Ziri, the first ruler of the Zirid Dynasty in Ifriqiy. By the end of the 11th century, the most characteristic Muslim building in Algiers had been constructed – the Great Mosque, also known as Djama ‘al-A’dam in Arabic. The mosque was erected during the reign of other Muslim rulers – the Almoravid – and today it is one of the few preserved examples of the magnificent architecture of this famous dynasty (Chebaiki-Adli & Chabbi-Chemrouk 2015: 117). Nevertheless, the modern history of the city begins with the arrival of the High Port Authority over the African Mediterranean coast. There was also another important event that shaped Muslim Algiers. This event was the mass migration of Moors and Jews from Spanish Andalusia. Both events had a tremendous impact on the city, not only sociological but also urban and architectural (Cresti 2008: 409). It was during the times of Ottoman rule that the first European descriptions of this city appeared. The first European description of Algiers comes from the 16th century, by Ibn az-Wazzan Zayyati, the author better known in Europe under the Christian name of Leo Africanus. Although his work on the geography of North Africa was published in Venice in 1550, the description of the city discussed here dates back to 1515, when the author travelled from Fez to Tunis. The image of the city depicted by Leo Africanus shows that Algiers made a great impression on him. Describing the fortifications of the city, the author pointed out that they were entirely made of stone, like the rest of the city, and it was supposedly built using material from the remains of the Roman ruins of the city of Ust Tamendf near Algiers (Cresti 1982: 2). Leo Africanus’ description of the city is not confined to the walls alone. Equally impressive was the city itself, especially the main mosque, because of its “panoramic position” towards the sea (Cresti 1982: 3).

Despite massive migration from Andalusia and the Berber province during almost three hundred years of Turkish rule, the city of Algiers has not expanded much beyond its administrative boundaries. F. Cresti (2008: 438) notes that Algiers, for most of the Turkish period, developed mainly within the city walls. For this reason, on the eve of the French invasion of Algiers (1830), the city was one of the most populated urban centres in North Africa, with a structure consisting of many narrow and winding streets. In one of the many books translated into French after the capture of Algiers, one can read the following description: “The streets of Algiers are ordinary passages, often so narrow that two horsemen cannot pass without collision. But they are cobbled and generally well maintained” (Shaler 1830: 96). Today, this pre-colonial, Arab-Turkish town is one of the city districts, called Casbah (Qasba in Arabic). The Algiers Casbah was founded on the ruins of ancient Icosium and is today regarded as the heart of the Arab-Muslim town. The old medina quarter reminds one of a triangular-shaped town carved into the hills facing the Mediterranean (Çelik 1997: 12). As Z. Çelik (1997: 13) describes: “the sea forms the base of the triangle; a citadel is at the triangle’s summit. It is defined to the south by Square Port Said and Boulevard Ouirida Meddad, on the west by Boulevard de la Victoire and the Palace of the Dey, on the north by Boulevard Abderezak Hadad, and on the east by Boulevards Ernesto Che Guevara, Anatole France, and Mohamed Rachid, which define the waterfront. The boundary of the town, fixed by fortifications, is developed vertically into a high-density settlement. Its striking urban aesthetics were defined by the interlocking masses of white, geometric houses with roof terraces opening onto the bay”. Casbah, like other parts of the Islamic world, was divided into residential and public zones. In the Ottoman period, the administrative part of the city was situated right behind the harbour, with both government and military buildings and apartments of the Ottoman elites. This part of Casbah was called al-Wataba which literally means “the plains”. In the upper part of the city (called al-Gabul or “the mountain”), away from the hustle and bustle of the harbour, lived other communities residing in Algiers, mostly Arabs, Berbers and Jews (Reymond 1981: 74).

The architecture of old Algiers is extremely diverse, though its former spatial structure has been only partially preserved. The colonial architects and urban planners had a great impact on this situation because they were trying to “civilise” the urban space of the Muslim part of the city. The Casbah posed a great challenge to French planners for a variety of reasons: “high population density, concentration and the form of the built fabric, topography, and sociocultural texture, as well as their own romantic/Orientalist appreciation of its aesthetic values, accompanied by a growing consciousness of historic preservation” (Çelik 1997: 26). While the upper part of the town was left practically untouched, the lower town underwent certain transformations that accentuated the pre-existing division during the colonial period. The paradox is that true degradation of old Algiers took place after 1962, when Algeria became independent (Lesbet 1987: 63). There were numerous reasons for that: the mass migration from the countryside to the capital, the demographic boom of the post-independence years – but also the ineffectiveness of Algerian planners and architects. The most recent history of Casbah is a reflection of the turbulent history of independent Algeria. This district was a symbol of the Arab-Muslim heritage of these lands, whose architecture was distinguished from the new, imperialist European one. During the war of independence (1954–1962), the old medina quarter was the headquarters of the underground independence movement in Algiers (Aussaresses 2006). The degradation of the urban space of old Algiers after 1962, is, in a sense, the result of the “shaking up” of Algerians by their independence. It is not an accident that Casbah, along with other neglected districts of Algiers, became a bastion of radical Islamism in the 1980s, which led to the bloody civil war in the next decade (Fontaine 1992: 158).

In 1982, the Casbah of Algiers appeared on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Inclusion on this list was the result of
meeting two criteria: that it “exhibits an important interchange of human values, the development of the world, the development of architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning, or landscape design” and “is an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture, or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change”. The old medina of Algiers fulfilled the above criteria because “The Casbah of Algiers has exercised considerable influence on architecture and town-planning in North Africa, Andalusia and in sub-Saharan Africa during the 16th and 17th centuries. These exchanges are illustrated in the specific character of its houses and the density of its urban stratification, a model of human settlement where the ancestral lifestyle and Muslim customs have blended with other types of traditions” and “(...) is an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement representing a profoundly Mediterranean Muslim culture, a synthesis of numerous traditions. The vestiges of the citadel, ancient mosques, Ottoman palaces, as well as a traditional urban structure associated with a strong sense of community testify to this culture and are the result of its interaction with the various layers of populations” (UNESCO World Heritage List, n.d.).

In order to understand the specific architecture of old Algiers, it is necessary to reconsider the rules governing the urban planning of an Islamic city. First of all there is a clear distinction between the residential area and the administrative and commercial districts. Secondly, a typical Islamic city functioned according to the rules written in the Quran and Sunnah by the Prophet. According to Islam the space is divided into a public sphere that is accessible to everyone (Sunna) and a private one reserved only for family members and women (harīm in Arabic). Traditionally in Algeria, urban public spaces are male, while the female spaces are essentially domestic ones (Djenidi 2003: 91). This Islamic principle can explain the specifics of the Casbah residential zone. On the street side, a typical Algerian house in old Algiers is not distinguished by anything special. Their appearance resembled the idea of simplicity, ugliness, poverty and poor execution, although paradoxically many of these constructions have survived the numerous earthquakes that regularly haunt the city. The real wealth of the residential architecture of old Algiers is in the interior of the house. The vertical structure of buildings includes columns and brick arches (Abdessemed-Foufa 2011: 5) and various elements used to decorate the houses of the Casbah: wooden balustrades, decorated doors, capitals and ceramic tiles for floors and walls (Abdessemed-Foufa 2011: 8).

Located in the lower part of Casbah, the public part of old Algiers is a combination of several architectural styles: Andalusian, Ottoman and Sub-Saharan. Between 1791–99, the palace of the gardens of the Dey was built, a building representative of precolonial Algiers, which is very interesting because its architecture is inspired by nature (Chebaiki-Adli & Chabbi-Chemrouk 2014: 541–551). Another building that stands out from the background of old Algiers is Dar Aziza, which was the former seat of the Algerian Turkish government. L. Golvin gives the following description of the architecture of this palace: “Its shape is square, with a courtyard in the middle. Each facade is made up of four arcades supported by marble pillars; its eastern facade is adorned with a double gallery. (...) The courtyard is paved with white tiles; it is located above beautiful cellars. The interior of the apartments is very rich. The ceilings are adorned with paintings with gilded frames. The panelling is in Genoa cobblestone; the rest is in marble, and it is provided with copper gratings” (Golvin 1991: 18). An example of the synthesis of various architectural styles of the lower Casbah is the Ketchaoua Mosque. This building was originally erected at the end of the 17th century as a mosque, but in 1832 the colonial authorities converted it into the Catholic Cathedral of St. Philippe. The temple only regained its original character in 1962, when Algeria gained independence from France. The building is an interesting example of the synthesis of the old Algiers architecture with influences of the Byzantine (Golvin 1985: 204). The architecture of the Grand Mosque of Algiers, which had been greatly rebuilt, was altered, but it retained its original shape in the 11th century. The materials used in the architecture of the mosque refer to the stylistic attributes of Islamic architecture, specifically elements used during the Almoravid period. These include: “pointed and polylobed pointed arches; various column arrangements (square section, cruciform or supporting); entrances with marble mouldings and Thuluth calligraphy; wooden doors carved with geometric motifs; facades crowned with red tiles; the use of several types of columns (octagonal, twisted, smooth, Corinthian capitals with round, octagonal or square bases); decorative panels, and both geometric and floral ceramic tiles” (Chebaiki-Adli & Chabbi-Chemrouk 2015: 111).

Alger la Blanche – Algiers as a European city

During the celebrations of the 100th anniversary of the French conquest of Algeria in 1930, French public opinion – both in the “Hexagon” (France) and Algeria – was very divided. The French authorities saw the colonisation of Algeria as a success story in the political, military, economic, and social fields. However, there are also opinions that the French presence in this country was limited to a narrow strip of the Mediterranean coastline, including particularly the city of Algiers (Jordi 1998: 29). Such arguments stemmed from the aftermath of urban and architectural revolutions, which had a major impact on the French Algeria’s capital. The city that used to be an example of a typical urban centre of the Islamic world was transformed into a truly modern European metropolis (Miège, 1985, p. 171). For the French, Algiers became something of an archetype of the colonial city in North Africa. Its modern European architecture, called “Alger la Blanche”, was contrasted with the urban style of the old Casbah district in an attempt to demonstrate the civilisational superiority of the West over Islam.

The process of transforming Algiers into a colonial metropolis can be divided into several stages. The case of Algiers provides the best example for understanding colonial urban practices, which were reproduced, in a variety of forms, in

1 From the word halāl (literally forbidden) comes the well-known western word harem referring to the domestic spaces that are reserved for the women of the house in a Muslim family and are inaccessible to adult males except for close relatives.
other Algerian cities. Within the broader colonial urban history of Algiers, five distinct periods may be identified: military planning (1830–1840), the birth of the European city (1840–1880), extramural expansion and urban growth (1880–1914), transformation between the two world wars and rural immigration (1914–1945) and that of housing shortage and bidonvilles until 1962 (Hadjri & Osmani 2004: 30). In the early years after the capture of the most important cities on the Algerian coast, the French did not interfere with their urban structure. Algiers was treated as a foothold for possible further expansion into the country. If the French made some changes to the city structure, they mainly concerned the expansion of the port and the expansion of some streets in order to improve the conditions for marching the army (the opening of the Place du Gouvernement and the widening of the main arteries, those of Rue Bab el-Oued and Rue Bab Azzoun). It is worth mentioning that the French who arrived in Algiers in 1830 were surprised by the lack of a harbour infrastructure in the city, which was considered a foothold of the Mediterranean corsairs (Lespès, 1921: 196). Paradoxically, this lack of transport infrastructure (both maritime and road) reinforced the original character of the upper part of Casbah. Later, French investments were mainly focused on the sea shore, which allowed the preservation of the traditional Muslim district (Çelik 2008: 60).

The Europeanisation of Algiers would be impossible without two factors: the expropriation of Muslim owners and migration from Europe. First of all, in just 12 years (1830–42) most of the lands surrounding old Algiers went almost entirely into the hands of Europeans (Piaton & Lochard 2017). Second, the first civilian settlers began to arrive in Algeria in the middle of the 19th century. They were not only the French but also Italians, Spaniards, Maltese, Germans and other European nations. This multinational group was later named “black feet” (Pied-Noirs in French) and they formed the framework of the new European identity of French Algeria (Temine 1987: 43–44). It was the Pied-Noirs who were the main group of people in the new European districts of Algiers. Paradoxically, unlike in other French colonial cities, Algiers was not strictly segregated into European and indigenous districts. The exception was the Casbah with an almost completely Algerian population. Other areas have shown a varying structure of population (Çelik 1997: 70). Nevertheless, from the mid-19th century until the mid-20th century most of the city’s inhabitants were Europeans. According to the records, in 1866, there were 63,000 inhabitants, of which 30,000 were of European descent (Sahli 1993: 51). In subsequent years, the dominance of the European population was maintained, as shown by the following data: 1906 – 170,000 (130,000 – Europeans); 1925 – 260,000 (190,000) and 1948 – 480,000 (250,000) (Sahli 1993: 53–54).

In addition to the residential buildings, the new architecture of the city has been designated as utility buildings and numerous plazas and boulevards. An example of 19th-century European architecture in Algiers is the Boulevard de la République, which was based on the Rue de Rivoli in Paris. Fronting the sweep of the Bay of Algiers, this Boulevard (today’s Boulevard Che Guevara) was lined with buildings characterised “by regular façades with arcades at the ground floor and, above, three or four storeys with French windows opening onto continuous balconies” (Hadjri & Osmani 2004: 36). It was on the Boulevard de la République that the colonial Préfecture was located, making the entire artery one of the most elegant streets of the city. Also, in the second half of the 19th century, the most sacred building of the colonial era – Basilica Notre-Dame d’Afrique was completed. The Basilica design was based on Byzantine sacred buildings – evidenced by the domes and numerous ornaments adhering directly to the heritage of the Christian East (Cherif, 2015). The architectural aspect of Algiers was firmly established by the end of the 19th century. In some cases, the topography of the site contributed to the variety and multiplicity of building types. In short, the idea of Algiers as a military centre and a naval port had become completely obsolete and the capital of French Africa developed new functions, mainly that of the commercial emporium (Hadjri & Osmani 2004: 39).

Yet although Algiers was the foremost among France’s colonial cities, it had never been a real laboratory of colonial architectural thought. Its development followed a haphazard pattern; decisions were made on the spot, in accordance with the ambiguous and unsetled policies of the early colonial period (Çelik 1997: 71). It is very likely that it was as a result of this factor that, despite the drastic interference of French urbanists, the city of Algiers retained its oriental character. As S. Graebner rightly notes (2007: 257), people visiting Algiers just before the Great War could think that the Turks had returned to the city and dominated its architecture. The anecdote quoted well describes the specific features of the colonial architecture of Algiers, in which the influences of European urban practice and the aesthetics of Eastern architecture were mixed. The embodiment of this merger was the neo-Moorish architectural style. The Préfecture of Algiers (built 1908–13), designed by J. Voinot and situated on the avenue de l’Impératrice, was one of the most monumental government structures in a neo-Moorish style (Çelik 2008: 175). With its white façades, horseshoe arcades, domes, and blue-tile decorations, the Préfecture stood in stark contrast to the surrounding architecture on this “European” strip and inserted a dominating element in the city’s skyline seen from the sea. Another example of neo-Moorish architecture was the Grand Post Office building (Grande Poste d’Alger in French), built in 1910 to the design of Jules Voinot and Marius Touodoir (Jordi 1998: 32).

The European image of Algiers as a city lying at the crossroads of Western and Eastern culture began to fade towards the end of the colonial era. The mass migration of Muslims to the capital of French Algeria during this period marked the rapid growth of the population of the city. Due to the lack of a sufficient number of dwellings, migrants began to create their own slum settlements, called bidonvilles. This phenomenon has spread mainly around neighbourhoods inhabited by Muslims, but also European districts have been affected by this problem. The slums of Algiers were characterised by overcrowding, poor sanitation and high crime rates. In the 1950s, there were already signs of problems with the integration of new residents in the city, which could result in the spread of this phenomenon throughout the city (Pelletier 1955: 285–286). The outbreak of the Algerian war of independence in 1954 finally suppressed any projects to combat the spread of slums. Algeria’s independence and the mass French exodus from
North Africa only superficially solved the problem of bidonvilles. The old European districts have gained new inhabitants from slums, but the phenomenon itself reemerged again in the 1970s and 1980s, when new slums began to appear next to the old ones (Guetta & Megdiche 1990: 304–306).

Cosmopolitan Algiers – “clash” or “meeting” of civilizations

The architecture and urban planning of modern Algiers fully reflects the history of this extraordinary city. Situated on the southern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, the city is an interesting example of the coexistence of European and Muslim architecture. This specificity places Algiers among other famous Mediterranean cities such as Alexandria or Beirut, which for a long time were European “gateways to the Orient” (Ilbert 1991). Nevertheless, it cannot be forgotten that these “gates” were symbols of European penetration of the Orient and subsequent domination (Bonneau 1998: 139). It must be remembered that the French presence in Algeria was founded with a double conviction: the superiority of the Orient and subsequent domination (Hadjri & Osmani 2004: 55). As a result, after Algeria's independence in 1962, the new authorities sought to eliminate all manifestations of the presence of the French in Algeria. This elimination took place both in the sphere of ideology by overcoming the colonial historical narrative as well as language through the Arabisation policy. Similar actions were taken with respect to the architecture and urban planning of Algiers (Grabar 2014). The symbol of the recovery of urban space by the Algerians in the capital of their country is a monument commemorating the war of 1954–1962. The Martyrs' Memorial, completed in 1982, is 92 metres high. The monument's designer was a Polish architect Marian Konieczny, who is also the designer of the Monument to the Heroes of Warsaw (also known as the "Warsaw Nike").

Despite numerous attempts to eradicate the French heritage from Algeria, the capital of this country has retained its cosmopolitan character. It is very likely that the Algerians were reluctant to make such attempts, as evidenced by their nostalgic attachment to old postcards published in the 1970s (McAllister 2013). Many of them depicting the image of Algiers in the 70s draw a picture of a modern city full of people satisfied with life. Today's Algiers is a shadow of the old city etched on these postcards. The effects of the economic crisis of the 1980s and the bloody civil war of the 1990s affected Algiers as well as the rest of the country. In contemporary troubled times, where every step reminds one of the clash of Western civilization with Islam, the city of Algiers is an interesting example of the coexistence of both cultures. The threat to Algiers is not Westernisation (on the one hand) or fundamentalism (on the other), but the spread of slums, which in the short term can reach the unique neighbourhoods of this remarkable city.

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