

Original scientific article

THE IMPACT OF URBAN REGENERATION ON TRANSFORMING THE IMAGE OF A DECLINING DISTRICT: THE CASE OF THE BARDO DISTRICT IN CONSTANTINE (ALGERIA)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the urban regeneration project of an old, decaying district called Bardo, located in the city center of Constantine, Algeria, examining its impact on the physical transformation of the district and its image, as well as the reactions of the local population. The study focuses on the conversion of a former shantytown into an urban park, the beautification of the riverside area, and the resulting changes in the neighborhood's perception. The research utilizes a qualitative methodology, including interviews with stakeholders and analysis of historical and administrative documents. It finds that while the urban park has significantly enhanced the city's landscape and created a new public space, the project's focus on visual appeal has not fully addressed the underlying social and economic challenges faced by residents. The project's success in attracting tourism and investment comes at the expense of neglecting long-term community needs, raising concerns about the sustainability and equity of development. Ultimately, the study argues that urban regeneration projects must adopt a holistic approach that considers the social and economic needs of local communities, going beyond purely aesthetic transformations to create inclusive and equitable urban environments.

Keywords: urban regeneration - urban wasteland - urban requalification - Bardo - Constantine.

INTRODUCTION

The globalization of large urban projects has driven cities into a competitive landscape (Cusin, Damon, 2010; Oosterlynck, González, 2013; Charnock, Purcell, Ribera-Fumaz, 2014). This competition has led to a heightened emphasis on urban attractiveness and marketing (Appert, Huré, Languillon, 2017; Lotz-Coll, 2021). Furthermore, cities are now acting as laboratories for revitalizing declining, crisis-stricken, or struggling neighborhoods through urban renewal strategies within a context of metropolitanization (Guieysse, Rebour, 2014).

Moreover, these upheavals generally leave their mark on the urban fabric (Lotz-Coll, 2021) and on the values of places already occupied and practiced (Viel et al, 2012, Appert M., Huré M., Languillon R., 2017), including: revitalizing central spaces and boosting tourist appeal (Semple, 2017), enhancing potential (Eckardt, AlSadaty, 2023), changing the appearance and urban landscape (Appert, Montès, 2015), improving the way

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space functions by redistributing activities, social groups and flows (Harris, 2015) to encourage their insertion into the city and contribute to its sustainability.

Like other countries in the Maghreb, Algeria has undergone an overhaul of how it produces urban spaces in the last two decades, following the end of the black decade¹ and the increase in hydrocarbon revenues. This overhaul has seen a shift from “extension urbanism” due to urban sprawl to “a return to the city” (Saidouni, 2001; Sidi Boumedine, 2013) through the multiplication of urban regeneration projects in existing urban fabrics. Indeed, the country’s leaders are seeking to give a positive image of modernity to their major cities and endow them with the attributes of “attractive places” through these projects to join the ranks of metropolises in the image of the development of waterfronts and riverbanks, the reconversion of urban wastelands and the requalification of historic, peripheral and insalubrious housing districts, the enhancement of historical and cultural heritage, the urban landscape and public space (Cattedra, 2010; Azzag, 2012; Kettaf, 2013). This is in line with the “PAT18” Territorial Action Program entitled “Urban Renewal and City Policy” of the SNAT 2030 National Spatial Planning Scheme (MATET, 2008).

However, these large-scale projects generate transformations in the urban space of Algerian cities through the assignment of new spatial distributions (new functions) in neighborhoods, the transformation of existing urban fabrics, the emergence of new centralities and urbanities (new towns), changes in landscapes, the construction of new identities and representations of place through the reconversion of brownfield sites (Cattedra, Legros, Iraki, 2010; Signoles, 2014; Belguidoum et al, 2015). With this in mind, our field of investigation is the city of Constantine, the capital of eastern Algeria. Faced with its dysfunctions and the alarming degradation of its urban landscape, this city in decline (Arab, 2018) has undergone an effervescent spatial transformation of its fragile territory since the 2000s in a process of metropolization. Moreover, its potentialities and weaknesses singularize the very nature of the problems to be addressed by urban planning.

On the other side, the city’s most striking features are i) its city center, which has been emptied of its population and cleared of run-down sites as part of the national policy of resorption of precarious housing, the ultimate and most relentless means to “de-slum” the city; ii) the appearance of the new “Ali Mendjeli” town on its outskirts as an asset to accommodate relocated populations and relieve congestion in the central city; iii) the launch of the “Constantine Metropolis Modernization Project PMMC” in 2007, as a global project overseen by the highest levels of government; iv) the designation of “Constantine, Capital of Arab Culture CCCA for 2015” as the city’s attractiveness and development strategy (Pradel, 2013).

Moreover, this modernization aimed to endow the city of Constantine with the attributes and characteristics of a regional metropolis (PMU, 2011), all the while conferring a brand image on the “new Constantine” (PMMC, 2007). Within this city project, the public authorities sought to reinvest in the declining and marginal parts of the city for regeneration by transforming land use (PMMC, 2007).

In this respect, Bardo², a former working-class 150 ha, enclave in the city center of Constantine, is the subject of our study (Figure 1). The latter was reinvested by local authorities as a major stakeholder in urban planning and development operations in Algeria (Sidi Boumedine, 2013), as part of the modernization of the city of Constantine to turn the existing shantytown into a central district dubbed “viva-cité” (Cherrad et Al, 2007), in a “process of verticalization” (Appert, Huré, Languillon, 2017) in the image of Persian Gulf neighborhoods.

Moreover, the legitimization of “demolition-delocalization” was reinforced by the conjuncture of the completion of the “Trans-Rhumel” viaduct, another pioneering modernization project overlooking the great Bardo. However, this “flagship project” of urban renewal takes the form of a territorial marketing and tourism promotion operation to brand the city and attract investors and multinational companies (Fainstein, 2008; Viel et al, 2012).

¹ It refers to the 90s, a period of decline, insecurity and political and economic instability caused by terrorism

² The district’s population was estimated at 28,141 inhabitants, including 2,825 structures, which comprised 4,854 dwellings and were occupied by 5,706 families, according to the General Population and Housing Census (RGPH) in 2008. Bardo encompasses all areas of precarious, dilapidated and degraded housing, including Rahmani Achour Avenue, the Orange camps, Roumania Avenue, the Bentellis housing estates, Pine Chalet, Bidi Louiza, Peupliers, Muriers and the Roman Arches zone.

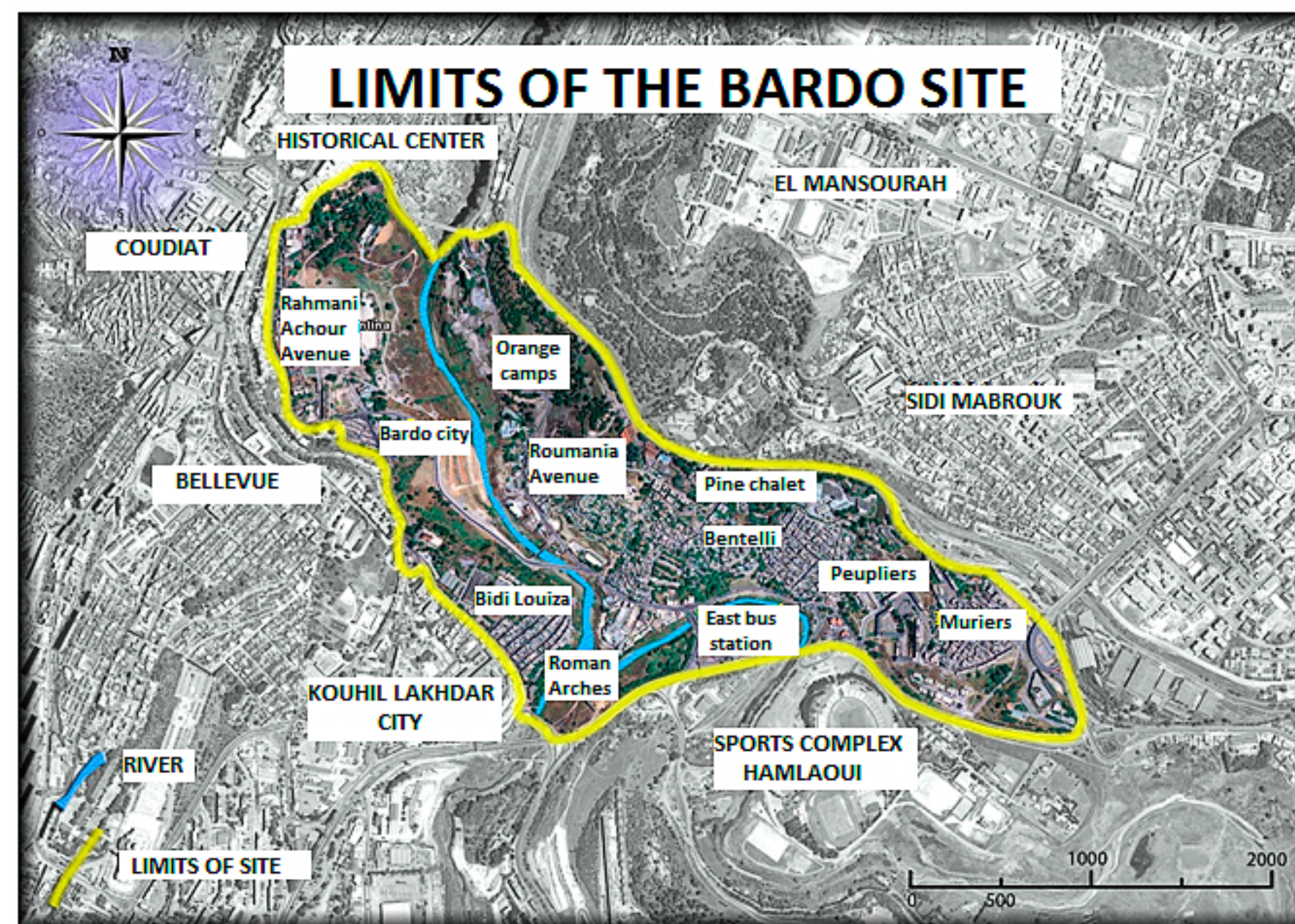


Figure 1. Location and limits of the Bardo district in the city center of Constantine

Source: DUAC of Constantine, 2010 + author's treatment

Nevertheless, this singular experiment with a “structuring effect” on the city led to the physical transformation of urban space through: the absorption of shantytowns on the banks of Oued Rhumel³ and the eradication of the popular district⁴; the relocation of their populations to the new “Ali Mendjeli” town; the conversion of the urban wasteland (65 ha) into an “urban park”; the enhancement of the landscape and historical heritage and the requalification of the riverside area in 2014⁵.

In this respect, this “flagship project” goes beyond the simple production of space (Max Raynaud, 2014) and consists of creating and multiplying “iconic high places” (Guéraiche, 2014) as part of the metropolization process, and arouses significant political interest due to the impacts sought on its insertion environment (Max Raynaud, 2014). With this in mind, the aim of our research is to examine the impact of the urban regeneration of Bardo on the physical transformation of the district and its image, shedding light on the reaction of its local population and day-to-day users.

METHODS AND DATA

To achieve the research objective, our methodology is qualitative, based on a descriptive and analytical study of the urban project in the Bardo district of Constantine. This approach, inspired by Lefebvre (1974), enables a deeper understanding of the urban project by analyzing the historical, spatial and social dimensions of its development, through the triptych: space designed, conceived and experienced.

The first phase of our research consisted of building a solid theoretical framework, based on an in-depth analysis of scientific research related to our research theme. This analysis enabled us to identify the main trends and issues related to urban projects, as well as the investigative methods most relevant to our study.

Press monitoring and content analysis of historical and administrative documents at the Constantine Wilaya Archives Center, the Department of Urban Planning, Architecture and Construction (DUAC), the Environmental Department and the Land Conservation Agency proved crucial in reconstructing the evolution

³ This operation is being carried out as part of the national policy of resorption of precarious housing, launched in the 2000s, the main aim of which is to have cities without shantytowns and reintegrate declining neighborhoods into the city's dynamic.

⁴ The operation was carried out between 2008 and 2010 as part of the PMMC project to modernize the Constantine metropolis, initiated in 2005 with the installation of Abdelmalek Boudiaf as Wali (prefect) of Constantine.

⁵ These latest operations to convert the urban wasteland into an “urban park” (to be completed between 2014 and 2022), enhance the historical and landscape heritage and redevelop the riverside area were carried out as part of the preparations for the international celebration of “Constantine, Capital of Arab Culture 2015”.

of the Bardo urban project. This step enabled us to distinguish the different phases of the project: i) Space designed by decision-makers since 2007 (Viva-cité): this phase corresponds to the project's initial conception, influenced by the visions and policies of local and national decision-makers. ii) Space conceived and realized by specialists since 2014 (urban park): this phase marks the intervention of urban planning and architecture specialists, who implemented the initial plans and shaped the neighborhood's physical space. iii) Space experienced by its users since 2022 (botanical garden): this phase highlights the appropriation of the urban project by Bardo's inhabitants and its impact on their lifestyles and perceptions of space.

In addition, observation in situ and taking photographs were essential to complete our analysis. Using the landscape reading method (Relph, 1976), we were able to observe the transformations of Bardo's urban environment and landscape by comparing photos taken before the neighborhood was eradicated with those taken recently during the field survey. This approach enabled us to understand the interactions between the physical elements and the socio-cultural dimensions of the urban project.

In order to obtain in-depth information on the interventions (planned and carried out) in the Bardo urban project, semi-directive interviews (Kvale, 2007) were conducted between February 2021 and May 2024, with representatives of the administrative bodies involved in the Bardo urban project, namely: the Directorate of Urban Planning, Architecture and Construction (DUAC); the Directorate of the Environment; the Land Conservation Agency. These interviews, based on a qualitative approach, aimed to understand the perceptions and motivations of the institutional players involved in the urban project. Further semi-directive interviews were conducted with the urban park management company (EDEVCO) and the investor in the project (MEGA), as well as with the local population. These exchanges explored the concrete realities of operating the project, highlighting the challenges and opportunities encountered (Yin, 2014).

■ RESULTS

Each urban regeneration project is committed to generating unique value, based on local conditions, the collaboration of distinct actors and the creation of context-specific effects. With this in mind, the results of our empirical work can be summed up in significant transformations of the neighborhood's physical space and its image, namely: the conversion of the urban wasteland into an urban park, the enhancement of an urban landscape rich in potential, and the urban requalification of the riverside area.

Enhancing the urban landscape by converting brownfield land into an urban park

Urban wastelands are “veritable cancers in the landscape” (Forbras, 2001), leading to the decline and degradation of neighborhoods. In this respect, their reclamation is an opportunity to reclaim land in the city to densify it (Delachaux, 2010), to materialize the urban environment and its organization (Banzo, 2015) and to reappropriate space for its inhabitants (Lotz-Coll, 2021). Bardo's urban regeneration, on the other hand, has been achieved by reconvertng the urban wasteland (65 ha) created after the eradication of precarious dwellings, which their occupants called “Arab houses” of vernacular architecture, into an urban park. This redevelopment has changed the site's appearance, giving it a new vocation, and transforming it from a working-class housing district into an amusement and leisure park in the heart of the city.

Consequently, this reintegration of the evacuated site into the existing urban fabric, which has been relieved of its stigmatized negative appearance, is an opportunity to recompose and energize the city center (Julien, Theyes, 2011), creating a symbolic space with an “outreach effect” and which contributes to the tourist appeal of the regional capital, while ensuring a viable and livable urban framework for the local population and everyday users.

From an external perspective, the Bardo urban park contributes to the creation of a naturalized space (plant and mineral) and the promotion of nature in the city (the forest and the river) through the purifying blue and green colors. As with any green lung in the city, this park gives a positive image to the future metropolis, thanks to its ecological aspect, which reduces air pollution, softens temperatures and provides visual and olfactory comfort.

Indeed, this urban transformation is illustrated in Figures 2 and 3, by comparing the photographs taken before the eradication of the district by the Wilaya of Constantine and the land conservation agency, which show the disastrous situation of the working-class district and the blighted appearance of the city center, with those of the current state of the site taken by the author, which in turn illustrate the change in the physiognomy of the site.



Figure 2. General views of Bardo before its eviction
Source: Constantine province, 2007

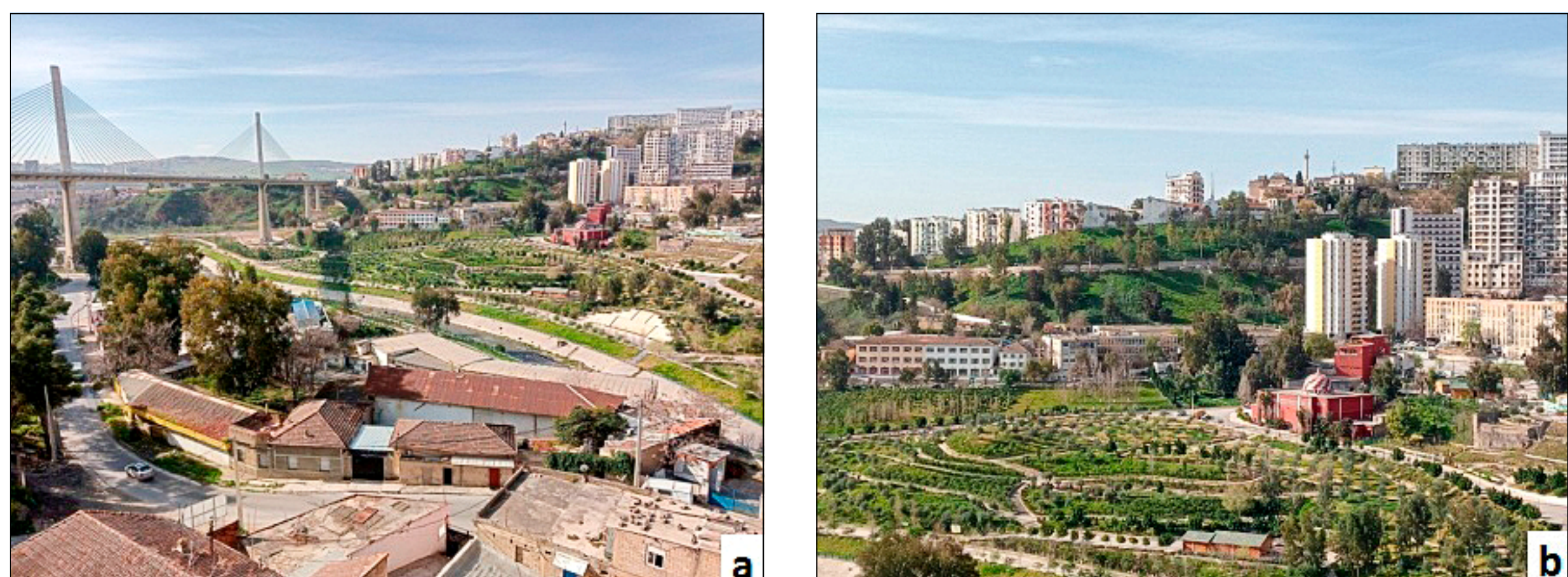


Figure 3. General views of Bardo after its conversion into an urban park
Source: Author, March 2023

The urban park incorporates two preserved buildings: the former “Métatla Taher” school, now an educational agricultural center, and the “Imam Malek Ibn Anes” mosque, which has been restored to maintain its religious vocation (Figure 4).

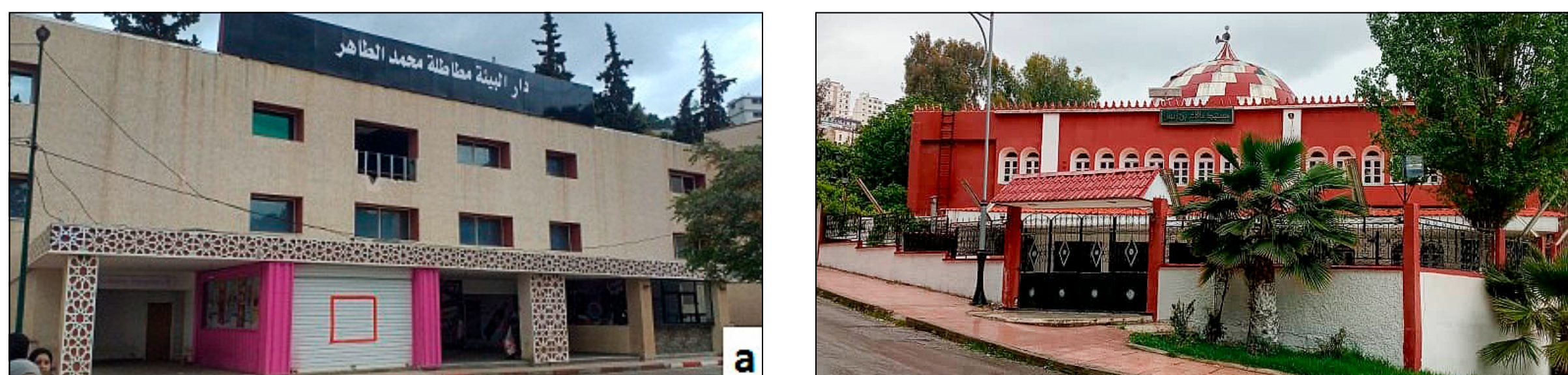


Figure 4. Buildings reinvested in the urban park
Source: Author, April 2024

In addition, the site has been revitalized through the redistribution of investments (Appert, Huré, Languillon, 2017) at its level, reinforcing its educational and didactic vocation through attraction activities as a lever for economic profitability (Pradel, 2013) through the multi-purpose concentration of consumer services and play and rest areas. This action offers an opportunity for job creation (Table 1), a major objective of urban revitalization projects, as it contributes to reducing unemployment and improving people’s living conditions (Getz, 2008; Beatley, 2014).

Table 1. Jobs created in the urban park

FUNCTION	NUMBER OF EMPLOYERS
Security guards	62
Multi-skilled workers	14
Gardeners	02
Maintenance workers	06
Mechanics	01
Maintenance technicians	03
Cashiers	06
Shopkeepers	20
Games operators	35
Administrative staff (EDEVCO, MEGA)	06
Total number	155

Source: Author, based on field survey, May 2024

Nevertheless, it’s important to note that the recruitment of security guards and game operators has given priority to local residents, both housed and local. This recruitment strategy, based on the concept of “user-experts of the site” (Noyer J., Raoul, 2008), aims to involve local residents in the management of the park and encourage local ownership of the project, plus the social and professional integration of the latter and the reduction of feelings of marginalization and exclusion. This approach, confirmed by the park manager “MEGA LAND” (interview conducted on 14-05-2024), promoted social inclusion and citizen participation and is in line with the principles of sustainable development and social justice (Pradel, 2013; Beatley, 2014).

However, the development of an urban park in Bardo, over and above the embellishment of the physical space, has triggered a profound transformation of the neighborhood’s negative image, impacting residents’ pride and its external perception, making it more attractive in the eyes of residents, visitors and even (Kallus, 2009). This change in visibility is reported in the media and national press by several expressions as a kind of marketing operation (Kallus, 2009) to give the neighborhood a positive image:

- “A large central park in the Bardo district of Constantine”
(Emergent Maghreb, 15-11-2012)
- “Bardo City Park fills up with visitors”
(Oran Daily Newspaper, 25-03-2019)
- “Bardo urban park: a major project turned into a fiasco”
(East of Algeria, 6-09-2020)

The embellishment of the riverside area without any real urban redevelopment

Requalification is an action that covers the transformation, mutation, restructuring and rebirth of part of the housing stock that is often destined for destruction in urban projects (Perrocheau, 2012). With this in mind, the Bardo riverside area was subject to urban requalification operations following the resorption of Bardo's insalubrious housing (65 ha).

Firstly, Avenue Rahmani Achour, known as “Triik Bardo” (formerly Rue d'Angleterre), is characterized by its dilapidated colonial fabric and high-rise apartment buildings dating from the post-independence era. This first zone has seen no urban improvement, despite suffering from several dysfunctions: anarchic and spontaneous urbanization, deterioration of the built environment, rural-urban behavior, informal trade and, above all, the phenomenon of “ghettoization” (Berry-Chikhaoui, 2009). However, the neglect of these triggers for urban requalification operations (Wachter, Emelianoff, 2009) has led to a series of protests by local residents demanding that they be rehoused in view of the deterioration in their living conditions and environment (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Condition of Avenue Rahmani Achour

Source: Author, May 2024

To deal with this chaotic situation, the former director of Constantine's land agency confirmed that: “the dwellings on this Avenue were intended to become a physical barrier between the city and the urban wasteland that had been created, generating a masking effect to prevent the proliferation of the informal sector in the city” (Interview conducted on 25-01-2022). In this vision, this avenue (Figure 6) minimized the sense of insecurity (Lynch, 1960) caused by the “emptiness” and lack of purpose of the urban wasteland formed after the neighborhood's demolition. However, this visual barrier also reduced the negative image of the wasteland as a disturbing and marginal urban element (Soulier, 2004) and a degraded urban landscape (Merlin, Choay, 2010).

On the other hand, the other housing estates on the banks of the Grand Bardo (Figure 7) constitute a sector in difficulty, made up of squatter settlements (Bentellis, Chalet des pins, arcades romaines and Bidi Louiza) and degraded housing estates (cité des peupliers and des muriers). The area also boasts a number of elementary schools, mosques and basic shops. With this in mind, the reinvestment project for this troubled area aims to enhance the existing urban fabric by minimizing demolition and giving it new qualities, as an act of “political and economic reappropriation” (Gasnier, 2004).

However, this urban intervention is a work of embellishment of the “image of the city” (Lynch, 1960; Wachter, Emelianoff, 2009) through the rehabilitation of dwellings and the painting of facades in White and openings in Blue or Green to give this sector the appearance of a material heritage in the city, in the image



Figure 6. Rahmani Achour Avenue as a physical barrier between the city and the urban wasteland

Source: Author, March 2023



Figure 7. The riparian zone before its redevelopment

Source: Constantine Land Conservation Agency, 2007

of the traditional medina (Figure 8). In addition, this “requalification of the physical” (Wachter, Emelianoff, 2009) was reinforced by the installation of the international Marriott luxury hotel. To this end, a member of the Bentellis neighborhood committee reported the discontent of local residents who consider this rehabilitation operation as “a makeover” that has not been implemented to improve their living environment, but just to beautify the appearance of the housing estates and not offend the sensibilities of prestigious guests (Extract from an interview conducted on 06-04-2021), without redeveloping the various roadways and installing the various technical networks (electricity, telecommunications, water, heating, sanitation) and producing the public spaces relevant to the community (Citron, 2017).



Figure 8. The waterfront area after redevelopment

Source: Author, June 2024

Although the requalification of the disadvantaged Bardo riverside area has brought visual improvements to the appearance of the sector by whitewashing facades and eradicating the former Med Boudiaf shantytown in Chalet des pins, it has fallen far short of meeting the objectives of the said intervention. These include, according to SNAT 2030, “the rehabilitation of housing in large estates and the elimination of substandard housing, the upgrading of basic facilities and services (connection to the AEP and sewerage networks, education, health, sports, culture, etc.), the allocation of abandoned buildings and the construction of new ones, the allocation of abandoned buildings with a view to reintegrating them into the urban fabric, the structuring of the urban fabric, urban integration, the development of public spaces (roads and green spaces) and the reclamation of the urban wasteland” (MATET, 2008).

In this respect, the operation carried out in the area around the Bardo district has been reduced to a simple “renovation of buildings”, without a genuine requalification of the existing fabric or enhancement of the district’s urban space. Figures 9 and 10 highlight the persistence of degradation in this area, particularly: degradation of public space and illegal appropriation, maintenance of traditional activities and informal practices (commerce), dominance of urban wasteland, degradation of biodiversity and environmental pollution, persistence of a stigmatized image due to unfinished constructions and the partial renovation of the urban facade, limited to the dwellings facing the Marriott hotel, undervaluation of historical (roman arches) and landscape heritage.



Figure 9. Degradation of public space, illegal appropriation and informal practices
Source; Author, June 2024



a



b



c



d



e



f

Figure 10. Partial renovation, degradation of the environment, enhancement of the historical and natural heritage

Source; Author, June 2024

CONCLUSIONS

The urban regeneration project in Bardo, Constantine, exemplifies the complexities of large-scale urban development in a globalized world. While aiming to transform a neglected urban wasteland into a vibrant, modern space, the project reflects the tensions between urban planning ideals and the realities of social and economic inequality.

The conversion of the former shantytown into an urban park represents a significant achievement, enhancing the city's landscape and creating a new public space for leisure and recreation. This transformation has also improved the neighborhood's image, contributing to the city's attractiveness and potentially boosting tourism. Furthermore, the project has created job opportunities, particularly for local residents, emphasizing social inclusion and participation.

However, the lack of significant urban redevelopment along the riverside highlights the project's limitations. While the physical beautification has improved the area's aesthetics, it has failed to address the underlying social and economic challenges faced by local residents. The absence of crucial infrastructure improvements and the limited impact on residents' daily lives highlight the project's focus on urban marketing and visual appeal over long-term community development.

This study highlights the critical need for a holistic approach to urban regeneration. While focusing on physical transformation is essential, it is equally crucial to consider the social and economic needs of local communities and to ensure that urban projects contribute to sustainable and equitable urban development. Further research should examine the long-term impacts of this project on local residents, including their experiences with displacement, economic opportunities, and access to services. This analysis will provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of urban regeneration initiatives and their potential to contribute to social justice and sustainable urban development.

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