The Land of Opportunity

أرض الفرص

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The Medina: The Land of Opportunity!

My first encounter with a Medina was when I was around twelve years old. When my father took me there along with two of my classmates because we had to conduct research on Tunisian heritage as part of our school work. Like many of those experiencing the Medina for the first time, I was immediately blown away by its striking beauty and unique atmosphere: the intricate architectural details, the labyrinth-like streets, the appealing courtyards, the colorful rooftops of the lively ambient sounds, the colorful handicraft... it was simply magical.

But the magic didn’t last long...

My father being who he is, has decided to end our trip by letting us inside a oukela, one of the hundreds of traditional houses that were converted into boarding houses where migrants from other rural regions of Tunisia ended up settling in after they came to the capital to seek new economic opportunities. And a sense of familiarity and love for their families. As I entered the oukela, I was shocked by the contrast with the outside. The states of the building was crumbling and the living conditions were horrifying. Families crammed up in tiny spaces, unhygienic, dark, a far cry from the dream that these men, women and children came to pursue.

Fast forward...

A couple of decades later, I visited the Medina with my two sons (both under twelve at the time) and I loved experiencing the Medina through their eyes. They were navigating its curvy streets on their push scooters, they too were stricken by the magic of the place and the ingenuity of the craftsmen and women that they have encountered along the way. That day, I decided to end our visit by letting them inside Dar Ben Gacem, one of a very few boutique hotels in the Medina set in a renovated traditional house. A labor of love of my friend Leila Ben Gacem who came from Abu Dhabi to the Medina to seek a more meaningful economic opportunity and a better quality of life for her family. As I entered the oukela, I was shocked by the contrast with the outside. The states of the building was crumbling and the living conditions were horrifying. Families crammed up in tiny spaces, unhygienic, dark, a far cry from the dream that these men, women and children came to pursue.

What fascinated me the most was how much life there is in the Medina, set in different times, came to mind and with our outsider perspective of a city lover, urban innovator, entrepreneurship ecosystem builder and mother of two digital natives I wondered about what would be kind of exploration that I would wish my future grandson or daughter to experience two decades from now?

For start, I wish for them to experience the same intact “magic” that I and millions of others have once experienced when they first set foot in this unique World Heritage site.

But the magic didn’t last long...

So when I was asked to share “my vision” for the Medina as part of this edition of Journal de la Medina, these two parallel first encounters with the Medina, set in different times, came to mind and with my outsider perspective of a city lover, urban innovator, entrepreneurship ecosystem builder and mother of two digital natives I wondered about what would be kind of exploration that I would wish my future grandson or daughter to experience two decades from now?

For start, I wish for them to experience the same intact “magic” that I and millions of others have once experienced when they first set foot in this unique World Heritage site.

I wish for them to learn that once many residents and workers struggled to live and work in decent conditions and that this no longer the case, most likely thanks to initiatives and projects that came out of the Medina Lab, a unique co-creation space dedicated to exploring problems faced by citizens and to design solutions to address them.

I wish for them to meet and to be inspired by hundreds if not thousands of people from all walks of life and social, cultural and economic backgrounds who now call the Medina as their home and who are building creative, modern and responsible businesses that contribute to preserving heritage and creating value for citizens in the Medina and beyond. Maker spaces, shared kitchens, courtyard pools, game design workshops gave me the opportunity of getting to know the Medina better and engaging with many highly motivated people who are actively contributing to its live and conservation.

I wish they would see more greenery and food growing, in pocket parks, along the streets, on windows and balconies, in courtyards, and on rooftops.

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Through these encounters, the recent history of this World Heritage Site began to unfold in front of me as we explored its relevance and dynamics. The magic of the old town was also painted through their words as they highlighted the many aspects that residents and locals value and come looking for.

In June this year, in a collaboration between my university, the University College London, and Blue Fish consultancy led by Leila Ben Gacem, we organised a series of workshops to bring together individuals and collectives connected to the Medina of Tunis with the aim of discussing the values, aspirations and needs of this historic city.

These workshops gave me the opportunity of getting to know the Medina better and engaging with many highly motivated people who are actively contributing to its live and conservation. I had the joy of meeting a large group of young professionals and students who are leading beautiful initiatives to brighten the live of the narrow streets and hidden squares. I also had the honour of meeting some of the most renowned architects and heritage professionals in Tunis, engaged in the conservation of the Medina for decades.

We hope you find your own emotions represented in the contents of these pages.

Dr Alejandra Albuema
Institute for Sustainable Heritage, University College London

UCL Jerida Intro
The Medina: the Land of Opportunity!

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For start, I wish for them to experience the same exact “magic” that I did and millions of others have once experienced when they first sat foot in this unique World Heritage site.

I wish also for them to find it convenient to reach the Medina from other parts of the city as they navigate its streets more with ease thanks to the availability of a number of low- and carbon-free transport options.

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I wish for them to leave so inspired that they would want to return because they too will be convinced that the Medina is indeed a land of opportunity.
WELL-BEING IN THE MEDINA: “HOW TO IMPLEMENT THE URBAN QUALITY CHARTER IN THE MEDINA OF TUNIS?”

The Medina of Tunis has chosen, ever since it became part of humanity’s patrimony, culture and all that is societal as its local identity. Its future depends on the implementation of an urban quality charter as a common planning tool for shared quality.

This will be a joint participatory project between the city of Tunis, Medina inhabitants, and professionals in the fields of trades and crafts. All of those involved together will commit to achieve the objectives of preserving an exceptional heritage setting and to guarantee conditions favorable of commercial and tourist appeal.

Thanks to aesthetic appeal, the souks, the tourist attractions, and the urban paths, façades will reflect an undeniable heritage and a living environment appreciated by all.

In fact, building restoration, façade enhancement, public space layout, terraces, and the creation of paths, all express the personality of a street, a neighborhood and the Medina itself. They also reflect the quality of services and products available to customers and encourage sharing and harmony.

In this context, the planning of public space takes everyone’s interest in consideration, regardless of its use, it makes sense to take into account all possible uses even if they are temporary.

Thus, planning the public space is to above all set it on a path of sustainability and durability in order to stand the test of time. It should also improve the living environment and provide the best conditions for “well being in the Medina”, guaranteeing balanced partitioning of public space for all. In fact, when the inhabitants, the tradesmen, and the craftsmen assume ownership of urban requalification projects, and take part in the various projects of development and restoration, they actively participate in a common and shared approach with the local authority to help preserve and promote both its identity, that of its inhabitants, its trade and finally its local trade.

To conclude, the urban quality charter could be one of the common planning tools for shared quality. Its objectives would be the following:

1. **Conserving and promoting the heritage of the Medina of Tunis, as it’s the reason behind its attractiveness, all the while maintaining the authenticity of its architecture and its historic character.**

2. **Strengthening commercial and tourist appeal by harmonizing the façades of restored buildings, while also integrating new touristic facilities with the distinctiveness of the old center.**

3. **Ensuring joint and profitable management involving all users of the public sphere through mutual respect of property quality, signage, and terraces.**

Amel Meddeb Ben Ghorbel
Executive Director of the Association de Sauvegarde de la Médina (Association for the Conservation of the Medina)

3 / Ensuring joint and profitable management involving all users of the public sphere through mutual respect of property quality, signage, and terraces.

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La Médina de Tunis a fait le choix, depuis son inscription sur la liste du patrimoine de l’humanité, de la culture et du social comme marque de son identité locale. Son avenir est tributaire de la mise en œuvre d’une charte de qualité urbaine comme outil commun d’aménagement pour une qualité partagé.

Cela va constituer un projet commun participatif entre la ville de Tunis, les habitants de la Médina, et les professionnels du commerce et de l’artisanat. Tous les intervenants vont s’engager ensemble à répondre à des objectifs de préservation d’un cadre patrimonial exceptionnel et à garantir les bonnes conditions d’une attractivité commerciale et touristique accrues.

Par la qualité esthétique, les souks, les espaces touristiques et les façades des parcours urbains seront le reflet d’un patrimoine indéniable et d’un cadre de vie appréciés par tous, en effet, la restauration des bâtiments, l’embellissement des façades, la création de parcours, l’agencement de l’espace public, des terrasses, expriment la personnalité d’une rue, d’un quartier et de la Médina elle même. Ils renvoient également à la qualité des services et des produits proposés aux clients et invitent au partage et à la convivialité.

Dans ce cadre, l’aménagement de l’espace public s’adresse à tous, quelle que sa son utilisation, il n’a de sens qu’en prenant en compte l’ensemble des usages possibles même lorsqu’ils sont temporaires.

« la charte de qualité urbaine pourra être l’un des outils communs d’aménagement pour une qualité partagé. »

Ainsi, aménager l’espace public c’est avant tout s’inscrire dans la durée, la pérennité et la durabilité, c’est améliorer le cadre de vie pour créer les meilleures conditions d’un “ bien vivre en Médina”, garantissant un partage équilibré de l’espace public pour tous, en effet, pour les habitants, les commerçants et les artisans s’approprier les projets de requalification urbaines, participer aux différents projets d’aménagement et de restauration c’est s’inscrire activement dans une démarche commune et partagé avec l’autorité locale afin de contribuer à préserver et valoriser à la fois son identité, celle de ses habitants, de ses artisans et enfin de son commerce local.

Pour conclure, la charte de qualité urbaine pourra être l’un des outils communs d’aménagement pour une qualité partagé. Ses objectifs recherchés se résument comme suit:

1. **Conservant et valoriser le patrimoine de la Médina de Tunis, sera à l’origine de son attractivité, en respectant l’authenticité de son architecture et son historicité.**

2. **Renforcement de l’attractivité commerciale et touristique par l’harmonisation de la qualité des façades des bâtiments restaurés, en intégrant également les nouvelles structures touristique à la spécificité du centre ancien.**

3. **Assurer une gestion concertée et profitable à tous, des usagers du domaine public à travers le respect de chacun d’entre eux de la qualité du mobilier, de la signalisation et des terrasses aménagées.**

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the traditional newly painted doors, the white walls, and the Bougainvillier that it perfectly fits all the criteria, but its charm goes way beyond this.

This spot might seem like the most obvious choice, considering we have just crashed a wedding… Even during the Ramadans, strolling through Driba alley can be like entering a secrets and treasures. You find yourself being drawn away to the middle of the traditional Arabian house, you find a high step probably added later on, but rare to find anywhere else in the Medina. You encounter a small square with wooden pickets, and in the shade of the trees, you find yourself going down a hill, you find yourself being drawn away to the Medina. So much so, that one would always find someone striking a pose in front of a newly painted door, a Bougainvillier plant, or a white wall.

Driba alley takes me back to when I first started familiarizing myself with the Medina, the time when I was a student at Sadiki school. When we would have a spare hour between classes, we would go out and discover this new world that seemed so foreign to us. Driba alley starts in an ordinary way, then all of a sudden you find yourself going down a hill, you find yourself being drawn away to the Medina. You encounter a small square with wooden pickets, probably added later on, but rare to find anywhere else in the Medina. And while you’re still admiring the square that resembles the middle of the traditional Arabian house, you find a high step that takes you down. Down there, the alley starts off dead until you end up at a small square with beautifully decorated wooden chairs, and sometimes you see a traditional rug or two. All of which makes it feel like you’ve just entered a home and you’re waiting for the owner to come greet you. It’s on those hot humid summer days that you appreciate the feeling more, when you enter Driba alley and immediately feel the coolness of being under a porch’s awning.

These little things become clearer and clearer, and you start to feel more and more during Ramadan, when that alley turns into a café, where loved ones get together, coming from each and every tribe of Grand Tunis, and its neighboring areas too. Each and every corner becomes full of colors, and sometimes even steal a few meters from the neighboring alley. Days go by and Ramadan ends… If you’re not really familiar with the Medina and you take a stroll through Driba alley during Ramadan you might think you have just crashed a wedding…

This spot might seem like the most obvious choice, considering how perfectly it fits all the criteria. The Medina of my dreams seems to stop mesmerizing the passing souls. While researching the Tunisian chéchia, as it goes without saying that it has managed to spread across the globe from east to west, I could not help but notice the vigor of the strategies put in place to keep this craft persistent. For at least two centuries, as far back as ethnographic texts tell us, there has been mention of the “death of the chéchia” or “decadence” and of “slow extinction.” Nevertheless, in 2019, the chéchia is still being made, with its renewed life in its own designated market: Sooch Chaouachi. In fact, the secret lies partly in how it constantly adapts to economic constraints, to mark the openings and closings in accordance with buyers’ desire, all while maintaining the aspects of its identity, borderline political.

In twenty years, same as one, two, three centuries ago, the chéchia will be made and sold in its soul, paved with unbleached marble, laid in 2019, adorned with its woodwork which is covered in infinite layers of paint, carrying part of the chaouachis’ world who now share their space with cafes. Seemingly frozen in ancient times, the chéchia knows how to adapt, to reinvent itself, and to innovate thanks to the chaouachis, who have been eternizing it. In this sense, the chéchia illustrates the tide of history, a past, a present, a mystical; a present in which it lives and to which it adapts; and a future, anticipated, dreamed of to whose ciphers correspond some characteristics, meanings, uses, and a destiny.

Thus, following the specialization of “intra-medinal” commercial spaces by trade, we can observe the entanglement of trades and occupations, between crafts, arts, sales, sustenance, housing. Hence, you can buy your chéchia then cook it later on over a fire, roasting it up with a mint tea, thanks to whom a millennium-old know-how lives on as it is transposed to the image of the souk, specifically found in the Zitouna street: the chéchia thus becomes an image of the medina: cats, meet, exchange, and learn from each other. The Medina incarne donc de tous les temps la ville créative et créatrice, mais également en quelque sorte la “souk” maghémienne, où tous nous sommes frères et sœurs, et où cette union citadine naissait les grands esprits. C’est bien pour cela que la médina est un patrimoine collectif, un espace qui représente chacun, fruit d’échanges personnels et collectifs, aboutissant à des façons d’y vivre et d’y être. Et c’est ce collectif qui détermine l’avenir de la médina de Tunis.

Drissa Boum Milkhi
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La Medina de Tunis est un coffret aux trésors que rien ne t'empêche de transformer, belle et vaillante face au temps, elle n'en fait pas d'embarras aux âmes de paix. Effectuant une recherche sur la chéchia tunisienne, car il va sans dire qu'elle a de nombreuses sœurs le levant du couloir, je ne peux que constater la vigueur des stratégies mises à l'œuvre afin que cet artisanat perdure. Depuis deux siècles au moins, et de millénaires d'enracinement nous parient, on parle de "mort de la chéchia", de "décadence" et d'"extinction", pourtant, en 2019 en Tunisie, un fabuleux trésor, la chéchia, qui trouve son écrin dans le souk chaouachi dédié. En réalité, le secret réside en partie dans l'adaptation constante aux contraintes économiques, aux marchés qui s'ouvrent et se ferment, aux désirs des acheteurs, au présent temps en toute poésie, et dans la dimension éminemment identitaire, voire politique, que la chéchia porte en son sein.

Drissa, une des nombreuses entrées adornant la Medina que vous pourrez visiter, et faire la rencontre de ces trésors qui l'habillent de sa robe blanche et de son parfum d'orient. Nous avons choisi de nous concentrer sur Driba alley, qui se trouve à environ vingt mètres de la Grande Mosquée de Tunis, et qui est l'une des entrées les plus emblématiques de la Medina, se transmet aux jeunes générations, valorisant ainsi ce patrimoine et son identité.
Le concept du patrimoine n’est pas nécessairement une notion allant de soi, ni intériorisée par les populations résidant dans les centres historiques, surtout quand celles-ci, à l’image de Tunis (dont le centre ancien a été classé sur la liste du Patrimoine Mondial en 1979) appartiennent à la sphère des pays en développement.

Les stratégies de sauvegarde des centres anciens dans les villes du Sud ont imposé la nécessité de préserver les monuments, les tessus anciens mais également les structures sociales qui leur sont attachées. L’architecture vernaculaire étant perçue comme patrimoine ainsi que l’attention de plus en plus marquée pour le patrimoine immatériel, sont des orientations récentes qui visent à donner une importance renouvelée aux fonctions résidentielles, aux cadres de vie, aux pratiques quotidiennes, loin de l’image scénarisée de la ville musée. Il est dans ce contexte de préserver « l’esprit des lieux », que le maintien des populations résidantes et pauvres est alors devenu un enjeu essentiel (bien au-delà des objectifs des politiques de reconquête des centres anciens des villes du Sud. La réhabilitation d’édifices patrimoniaux avec le maintien des populations pauvres est un pari difficile qui nécessite une forte implication financière de la part des pouvoirs publics. Elle a également lancé une mouvance internationale prônant la démarche participative et l’implication des habitants aux prises de décisions.

Afin de préserver les fonctions résidentielles de la ville historique pour ne pas en faire uniquement une ville patrimoniale et touristique, des politiques incitatives stimulent un retour spontané des populations aisées dans les quartiers encore populaires. L’articulation entre ces deux politiques est-elle possible ? Elle aboutirait à un idéal de mixité sociale qui apparaîtrait comme bien utopique aux échelles du niveau international et dans les politiques locales des diversités.

« Depuis les années quatre-vingt, la réflexion s’est portée sur une approche culturelle, en parallèle des opérations de restauration et de restructuration urbaine ; c’est ainsi qu’il y a eu création du Festival de la Médina et la mise en place d’un circuit touristique comme moyens de montrer que la médina est aussi un lieu de culture et de loisir. »

Une nouvelle fonction : des maisons d’hôtes, des restaurants, des ateliers d’artistes et galeries d’art se multiplient. Par ailleurs la médina est de plus en plus investie par des classes sociales plus aisées qui achètent des maisons soit pour y habiter soit pour monter des projets de restaurants, de maisons d’hôtes, des hôtels, des bistro. Il y a fût une émergence de poches de richesse dans le centre ancien ?

De même que des événements culturels, initiés par des jeunes de la société civile, qui établissent de nouvelles initiatives comme l’association L’Art rue ; Collectif Créatif : Journal de la Médina ; Doulesha ; Interference ; El Houna Khir... etc.

Il est à noter que depuis les années quatre-vingt, la réflexion s’est portée sur une approche culturelle, en parallèle des opérations de restauration et de restructuration urbaine ; c’est ainsi qu’il y a eu création du Festival de la Médina et la mise en place d’un circuit touristique comme moyens de montrer que la médina est aussi un lieu de culture et de loisir. Son impact le plus important se manifeste sur l’espace de la médina ; il draine un public important de tous les âges et de toutes les catégories sociales.

Toutes ces initiatives ont eu un impact important sur la Médina, tant sur les plans architectural, social et économique que sur le plan patrimonial. Ainsi des visiteurs redécouvrent ce quartier de la ville ; ce qui génère de bonnes affaires sur le commerce. Le Café Al-Anba (la vigne), dans la rue Souk-Erbaâ est devenu le passage obligé des jeunes, tout comme, la pâtisserie de la rue Sidi Ben Arous (glace et Jawajem) ou celle de la rue du Riche et de la rue du Pacha (tartes aux fruits). Depuis une décennie voire deux, les prix de l’immobilier grimpent si bien que la médina a commencé à prendre un nouveau visage. Et si la médina est aussi un lieu de culture et de loisir.

La médina (Bâa) devient-elle tendance ?

Will the medina (Re) become trendy?

The concept of heritage is not necessarily a self-evident notion, nor internalized by the populations living in historical centers, especially when they, like Tunis (whose old center was listed as World Heritage in 1979) belong to the sphere of developing countries.

The safeguarding strategies of the old centers in the southern cities have embodied the need to preserve the monuments, the ancient fabrics, but also the social structures attached to them. The vernacular architecture, perceived as heritage, and the growing attention for intangible heritage, are recent guidelines aiming to give more importance to residential usage, living environments, and daily practices, far from the ossified appearance of the city as a museum.

In an effort to preserve the “spirit of the place”, the maintenance of the resident and poor populations has become an essential issue (at least at a rhetoric level) for the restoration policies of the old centers of the cities of the South. The rehabilitation of heritage buildings while supporting the poor is a difficult challenge that requires a strong financial implication on the part of the public authorities. It is also part of an international movement advocating a participatory approach and the involvement of residents in decision-making.

In order to preserve the residential usage of the historic city and prevent it from becoming a mere heritage and tourist city, incentive policies would stimulate the spontaneous return of wealthy populations to the still-popular neighborhoods.

Is the linkage between these two policies possible? It would lead to an ideal of social diversity that would appear utopian in regards to current developments in heritage cities. Does it not risk stimulating spontaneous gentrification?

« Since the eighties, reflection has shifted towards a cultural approach in parallel with restoration and urban restructuring operations; This is how the Medina Festival came to light and a tourist circuit was set up as a means of showing that the medina is also a place of culture and leisure. »

The need to maintain resident populations in heritage buildings has become an issue and a reality both at the international level and in the local city politics. In Tunis, this experiment is already old, it started with the preservation projects of the Medina launched since the seventies.

Since its creation in 1967, the Safeguarding Association of the Medina of Tunis has been overseeing the rehabilitation of buildings, overcrowded housing, and neighborhoods such as “Hafsa”. Other projects have rekindled the interest of the authorities in the medina as with the projects of touristic beautification. They have managed to noticeably transform the neighborhood, increase the economic and tourist appeal, and ‘improve the inhabitants’ quality of life.

Private investors were behind the revived interest in the Medina. In addition to the rehabilitation of the buildings, they gave them new functionalities: guest houses, restaurants, workshops for craftsmen and art galleries are multiplying. Moreover, the medina is becoming increasingly invaded by wealthier social classes who buy houses either to live in or to set up projects for restaurants, guest houses, five-star hotels. Is there an emergence of pockets of wealth in the old center?

As well as the cultural events being initiated by young people from the civil society, who try to involve local residents like the initiatives of the association L’Art rue; Creative Collective: Journal of the Medina; Doulesha; Interference; El Houna Khir... etc.

It should be noted that since the eighties, reflection has shifted towards a cultural approach in parallel with restoration and urban restructuring operations; This is how the Medina Festival came to light and a tourist circuit was set up as a means of showing that the medina is also a place of culture and leisure. Its most important impact is on the area of the medina; it attracts an important audience of all ages and all social categories.

All of these initiatives have had a significant impact on the Medina, architecturally, socially and economically as well as in terms of heritage. Thus, visitors rediscover this area of the city; which generates good business deals. The “Al-Anba” Café (the vineyard), situated in “Rue Souk-Erbaâ”, has become a must for young people, as are the pastries of “Rue Sidi Ben Arous” (icecream and Jawajem) or those of “Rue du Riche” and “Rue du Pacha” (fruit pies).

For a decade or two, real estate prices have sharply risen; Is it the reversal of the bandwagon effect in the Medina?

Will the medina (Bâa) become trendy?

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I'm no expert when it comes to cities... To be honest I'm not an expert at anything, but I love people and people are the pillars of society, they make up its features. I want to experiment, analyse, and develop. I want to make mistakes everyday and try to correct them... in the workshops that we organized with the UCL Institute in London. I have come to realize three things, because this is my favourite number: “Political intent” to be or not to be.

In Tunisia, when speaking about heritage, rediscovering it, and preserving it, the topic is quickly dealt with thanks to four potent magical words: “there’s no political intent”. Truth is, as a social activist (if I’m not mistaken), my mission in life is to rest until doors are left unopened, and I refuse the idea that even the smallest crack where slithers of light can get through doesn’t exist! Plus, as a failed politician, in the first place, I ask you, how many votes does the issue of heritage and its preservation guarantee, for god’s sake how do we believe that a political intent would exist if this issue is not a priority in electoral lists and the programs of political parties, etc...! Nevermind all of that. Moreover, after the revolution, there were thankfully a lot of private contributions that did contribute to the development of the city. That could only happen if this economic dynamism with new opportunities that could in itself contribute to the development of the city. That could only happen if the city embraces its “marketing pot” or it could create a new job if it follows the interstate route.

“Technology’s distance shortening impact”

Sometimes in Dar Ben Gacem, representatives from the Ministry of Tourism pay us visits. They would always ask “what’s the market you are targeting?”, a question which almost always surprises me to be honest, and to my answer which always varies... It’s a really, really, really tough question, because the hardest thing about it is the lack of faith in the old Medina... Could you imagine that an employee of the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism would ask about which market the pyramids targets, or in France, would they ask which market is targeted by the Eiffel Tower? I want to answer them saying that they are standing on the precipice of an international story, ancient treasures, artworks that belong to all humanity... But the answer ends up being “a lot of Americans and 30% of Europe”, because faith is never given nor described.

Nowadays people talk about the strategic place cities hold within globalisation, so why don’t we create small projects which provide more value to the already existing buildings, using new techniques that take into consideration the hopes and dreams of the youth. Small projects of Tourism would ask about which market the pyramids target, or in France they would always ask “what’s the market you are targeting?”, a question which always surprises me to be honest, and to my answer which always varies... It’s a really, really, really tough question, because the hardest thing about it is the lack of faith in the old Medina... Could you imagine that an employee of the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism would ask about which market the pyramids targets, or in France, would they ask which market is targeted by the Eiffel Tower? I want to answer them saying that they are standing on the precipice of an international story, ancient treasures, artworks that belong to all humanity... But the answer ends up being “a lot of Americans and 30% of Europe”, because faith is never given nor described.

In contemporary history (As in quite recently), people always talk about what came after them like it’s something additional, desperately trying to find a spot, to run the “economics”. They call them “the immigrants” (those who move from southern poor states to the northern wealthier and coastal states) in a demeaning way referencing those who try to establish themselves somewhere that isn’t theirs. We always see them as our inferiors, because “we” are better! When in fact, all of us were immigrants at some point in history. Tunisia’s history is full to the brim with the people who came and went, settled down then took off again, and people who came from far away lands. We didn’t love them at first but then at some point they turned into our family, until we learned to be proud of our mixed origins.

Why is it that this specific topic is such a sensitive matter, and why does it cause so much excitement when it comes to the Medina?

I want the Medina to become internationally famous, and international cities’ last worry is people’s last names or where they came from just like cities’ last worry is people’s last names or where they came from just like small villages. Because what renders these grand cities and societies different is not their borders, but their borders...”

The Medina, Steadfast with New Feature

**Opportunities for investment in heritage, specifically in the Medina exist in every corner, alley, closed-state-owned historical building, and private properties in ruins.**

"City Dynamics""
We’re in front of “Kishlat Sidi Aamor”, a military barrack from the Ottoman era, located just off Zitouna Mosque St., in the southern part of the Medina.

For some visitors, it’s one of many stops on an urban discovery tour (see visitors on the left). The building, classified as cultural heritage, is inspected, appreciated and then left to itself to exist.

For some merchants, it’s a space which facilitates the sale of imported plastic slippers. They have claimed this space and named it “the world of shoes” (see sign).

“Sustainability” of heritage can mean different things for different people. While to some this might mean maintaining the world of shoes as a space of commerce to sustain a living, to others it might imply the museumification of the building, neglecting the barrack. It’s a space of shared cultural heritage classified as cultural heritage, is inspected, appreciated and discredited as cultural heritage.

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ÉLOGE D’UN VIDE QUI NE FAIT PAS SEMBLANT.

Une ruelle, une impasse, une porte entrouverte sur un jeu de tons de blancs.

Deux murs en ruine au fond d’une impasse, on écoute à peine le passage rapide de deux enfants.

On ouvre la porte, une chicane en demi-pénétrable, une sortie, une lumière aveuglante qui tranche le regard, une profondeur construite autour d’un entre-deux, Quatre plans.

L’extase en face d’une ombre qui se structure, qui émeut, tranche, face à la modestie majestueuse d’un vide.

Une silhouette s’en va pour disparaître graduellement au sommet du toit, le temps qui devient plus paisiblement lent.

Silence rompu par une réverbération simultanée des appels à la prière.

Tu t’extases, tu laisses faire, tu atterris sereinement sur le marbre d’un patio, le cœur d’une maison en vie. Je suis de retour chez les vivants.

Qu’on soit habitué au langage étymologique de sa volumétrie, peu familier à son introverti vernaculaire ou simple amaurose des jeux structurés d’une lumière sur ruine qu’on découvre au fond d’une maison, n’importe quelle âme sensible à l’espace qui l’entoure n’aura à faire aucun effort pour s’émueillir face à la poésie spatiale qu’offre un patio d’une des maisons de la médina de Tunis. Qu’il soit abandonné, réhabilité, de maître ou le vestige d’une ancienne demeure reconvertie en Wkala, les patios fascinent, surprennent et étourdissent. La beauté de certains se surprend par sa modestie naturelle, d’autres par leurs complexités d’ornementation qui le rappellent, stoliques, le temps révuls de ceux qui savent bien analyser le pourquoi de chaque espace avant de s’aventurer à produire son comment. Ils se partagent en famille, qu’ils soient d’une maison de maître ou d’un des quartiers des plus maîtrisés. Protagonistes des entre-deux et des séquences indirectes, leurs vides ont du poids et leurs pleins cernent le silence d’un moment où tout le monde respire, où l’ombre y est franche et fraîche et où on y rentre pour s’exalter, ou chaque saison a un sens et lui tempe une fonction. Un patio te révèle parfois même la candide bipolar schizophrenia des gens qui l’habite, qui tiraillés entre une modernité globale, l’expression à demi-teinte de plusieurs couches de passés coloniaux et une nouvelle vague de nationalisme contextualisé finissant par donner naissance à un patchwork architectural qui résume la condition d’une identité locale de plus en plus assumée et bien loin d’un museau figé de faux-semblants. On peine parfois à cerner son pourquoi, qu’importe, si un patio en sol est un espace qu’on trouve toujours le prétexte d’habiter.

Aujourd’hui, face à un patio récupéré par un grand poète1 que j’ai eu l’opportunité de visiter, j’éloge l’histoire d’un héritage qui fascine beaucoup plus autrefois que dans la ville où je suis née. Il se résume en quatre plans, une lumière qui se structure en fonction d’une ombre et des tons délavés de blancs, d’une séquence lasse et quotidienne, d’un espace qu’on défend au nom d’un poésie pragmatique de plus en plus rare dans un monde de Disney landsgentrifiées. J’éloge un vide qui ne fait pas semblant.

1The Medina House, John Pawson.
LA MÉDINA DE TUNIS : ENTRE VALORISATION ET GENTRIFICATION

Si cette amorce de réinvestissement de la Médina est très positive pour sa mise en valeur, sa généralisation ne présente-t-elle pas un danger pour ce tissu urbain exceptionnel et toujours vivant malgré toutes ses vicissitudes ?

Ce n'est pas un hasard si pratiquement tous les réseaux électriques et téléphoniques, circuits touristiques ou les opérations qui les ont précédés tels l'aménagement des investissements publics ou municipaux sont restés éclairés. Le pionnier fut, sans conteste, si Ahmed Ben Gacem qui, en 1989, a lancé en Tunisie l'ASM. Il a su se mettre à l'avant-garde pour sa mise en valeur et aussi préserver la Médina de la décadence. Pour éclairer la Médina de Tunis en rénovation, il a créé, en 1990, l'Association de Sauvegarde du Quartier historique médina de Tunis. En moins d'un an, il a pu rassembler 7000 membres qui ont participé à sa création. Cette Association est devenue en très peu de temps un modèle d'organisation, de gestion et de mobilisation des citoyens. Elle a réussi à faire remettre la main sur le destin de la Médina de Tunis et a pu diriger la ville vers un avenir meilleur. Elle a pu préserver la Médina de la décadence et lui donner un nouvel âge d'or. Elle a pu la rendre à la population et lui permettre de la découvrir de nouveau. Elle a pu la transformer en un espace culturel et touristique de grande qualité. Elle a pu la rendre à la population et lui permettre de la découvrir de nouveau. Elle a pu la transformer en un espace culturel et touristique de grande qualité. Elle a pu la rendre à la population et lui permettre de la découvrir de nouveau. Elle a pu la transformer en un espace culturel et touristique de grande qualité. Elle a pu la rendre à la population et lui permettre de la découvrir de nouveau. Elle a pu la transformer en un espace culturel et touristique de grande qualité. Elle a pu la rendre à la population et lui permettre de la découvrir de nouveau. Elle a pu la transformer en un espace culturel et touristique de grande qualité. Elle a pu la rendre à la population et lui permettre de la découvrir de nouveau. Elle a pu la transformer en un espace culturel et touristique de grande qualité. 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