ASSESSMENT OF ARCHITECTURAL CONSERVATION IN THE MEDINA OF MAHDIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Keywords

Architectural conservation; Medina of Mahdia; heritage; projects; actors; assessing; experimentations.

Abstract

The paper deals with the architectural conservation of the Medina of Mahdia in Tunisia in the 21st century. This millenary ancient Fatimid capital offers an example of urban heritage that continues to impose rougher debates about the uncertainty and the lack of its conservation, promotion and valorisation nowadays. The research examines multiple dimensions related to actual state of the case study, proceeded conservation projects and different actors’ points of view mainly local population and involved institutions. It aims to find out if the case study is recognised as valuable heritage, and how much did the proceeded projects succeeded in ensuring urban and architectural conservation. By assessing and criticising, experimentations are displayed, faults are revealed and thus more suggestions are announced to mend the degradation and improve future projects that will be initiated on built heritage in the case study or in other Medina of the country.

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INTRODUCTION

In most of the Tunisian cities, there is a traditional urban fabric representing the historic centre of the city and is generally named Medina. It is considered the ancient and original core of the whole city. The Kasbah or fortress, ancient earthen ramparts and their gates, sinusoid lanes, tight alleys and dwellings with courtyards, mainly shape the compact structure of this ‘urban Arabic heritage’ (Jelidi, 2010). These items keep telling stories from the old days of the ancestors, and are full of meanings, values and senses. For the local population, it is an exceptional legacy and symbolic icon. More and more, it is seen as the heritage of the community, which is worth safeguarding and transmission to future generations (Msefer, 1984). The Medina, a support of memory and identity, represents a nonrenewable symbolic resource carrying multiple challenges in the contemporary time.

Figure 1 shows example of urban morphology of a traditional fabric, which is the Medina of Tunis, characterised by its density, an interesting number of mosques, palaces and monuments that overpass six hundred.

![Figure 1: Urban morphology of the Medina of Tunis (Source: ASM of Tunis, 2015).](image)

However, because of the multiple consequences of the modernisation and the exceptional changes that came with, all the Medinas of the Islamic world are suffering from a constant economic and social decline, causing a very ruthless process of marginalisation (Msefer, 1984). Many threats are accelerating the wear and tear on historic buildings because of illegal construction and demolition of built heritage, destructive tourism, pollution, vandalism, looting, illegal excavations, neglect and ignorance, lack of awareness, non-respect of legacy and why it must be preserved. Neglecting these fragile and precious sites leads to awful impacts on their cultural, urban and architectural legacy, the collective memory of human societies and especially threats the process of heritagization (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1996) of the Medinas all across the country.

In fact, many procedures of safeguarding and conservation have been implemented since the last three decades in order to valorise this cultural heritage with its items. Nevertheless,
These procedures have not touched all the Tunisian Medinas; several cases still suffer critically nowadays because of their abandon.

This paper tends to criticise the conservation work proceeded in the Medina of Mahdia, located in Tunisia. This millenary Fatimid capital was erected in a rocky promontory located in a coastal city of the east shore of the Mediterranean (Hababou, 2010). The case study chosen to carry on with the research offers an example of urban heritage that continues to impose rougher debates about the uncertainty and the lack of its conservation, promotion and valorisation in the 21st century. Then, our ambition is to answer three central questions of the problematic:

- Is the Medina of Mahdia recognised as valuable heritage?
- Does it oscillate between heritagization and degradation?
- And how much did the proceeded projects succeeded to ensure the conservation of the urban heritage?

By referring to these questions, we formulated two hypotheses in order to guide the research. The first hypothesis announces that the Medina of Mahdia is considered heritage with a variety of authentic elements thanks to its historic pathway and the remarkable site that it occupies in the Mediterranean. In the eyes of the actors, this heritage has many values and is worth safeguarding and transmission. However, when observing the actual state, it did not receive the appropriate gratitude. The second hypothesis completes the first one and estimates that the proceeded conservation work can be described as important but insufficient. All the interventions are limited because of financial and technical constraints. Consequently, only a small part of the Medina is preserved and a big perimeter is left in decay despite the richness of its architectural legacy.

In the light of the announced problematic and hypothesis, the paper examines multiple dimensions related to actual state of the case study, conservation projects and actors’ points of view mainly local population and involved institutions. Thus, it is structured with an introduction, two complementary parts and a conclusion. We start with presenting the case study and the analytical protocol. Then, the second part is more analytical and is divided into two sections. The first section contains interpretation of the survey with analysis of the involved actors’ points of view, as well as assessment of three conservation projects proceeded in the Medina. As for the second section, it takes the form of a discussion that criticises the conservation work. In addition, solutions are announced that could mend the degradation and strengthen the process of heritagization. The paper ends with a conclusion that summarises the research and confirms or rejects the hypothesis announced initially.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS:**

**General presentation of the case study:**

The real story of Mahdia begun with *Ubayd Allah Al-Mahdi* in the 10th century, a Shiite imam who founded the city in a rocky promontory and made it the new capital of the Fatimid Empire that was spread from Morocco to Syria (Hababou, 2010). It is the first dynastic city created by the Arabs in the Maghreb on the coast (Figure 2).

Mahdia knew a long historical pathway with many wars, destruction and maritime attacks. The ancient architecture, all erected with stone, simple and robust has made this Medina a medieval city, rebuilt around traditional functions combining residential, commercial, cultural
and craft activities (Hababou, 2010). High ramparts were protecting and surrounding the Medina of Mahdia. Inside, it contains the Grand Mosque, the Ottoman Fortress (Figure 3) and many neighbourhoods containing traditional houses with courtyards (Figure 4), streets and tight alleys. Mahdia is much better known for its immense cemetery located on the seafront at the edge of the peninsula. Today, ramparts no longer exist. The Medina occupies an area of thirty-eight hectares and has a local population of over five thousand people.

Figure 2: Map of Tunisia with the situation of Mahdia (Source: Authors 2014).

Figure 3: Urban morphology of the case study and its principal monuments.
1- Skifa Kahla or black vestibule;
2- Grand Mosque;
3- Ottoman Fortress;
4- Arch near the Phoenician cothon.
(Source: ASMM – with modification of the authors 2014).

Figure 4: Example of ornamentation inside traditional dwelling (Source: Authors 2014).
Analytical protocol:

Questionnaire and interview:

This research follows a hybrid method that combines both qualitative and quantitative techniques. It leads to deep scientific investigation and allows collecting the primary required data to move forward with the study. In fact, our method involves the conducting of a survey project based on the three instruments of direct observation, questionnaires and interviews.

Repeated insertion in the Medina helped us to gather positive and negative findings related to the current state, collect responses of questionnaire and discuss with the involved actors in order to understand their different points of view. The survey project begins with the establishment of two types of questionnaires. There are not many differences between the two types; the first one given to the local population is more simplified, whilst the second type contains more technical terms for heritage professionals. The sample of surveyed persons contains sixty-three users and seven professionals working in the historical monuments and the active local Association of Safeguarding the Medina ASMM. Thereafter, we interpret and asses the gathered results. On the other hand, information, archives and documents, provided by the association ASMM, represent the primary data used to apply an assessment system which is a matrix, implemented to judge the appropriateness of architectural conservation.

Assessment matrix:

In his courses in the university ‘La Sapienza’ in Roma, Palmerio has retained the following principles to guide restoration projects: minimal intervention, reversibility, distinguishability, compatibility, authenticity and expressive actuality, according to the theory developed by Carbonara and taken from the charters of restoration. Inspired by this Italian architect, researchers from the unit PAE3C (National School of architecture and Urban Planning of Tunis) developed an assessment system with the principles of conservation mainly included in the international charters of Venice and Burra. In fact, authenticity is safeguarded by reversibility and minimum intervention, expressive actuality is ensured by visibility. Thus, researchers suggest retaining the first four principles, substitute ‘distinguishability’ with visibility and add two more principles: durability and valorisation. These seven principles created a matrix implemented to judge the relevance of the intervention on many heritage items.

In our current research undertaken on a Medina, two principles of integrity and authenticity are added to the assessment matrix, originally formed with six principles of conservation. Therefore, the chosen principles of conservation are the following: minimal intervention, reversibility, compatibility, visibility, durability, valorisation, authenticity and integrity.

Respecting these principles of conservation must be rigorously observed in the different projects. They are considered as ‘standard ethics of conservation’ (M. Feilden, 2003):

1) **Minimal intervention**: the minimum effective action is always the best (M. Feilden, 2003). This first principle ensures authenticity, and it is imperative to assess the proportion of the intervention.

2) **Reversibility**: is the possibility to return to the state before the restoration, the intervention should not forbid future action. All proposed interventions should be reversible or repeatable, if technically possible, or at least not prejudice a future
intervention whenever this may become necessary (M. Feilden, 2003).

3) **Compatibility**: this principle requests respecting the existing materials and original construction methods. It must allow the minimum use of new materials and maximum amount of existing material to be retained (M. Feilden, 2003).

4) **Visibility**: the new added elements must be harmonious with the whole composition, and clearly distinguished from the original parts [Venice Charter, article 12]. Proposed interventions must be less noticeable than original, while at the same time being identifiable.

5) **Durability**: is related to the use of original materials to ensure physical stability of heritage. This principle requires permanent maintenance as well as minimum addition of new substances for comfort.

6) **Valorisation**: conservation work is followed by strategies aiming to increase the value of preserved heritage through promotion, scientific events and educational activities. Valorised heritage brings economic incomes, develops tourism, reanimates buildings, monuments, and sites.

7) **Authenticity**: conservation practice must consider authenticity and respect all original properties of buildings (image, colour, texture, form, scale, local construction codes, integrity of cultural property in question (M. Feilden, 2003)). Knowing and understanding these values as well as the cultural context of heritage is essential for recognising all aspects of authenticity. The understanding of authenticity plays a fundamental role in all scientific studies of the cultural heritage, in conservation and restoration planning, as well as within the inscription procedures used for the World Heritage Convention and other cultural heritage inventories [The Nara Document on Authenticity, article 10].

8) **Integrity**: it represents a relevant principle to determine if a site, besides its exceptional specificities, has the value to be classified for the World Heritage List.

**Assessment process:**

By applying the mentioned matrix to the three chosen conservation projects, an assessment will take place that goes from ‘Not applied’ to ‘Very well applied’ and also from one to five (1-5). Afterwards, we interpret the results of the assessment with a figure called Radar. This specific figure has eight rays representing the eight principles of conservation, and contains the values of the scale of appreciation that goes from one to five. Thus, it is very essential to define a scale made of values of appreciation that is formed with five units (1–5). These values going from one to five respectively correspond to ‘Not applied’, ‘Weakly applied’, ‘Moderately applied’, ‘Well applied’ and finally ‘Very well applied’.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS:**

The critical study of architectural conservation needs to apply more research methods conducted in the field, that are less interested in the written documents and archives, but they focus on enquiring the institutions, revealing the procedures and the involved actors as well as observing actual practices (Julien, 2014). Therefore, the research work goes through two distinct phases. Firstly, it starts with assessing the different actors’ points of view that are directly related to heritage and conservation works. The survey is destined to two categories of people: professionals involved in the works of conservation (architects, restorers, technicians, contractors, etc.) and users or occupants of the Medina (inhabitants, merchants,
visitors, etc.). Secondly, some conservation projects are analysed using an assessment matrix that contains eight principles.

**Assessment of the users’ viewpoints (U):**

For the users of the Medina, the surveyed sample indicates a relative parity between sexes. We collected the responses of thirty women forming 48% of the sample, and thirty-three men creating a percentage of 52%, slightly more dominant. When analysing the composition of the sample by age, adults aged between 40 and 49 monopolises the most dominant percentage that is around 24% (Figure 5a). In addition, the professions of the surveyed persons are presented in Figure 5b in order to distinguish farmers, artisans, managers, superior intellectual professions, unemployed, students, etc. and identify the different motivations of the actors who live, work or visit the Medina.

The answers show that the major part of local population is strongly attached to the Medina, which represents their place of festivities, meditation and business. Despite the metamorphoses related to the advent of a new lifestyle, local population strikes to keep the inherited traditions and maintains the heritage alive, but their efforts remain insufficient because of the lack of funding, political and institutional support.

Feelings of pride, affinity and gratitude are omnipresent in the minds, but without organised and permanent actions to protect architectural and urban legacy. The local population is aware of the advanced process of degradation of the Medina, denounces the evolution of the problems and sees that the government is the first responsible for what is happening. Most of
the surveyed persons ignore the laws that are supposed to ensure safeguarding the heritage. The majority does not appreciate what is done and describes the projects as ‘average’ and ‘fair’.

In fact, governmental institutions only concentrate efforts on the restoration and maintenance of the three historical monuments, which are Skifa Khala or black vestibule, Ottoman Fortress and the Grand Mosque. According to their own technical know-how and financial means, the users try to preserve their private properties within the Medina and maintain them in good condition. Unfortunately, functional needs come first without taking care of the principal properties of built heritage and the homogeneity of its image. Extensions in buildings continue to rise in order to supply the growing requirements of local population. As a result, overcrowding, considerable loss of traditional architecture and many specific characteristics of the ancient Fatimid capital is widely observed.

As a final step in assessing the users’ points of view, the gathered results are interpreted in Figure 6. On a scale from one to five, the histogram shows very low values for both conservation (2.9) and valorisation (1.83). Thus, local population estimate that the Medina is deteriorating quickly and the proceeded conservation projects are not enough despite the urgent necessity of reacting.

**Assessment of the professionals’ points of view (PRO):**

The heritage professionals who are directly related to the Medina of Mahdia announce great sensations of gratitude and regret at the same time. In their point of view, gratitude and appreciation are for the richness of the properties of traditional fabric, but regret because of the low value given to heritage.

The following histogram (Figure 6) also interprets the assessment of the responses of the professionals. It displays an important value for conservation (3.43) and an average value for valorisation (2.8).

![Figure 6: Interpretation of the assessment of the professionals and users](Source: Authors 2016).

During the 20th century, the policy adopted by the French Protectorate promoted the city of Sousse and caused economic isolation of Mahdia. From the independence in 1956, the decline of the Medina began. There was a massif departure of indigenous people who left
their traditional dwellings and preferred to live in the new suburbs developed outside the peninsula. This phenomenon caused the abandon of the Medina, loss of the ancient architecture as well as many social and urban transformations. Consequently, the process of degradation becomes advanced and threats continue to grow. On the other hand, when speaking about the legislative frame that is supposed to ensure protection of heritage items, the only text that exists is entitled ‘heritage code’ and was ratified in 1994. It has not been properly applied in the field because of total absence of executive decrees. The professionals take decisions and concrete actions without any reference to clear legislative dispositions. Their practices combine multiple techniques that are different from one project to another.

The proceeded work of restoration and conservation undertaken by the government as well as some initiatives coming from private institutions are considered aleatory and insufficient. They are limited to the historical monuments and the entrance to the Medina, a small area very frequented by tourists (Figure 7). Unfortunately, many conservation projects, and valorisation initiatives have not been brought to an end due to lack of funding and qualified staff. In addition, exhibitions and promotion of heritage are absent except some celebrations and festivals (Nights of Mahdia, Silk Festival, Festival of the Sea of Mahdia, Festival of the Medina, etc.) that managed to animate cultural life and attract visitors even periodically.

Figure 7: Preserved perimeter and monuments in the peninsula
(Source: Google Earth with modification of the authors 2016).
Assessment of some proceeded conservation projects:

Presentation of conservation projects:

We choose to assess three important conservation projects, which touched the Laboratory House, the fronts of Slimane Hamza Street and the ancient church. These historical buildings are located in different places of the peninsula.

- **Project 1:** the project of restoring the Laboratory House was part of the network ‘Small Historical Cities’ initiated by UNESCO in order to preserve the traditional architecture of the Medina of Mahdia and take action against savage building. In fact, this project lasted eight years and involved many actors who are: Municipality of Mahdia, Association of Safeguarding the Medina (ASMM), National School of Architecture and Urban Planning of Tunis (ENAU), School of Architecture of Nantes as well as UNESCO. The intervention has completely changed the old building. The new rooms of the ground floor contain many shops exhibiting and valorising local crafts. The upper floor is reserved for the association ASMM.

- **Project 2:** the second project of enhancing the degraded fronts of Slimane Hamza Street began in 2008 and brought to end a year later. There was not so many actors involved in this project; only the Municipality of Mahdia, ASMM and the General Council of Loire Atlantique (France).

Figure 8 shows sketch of the project and how the front will eventually appear. The intervention consisted on scraping old fronts, repeating frames, painting walls and highlighting specific architectural details of the Medina.

- **Project 3:** the third and final project is the restoration of the ancient church which was abandoned and in danger of collapse. This project lasted more than seven years, from 2004 to 2011. The involved actors are the same ones who participated in enhancing the fronts of Slimane Hamza Street (project 2).

- The project has gone through two phases: the first one started with restoring the ground floor, rehabilitate it and transform it into an auditorium that can receive cultural events (Figure 9). As for the second phase, it included the restoration of the first floor and the creation of ‘Friendship Home’ which is a sort of small hotel designed to receive guests.
Assessment and interpretation:

The restoration of the Laboratory House started with the diagnosis of its state because the building was abandoned and in such a ruined condition. By using materials similar to the old ones like lime and stone, and by repeating traditional techniques during initial construction, the involved actors have very well applied the principles of compatibility and reversibility. They managed to respect traditional style and architectonic details which are in good harmony with the image of the Medina. In this project, the intervention was not minimal but remarkable. In fact, it touched most of the components especially walls, stairs, floors, doors and ceilings that were completely reconstructed and decorated, exactly like the old ones in order not to destroy the authenticity of the building (Figure 10).

Figure 9: 3D image of the future auditorium (Source: ASMM, 2005).

Figure 10: Multiples proceeded interventions in the ancient building (Source: ASMM, 2005).
When looking at Figure 11, we clearly see the differences between old and new states of the building. The restoration has enhanced the Laboratory House, kept its authenticity and ensured its integrity in the area as well as its durability over time. Consequently, the principle of minimal intervention was not applied, but the other seven ones were very well applied.

![Figure 11: (Left) restoration works (Source: ASMM, 2008) (Right) new state of the Laboratory House (Source: Authors 2016).](image)

The second project related to enhancing the fronts also started with the diagnosis of current state that was described as average. Firstly, we strongly notice the use of other materials such as plaster and cement to coat walls and cure some pathologies. Here, the principles of durability, compatibility and reversibility were weakly applied. The intervention was not very remarkable, but visible when old and new states are compared (Figure 12). This fact makes the principle of minimal intervention moderately applied and the principle of visibility well applied. The traditional specific architectural style was respected, making the fronts very well integrated in the urban context. Authenticity was kept and thus the fronts of Slimane hamza Street are well preserved. In this project, four principles of conservation are weakly applied, only one is moderately applied and three ones are very well applied.

As for the restoration of the ancient church and its transformation into an auditorium and Friendship House, this project did save the building which was neglected and in very critical condition that requires urgent solutions (Figure 13). The proportion of the intervention was enormous, visible and touched the main components of the building such as roofs, arches, openings and walls. Consequently, the principle of minimal intervention is not applied at all, whilst the principle of visibility is very well applied. Materials and techniques used during restoration work are a mixture between the new and the original ones, which make the principles of compatibility and reversibility moderately applied. Due to this project, the old church now has the name of ‘Cap Africa’. It becomes a valuable heritage; its authenticity is respected and integrity in the site is guaranteed.
Figure 14 interprets and compares the three assessed projects. Mainly, there are convergences towards maximum values for the principles valorisation, integrity, authenticity, durability and visibility. In the three cases, the intervention was not minimal, which explains the convergence towards minimum value for this principle. The principles of compatibility and reversibility are sometimes weakly applied and sometimes moderately applied. During practice, authenticity of historical building is respected and integrity is guaranteed.
Based on the above outcomes, the Medina of Mahdia is an urban fabric suffering from an advanced degradation, and is a specific heritage who is starting to disappear. This comes as a result of deep transformations of its social and urban structures, deterioration of traditional architecture and decline of economic functions. The various actors appreciate the built heritage, are anxious and aware of how much it is important to conserve architectural and urban legacy. Nevertheless, their concrete actions remain limited and convicted most of the time. Inhabitants and commerchants put their functional and quotidian needs at the first place regardless of the value that endows heritage. Professionals are reacting depending on technical and financial means conferred by superior authorities. Thus, lack of awareness and absence of collaboration between the involved actors represent two huge threats that continue to worsen the situation.

In summary, few monuments are nationally classified and protected. Table 1 makes a list of them. Despite the array of proceeded projects, many historical buildings are very well conserved but not very valorised, making them neglected and threatened like the case of the Laboratory House. In addition, the Medina of Mahdia becomes divided into two contrasting parts: the first part located at the West of the peninsula is small but well-preserved and ‘heritagised’, in opposition of the second part that covers a bigger area and is wildly marginalised. Figure 15 illustrates this contrast by showing two examples of preserved and degraded quarters both located in the same Medina.

Discussions:

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Figure 15: (Left) Well – preserved area (Source: Authors 2014) (Right) Abandoned and degraded residential neighbourhoods (Source: Authors 2014).
Table 1: List of the historical monuments nationally classified and protected (Source: INP, 2012).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N°</th>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Name of the monument</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Medina of Mahdia</td>
<td>The Grand Mosque and its minaret</td>
<td>03/03/1915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Medina of Mahdia</td>
<td>Roman cisterns</td>
<td>22/03/1899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Medina of Mahdia</td>
<td>The Kasbah</td>
<td>13/03/1912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Medina of Mahdia</td>
<td>Entrance of the historical centre</td>
<td>03/03/1915</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Governorate of Mahdia

14 historical monuments

Medina of Mahdia

4 historical monuments

Urgent solutions are proposed in order to ameliorate the current situation:

- Strict and immediate application of the existing legislative dispositions;
- Developing other powerful tools to preserve and restore the traditional architecture;
- Implementation of a sustainable strategy combining economic, cultural and social approaches;
- Making the local population more aware of the value of the heritage which exists around them, and especially motivate the youth to action;
- Review institutional relationships to establish an effective coordination and agreement between municipality, INP (National Institute of Heritage) and ASMM (Association of Safeguarding the Medina);
- Create different workshops to lead development and investment opportunities;
- Allocate more technical and financial means for an effective management of the problems and stopping the advanced degradation;
- Promote cultural life in the Medina to reanimate the region and develop more activities;
- Labelling the Medina of Mahdia as a World Heritage site, in order to have international higher levels of protection.

CONCLUSION

Our paper deals more closely with the operational actions related to architectural conservation of the Medina of Mahdia. Through direct observation, questionnaires destined to users and professionals as well as interviews, we assessed the proceeded conservation work and then determined how much it can be described as remarkable but limited. The Medina of Mahdia is recognised as a valuable heritage expressing identities of different civilisations, but its current state oscillates between heritagization and marginalisation. Only few restoration projects have succeeded in ensuring conservation of the urban and architectural legacy, but on the other hand, there is a process of degradation affecting a big perimeter of the peninsula that continues to worsen with time. This degradation comes as result to the non-awareness of many citizens, failure to eliminate the threats and lack of financial means.

The examples of the Medinas of Sousse and Tunis can be followed, two historical centres recognised as World Heritage sites since decades that are permanently conserved and managed to eliminate many threats. More efforts, tools, laws, experts and strategies must be mobilised to freeze the marginalisation of the Medina of Mahdia, value the high specificities
of built heritage and thus make the process of heritagization always dynamic. Also, we confirm the two hypotheses announced at the beginning of the research. It is clear that the case study is a valuable heritage that is suffering from an advanced degradation and is not very well valorised. In addition, during conservation work, involved professionals combine different practices and techniques without really following a clear recipe or a particular theory during the intervention process.

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