

# The evolution of heritage atmospheres in the medina of Tunis since the 19th century

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to study the urban evolution in the medina of Tunis with a focus on atmospheres and users' feelings. Thus, this investigation approaches this topic by means of the sensorial aspects that have been created in this historic centre. This research work compares past and new sensorial feelings expressed by the users of the medina. Old feelings are explored in the literature sources that describe the old life in the medina, whilst new ones are collected by means of observation and interviews.

*Keywords: heritage atmospheres, ambience, evolution process.*

## 1 Introduction

Within two centuries, the medina of Tunis was qualified with the most varied of antonyms: from the 'archetypal city' to the 'dying city', from the town where all ethnic groups mix and live to the 'Muslim ghetto' or 'the ghetto of poverty'. Actually, the medina of Tunis knew that since the second half of the 19th century several transformations had profoundly changed its status. "Not only house's or street's shapes changed, it was also about atmospheres" [1].

## 2 The medina of Tunis: a brief history

Almost like the majority of Arab Islamic cities, the medina of Tunis knew its 'golden age' under the Ottoman reign, during which most of the city was conceived. In fact, "the historic city that we know today is a direct heritage of the

Ottoman period, which lasted most than three centuries” [2]. At that time, the medina was “the single urban fact in the site of Tunis” [1], and represented the capital of the regency.

During the Ottoman reign, the medina of Tunis knew an important proliferation of its economic and industrial transactions. It was also one of the most important cultural cities in the Mediterranean area.

However, from the second half of the 19th century, and more exactly after the French occupation of Algiers in 1830, changes started to manifest in the city, socially as well as on the urban plan. The demolition of the ramparts (1860), the opening of the city doors (1870), and the establishment of the new French consulate ‘out of the walls’, were the most important signs of a big transformation in the Tunisian capital city.

Indeed, the ‘beys’, who were the prefects nominated by the Ottoman Empire in Tunis, were aiming to modernize their city referring to the European model. Thus, they undertook several operations of modernisation that very much cost the funds of the regency. It led to a financial crisis, which was the main pretext to establish the French occupation in 1881. From that date, the medina of Tunis was no more the centre of power; it lost it to the benefit of the new colonial city, built to the east.

During the colonial period, and while the ‘European city’ flourished, and European communities of Tunis were proliferating, the medina of Tunis and its inhabitants were sinking into poverty. This situation worsened immensely after the independence: while original inhabitants of the medina left their homes and moved to ‘modern’ houses deserted by colonists in the ‘European city’, an inverse exodus was registered in the medina: “rural migrants began to move into the city and take up residence in the empty medina houses, crowding one family into each room. Crowding rose tremendously, and at the same time, the medina fell into a state of urban decay” [3].

This critical situation of a ‘dying city’ was not long in causing a general indignation. A movement that found its apogee with the creation, in 1967, of the Association of Safeguard of the Medina of Tunis (ASM), which will contribute, in 1979, to the registration of the medina on the list of the world heritage. During nearly four decays of hard work, it helped the medina of Tunis in regaining its overriding role in the economic, industrial and cultural life of the capital city.

### **3 Heritage atmospheres in the medina of Tunis**

We identify as atmosphere, “an enveloping phenomenon that surrounds and affects our sensuous system and well-being when we approach, enter, stay or move in a building” [4]. Recording to additional studies [5, 6], atmosphere – also designated as ‘ambience’ – integrates various items contiguous to space (conformation, forms, materials, colours, lights...) and users (individual character, mood, age, sex...) considered in a particular context (time, social environment, political context...). Consequently, atmosphere is a ‘dynamic process’.



Thus, we aim in this work to expose the direct effects of urban and social transformations, exposed above, on atmospheres in the urban context of the medina of Tunis.

### 3.1 The medina of Tunis at the dawn of the 19th century

As mentioned above, the medina of Tunis was the capital of the Tunisian regency. According to several travel stories, it was a rich, prosperous, highly populated merchant city [7–9]. From afar, it offered a stunning and charming landscape of white houses built over the hill, whence the designation of ‘Tunis la Blanche’ (the white Tunis), often mentioned to describe the city [8–12].



Un baazar, à Tunis. — Dessin de A. de Lar d'après une aquarelle de M. Amable Crapetel.

Figure 1: A souk of Tunis in the 19th century.

Once in the city, the first impression was the labyrinthine aspect of its streets: they were compared to a complicated network similar to a termite's city [10]. These streets were in dirty and squalor conditions, contrasting with the first impression the city had from afar. In this regard, many authors told about filth all over the streets, foul odours, open sewers, dusty streets in summer and muddy ones in winter [8, 9, 13, 14]. Some of the buildings of the city were also in a 'pitiful state' of decay: Baraudon [9] and Dumas [15] compared the atmosphere of some streets in the medina of Tunis to the one of dead streets of Pompeii.

However, the same authors also reported a bright and charming side of the medina of Tunis, especially on the neighbourhood of the district of the 'souks'. They talked so long about its large charming streets, sometimes vaulted, sometimes covered with wooden boards, about sunshine that infiltrates from the

small zenithal apertures, about the pleasant fragrances in the ‘souk el Attarine’, the smell and the taste of the coffee served each time you ‘enter’ those kinds of tiny shops, the noisy auction scenes, the distinctive sound of knocking on copper in the ‘souk Ennhas’, and that infinity of shades of colours in the fabric of the souk.

Another district also fascinated almost the majority of the authors of the 18th and 19th centuries: the Moorish district. Because, while its character of a cosmopolitan city was confirmed and respected, the urban space of Tunis was explicitly organised according to ethnic and religion backgrounds: Jewish and Christians occupied the lower part of the city, which was also the insalubrious one, while Muslims from different origins occupied the higher districts.

The Moorish district was quiet and peaceful, rhythmised as the whole city by the five calls to prayer that “gave inhabitants reassurance and to the city the characteristic of a safe space” [11]. This part of the city is relatively clean and poetic, “with its mysterious ‘impasses’, its flourish arches, its large palaces..., and its ‘mashrabiyyas’” [10]. Here, the atmosphere was completely different from the lower districts, especially the Jewish one, where “streets are gloomy, with a foul odour, where dirt seems to be man’s companion” [11].



Figure 2: Souk Et-Trouk in the late 19th century.

From sunrise, the medina of Tunis was full of life: children in procession went to their schools or ‘kouttabs’ repeating koranic verses, merchants crossed the city with their animals carrying every kind of products; storytelling took place in coffee shops or public places attracting people to listen to them.

However, at sunset, all activities came to an end, city doors were closed, and the whole medina dived into absolute dark and silence.

### 3.2 Tunis after the occupation of Algiers: a century of mutations

Due to the political changes in the 19th century, the medina of Tunis “lost its confidence of former days... Tunis ‘la Blanche’ was sending back only a hideous and disturbing image” [16].

As we mentioned above, the social, urban and political situations changed against the interests of the ‘old city’ and its inhabitants. The spatial division of the city was no more respected: we note a Jewish and Christian penetration in the Muslim dedicated areas. In addition, the impoverishment of the population led to a degradation of urban and architectural environment, and local-industrial crisis caused the closure of several workshops or their reconversion. Ruins multiply, the number of bawdy houses and pubs increased, and for the first time such functions took place in the Muslims’ districts; rates of criminality and delinquency increased too.

On the other side, ‘positive’ changes took place: the abolition of slavery in 1846 removed “that distressing show of human flesh” in ‘souk el Berka’, the slave market of Tunis [16]. However, the neighbourhood of the souks seemed indifferent to all these changes: “animation, colours, joviality of these oriental marketplaces are indescribable, because we need to express simultaneously light, sounds and movements. At night, all the district of the souks is closed by heavy doors, at the entrance of the galleries, such a precious city locked into the other one” [17]. However, in certain places, “zinc sheets replace the roofs of the souks... souks were paved, and the small columns that support the vaults were buried” [18].

A striking consequence of the French occupation of Tunis was also the acculturation of a big part of the population. New generations, living mixed with Europeans, adopted their lifestyles, uses and even costumes: “men and women gave up their traditional costumes, to get dressed in the European way” [19].

At the beginning of the 20th century, the situation in the ‘Arab city’ was critical: between 1881 and 1956, the population density partially doubled, “Tunis is full of an unhelpful poverty” [20].

### 3.3 The medina of Tunis in the 20th century

Thirteen years after independence, the creation of the ASM helped to stop the decay of the medina of Tunis. Actually, the ASM was interested in the beginning in urban and architectural regeneration with the ‘Hafsia’ and the ‘Oukalas’ projects, aiming to “treat insalubrity and slow down degradation” [21]. Social development is thus ensured: “we note with satisfaction the starter of a phenomenon of return in the historic town”. This social development, as well as the renewal of the population of the Medina, allowed the revitalization of the marketing activities in the historic centre.

Later, the choice was carried for the ‘cultural revalorization’: “All the Medina with its monuments must radiate like a cultural pole of great value” [21]. Within



this framework, several operations were conducted. These interventions allowed the creation of a cultural circuit, apart from the classical trade one, which tends to integrate the culture in the equation of a touristic economy, so that one comes 'to properly consume the city'.

"The old city is not any more that space folded up on itself, shut in, which described Jacques Berque in the thirties. It vibrates with the least social or cultural impulses which agitate the capital region. On the opposite, it transmits messages in the direction of the other districts of the urban area: such conference in the 'Club Tahar Haddad', such concert in the 'Medersa Bir Lahjar', such manifestation in the 'National Theatre' or in 'Kheireddine Palace' are the signs of another radiation that of the tradition" [22].



Figure 3: Cultural manifestations in the Medina of Tunis.

## 4 Heritage atmospheres: evolution process

We tried above to show the impact of social and political changes on atmospheres in the urban space of the Medina of Tunis. Hereafter, we will try to expose the different ways atmospheres evolved.

### 4.1 The persistence

The first way atmospheres evolved in the medina of Tunis is by persisting, despite time and social changes. It is the case of souks. Most of the souks in the Medina of Tunis are still conserving their original functions, and also their original atmospheres, in particular the souks next the mosque Ez-Zitouna, where ambiances are still marked by these "light clouds of subtle perfumes... that sensual lively or deadened colours... and that hammering blows' sounds" [9].

The streets of the medina are also still offering that tortuous aspect, ensuring the surprise effect every time you take a new direction. Thus, it would be difficult to distinguish the words of a 19th century traveller from those of a 21st century one: "The medina is a disorienting labyrinth of narrow streets filled with nice and smiling vendors ... The key here is to take the time, look around, enjoy the hidden architecture ..." [23].

## 4.2 The loss

It is true that the medina and especially the souks' district, kept almost its former days' ambiances, but some of them were lost. We mentioned above that the abolition of the slavery had its direct effects on the slaves' market atmosphere. We can also mention the disappearance of auction that had an important role in the visual and acoustic show in the souks.

Besides, by the creation of the municipal council in 1858, whose task was to ensure a better environment management, the urban landscape knew several interventions: the streets are no more "seas of mud" in winter and mountains of 'black and fetid dust' in summer. Measures were taken to set up tiled floors and purify sewers that exhaled.

Another characteristic of the old town also vanished: it is the distinctive clothing diversity of the inhabitants of the medina. Centuries ago, citizens of various nationalities, religions and social status could be easily distinguished thanks to their costumes. We could easily discern the Moor from the foreigner, the Muslim from the Jewish, the rich from the least rich, the young lady from the married woman, and we could even guess the function of an individual from its suit. This distinction disappeared little by little.

Until the 19th century, a social order was also established regulating the presence of men and women in public spaces: This order consisted in separating men and women. Commenting photos taken in the Medina by Ré Soupault at the beginning of the 20th century, Anton Esher writes: "The pictures show the strong polarity between men and women in the public sphere. One could even say that the public sphere in the *medina* is created or made possible only by the absence of women. ... women may nevertheless appear in the public sphere, but only if they adhere to a complex system of rules and regulations" [24].

Nowadays, the situation is no more the same: female presence in the historic town is more than obvious: she is not only a passive user of the public space, she also owns and manages several shops, coffee shops and hotels in the medina.

We can finally notice the disappearance of animals from the public sphere of the medina, formerly used by merchants for carrying different types of products, and also to move along the districts of the medina. It would be a madness today to bring a camel or a horse in the historic town; only cats, and rarely dogs, are welcome.

## 4.3 The adjustment

Differently from sexual distinction that no more exists, a spatial distinction subsists in the medina, but in a new form. After the renewal of the population of the medina, new spatial distinction were noticed. It is no more about religion but about origins and social status: "The rue du Pacha for example, is a focus for migrants from Douiret, a cluster of villages in the far south of Tunisia, while Bab El Khadhra has a high concentration of Metouia, from the area south of Gabès" [25].

Some functions are also adjusted, such as cultural coffees that substitute the storyteller circles, welcoming periodically cycles of cultural conferences. In



2015, an old/new experience is introduced in the cultural club ‘Taher Hadded’: ‘The legends festival’, presenting a revisited view of the storyteller character.

Whole districts also changed vocation in the late 1990s: we can mention the district of ‘Pacha Street’, currently the principal artery of the cultural district of the medina that used to be a residential area before the intervention of the ASM. New atmospheres are thus created in this district, due to its new function: the itinerary that once was used by the ‘bourgeois’ on his return from the mosque is now the route taken by many others for all sorts of reasons... [25].

Even sounds and cries were adjusted: the carrier who called ‘belek’ (take care) to protect people, nowadays calls ‘saqik’ (take care of your feet).

## 5 Conclusion

The atmospheres’ approach we had in this work allows the superposing of both material and sensitive characterization of the studied space, with a special mention of the social, political and historical context. It also allows evaluating the authenticity of an atmosphere by defining its evolutionary process. In the case of the medina of Tunis, atmospheres evolved by three different ways: persisting, loss and adjustment. We can also talk about the creation of new atmospheres, particularly with the new cultural politics introduced by the ASM in the historic area.

It is also important to consider different users’ interpretations of the atmospheres in the medina: in this work, we tried to bring forward ambiances perceived and reported by the majority of medina’s users. However, it is important to say that the same ‘signs’ could be interpreted differently by one user or another, according to their age, sex, origin, religion and even state of mood.

Finally, we have to mention that atmospheres are part of what ICOMOS (International Council of Monuments and Sites) named in 2008 the “spirit of a place” [26]. Thus, this work is a part of a larger investigation on identifying the spirit of the Medina of Tunis, by looking after tracks of formal “memories ... rituals ... values, textures, [and] colours...” [26].

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