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Shopping Centers at the Heart of the Process of Emergence of New Commercial Polarities in the Periphery of Constantine: The Case of Ali Mendjeli's New Town

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In Algeria, the economic dimension and, more especially, commercial activities have recently received a great deal of attention as many cities are undergoing sociospatial redistribution and the formation of new planned or spontaneous centralities, in which commerce is the key ingredient. The rise of new urban centralities is driven by the ever-increasing creation of new commercial centres. Since their launch in 2008, the commercial malls of Ali Mendjeli, particularly El Ritaj and Ritaj Mall, have contributed to the transformation and reorganisation of this city's landscape. Ali Mendjeli is no longer a dormitory town and has become a new metropolitan centre. How have these shopping centresreformed the image of this city, and how have they been successful in generating desirable commercial polarities? This study tries to find out the answers to these questions by doing a field survey as part of a doctoral research project that is still going on. It does this by combining on-site observations with qualitative interviews with shop owners and citizens.

Key words : Ali Mendjeli, commercial polarities, shopping centres, El Ritadj, Ritadj Mall, territorial recompositions.

INTRODUCTION

Algeria's economic opening and progressive incorporation into globalisation (Bouhali, 2018) has influenced several Algerian cities, resulting in socio-spatial redeployment and the establishment of new planned or spontaneous centralities. This urban dynamic, which began in the 2000s, is fundamentally inherent in the implementation of a variety of projects of various size and form, swinging between simple and massive housing, equipment, and infrastructure programmes and new cities developed from scratch! Driven primarily by the state, these fundamental urban processes were swiftly rallied by the initiative of private players; promoters (land and real estate) and dealers in particular, who became key actors in these urban changes due to their spatial redeployment and anticipating strategy.

Indeed, the economic dimension and, more specifically, commercial activities, receive special focus. These are undoubtedly places of consumption and supply for city dwellers, but they continue to be significant spaces in their spatial practices and even a referred location that organises the frequentation of other spaces. This is especially true with bazaars and marketplaces, which *"bring together clients in specific locations (souks, vast squares) and at specific times (weekends, religious holidays, the start of the school year)"* (Bergel and Kerdoud, 2010, p2). This commercial economy, which is at the centre of the creation of jobs and income, wields enormous power in the creation of space, particularly urban space, through the numerous developments that it generates (Bergel and Kerdoud, op. cit.).

Much study in the Arab world, and particularly in the Maghreb, refers to the importance of commercial spaces in the socio-spatial recomposition of cities. This is true of the works of R. Stadnicki on Sanaa, P.-A Bartel on Tunis, and T. Harroud on Morocco. In this example, the latter was interested in the socio-spatial recompositions caused by the proliferation of retail malls on Rabat's outskirts. The author proved that these commercial spaces, which can contain a variety of purposes, including non-market ones, are responsible for the birth and diversification of new kinds of sociability in the city and its outskirts (Harroud, 2015). According to the same researcher, these retail malls are progressively defining the Moroccan urban landscape, becoming sites of strolling and relaxation as well as new social behaviours and representations.

Certain Algerian cities have been affected by the structuring effect of retail malls on territorial dynamics. Despite their late entrance in Algeria in comparison to neighbouring nations, shopping malls are becoming a vital element of the urban landscape. However, they have gotten little attention from urban research, which has been focused on the process of creating new commercial centres and the involvement of private actors (including ordinary city dwellers) in socio-spatial recomposition and changes in urban morphology (Lakehal, 2013; Benlakhlef and Bergel, 2013; Boudinar and Belguidoum, 2015). According to this research, the advent of these new market spaces has generated new locations of consumption, which are highly valued by the people and have become "revelators" of significant shifts at work in Algerian society.

Bergel and Kerdoud's work on Sidi Mabrouk in Constantine, for example, has already highlighted this revealing role of trade while focusing on what they call "globalisation from below"; this term refers to the process by which these new commercial spaces, which are essentially materialised by trade centres, are inserted (legally or illegally) on a level with globalised networks of access to goods. The development of these worldwide networks is also frequently followed by a revitalization of commercial architecture and urban planning, which frequently results in new sources of supply and even a shift in consumer habits (Bergel and Kerdoud, 2010, p.01). At the end of their research, the authors confirm that the commercial function that developed in Sidi Mabrouk, for example, greatly helped to create a new urbanity while allowing women to exercise their right to enter and use public places, especially commercial spaces (Kerdoud, 2015).

The current paper seeks to investigate the several modalities that led to the creation of a new commercial polarity in Constantine's southern periphery, more specifically in the new town of Ali Mendjeli. The selection of this city as an example is not by chance. It is justified for a variety of reasons. First, consider the circumstances behind the creation of this urban experience. Indeed, the city of Constantine did not avoid a major housing crisis caused by unrestrained demographic growth during the 1990s, following in the footsteps of numerous Algerian cities. In response to the situation, the local authorities chose to build Ali Mendjeli, a new town 15 kilometres from the capital city. This city proved to be the most appropriate solution to the aforementioned concerns at the time. Nonetheless, the urgent necessity to rehouse the mother city's demographic excess swiftly converted this new city into a dormitory town. It was mostly known for the large number of social housing units and the monotony of its architecture, which was caused by a lack of basic infrastructure and tools.

Ali Mendjeli was almost doomed to fail from the start, but its destiny has taken a different turn thanks, above all, to the gradual rise of trade in its many areas beginning in 2001. After a few years, Ali Mendjeli's business network has grown sufficiently to make it a confirmed urban centre as well as a rising urbanity today. This dense and diverse commercial network is made up of tiny specialised or non-specialized stores, bazaars, buildings with multiple floors dedicated to commercial services, but most importantly, shopping malls. The latter, whose number is increasing, play an important role in the liveliness of this tertiary network and in the overall urban dynamics of the new town due to their structure and substance. They have contributed to the transformation of this dormitory town, just as they have participated in (re) structuring its space, scenery, and social image. They help today inextricably to animate the new city and diversify the population that goes and lives there, but also to drain significant flows that will now suffocate its entrances in a quasi-permanent way!Because of the uniqueness of their luxurious and modern aspects, which are mostly modelled after Western models, these facilities are becoming the scene of *"the westernisation of local lifestyles and even the opening up of the population to new forms of consumption and sociability,"* as Harroud (2015. p 3) has already observed in Morocco.

PRESENTATION OF THE CASE STUDY AND ITS COMMERCIAL GENESIS

The planned town of Ali Mendjeli, situated 15 kilometres due south of Constantine on the Ain El Bey plateau (Figure 1), was built to take advantage of a potential land area of 1500 hectares. The concept of its formation was conceived in 1982 within the framework of the PUD, but the designation of a new town was not given until 2000 (Djouablia et al., 2022). Its study and design were entrusted to the URBACO design firm, whose work was heavily influenced by the French new town model and, as a result, proposed a similar development philosophy. The master plan for the new town envisioned the formation of five districts revolving around a central hub in accordance with the zoning principle and a subdivision into residential units and infrastructure. Each district consists of four neighbourhood units (UV), each of which is constructed of multiple residential blocks(Djouablia et al.,op.cit.). A hierarchical road network of primary, secondary, and tertiary roads forms the entire.

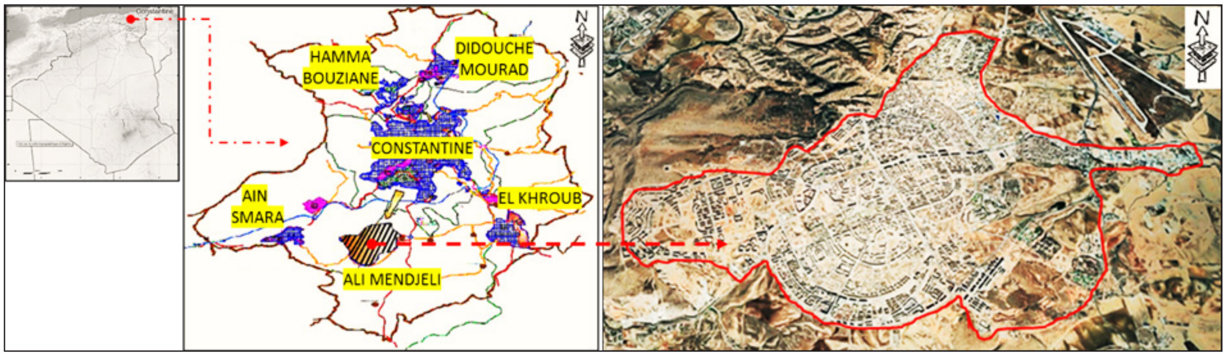

Figure 1. Geographical location of the new town of Ali Mendjeli (source: authors)

It should also be noted that Ali Mendjeli's designers wanted to create a "strong, structured, appealing, and job-creating centre" (Pachaud, 2005). Consequently, theyselected in the general organisation of the city a hierarchical centrality whose apex is a main centre, gathering commercial, tertiary, and administrative activities (Fourra, 2005), positioned at the intersection of the city's two main boulevards (figure 2). At a lower level, there are five secondary centres that, with their facilities, are designed to connect the neighbourhood units. Local amenities and services that are situated within neighbourhood units provide the final level of centrality.

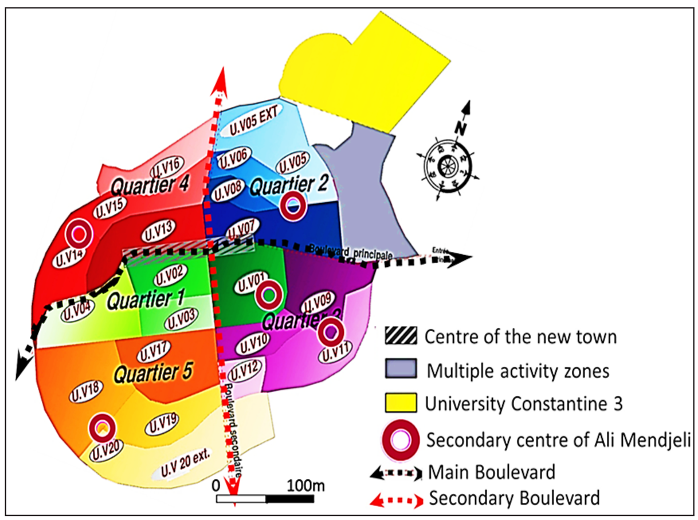

Figure 2. Hierarchy of Centrality in Ali Mendjeli and its Different Districts (Authors)

In his research on Beirut, Boudisseau had previously determined that "*urban environments are the product of a game of private actors, whether individuals or networks, following the logics of investment, speculation, dominance, and interests*." He adds that this in no way permits "*ignoring the public actors participating in this process of spatial formation*" (Boudisseau, 2001, p163). The situation in the new town of Ali Mendjeli is not dissimilar to that in Beirut. Indeed, the development of its spaces, particularly commercial ones, was initially framed and organised by public actors (notably the OPGI and the DUC) through the implementation of certain norms and standards (despite their insufficiency). During the first few years of this city's existence, the number of businesses grew to the level of UV 06 because the OPGI sold commercial spaces on the ground floors of residential buildings.

However, this commercial structure of UV 06 was insufficient at the time, and the new town served few or none of the needs of its residents. As a result, the public authorities permitted the installation of informal commerce in the shape of a "souk" in the heart of UV 06. Before the growth of anarchy and filthiness compelled the authorities to remove it, this served the entire city as a marketplace for a number of years. Prior to this judgement, however, numerous attempts were made to regularise the situation, including in 2006 when the authorities attempted to implement Decree n°1079 of July 24, 2005 (amending Decree n°912 of July 28, 2004). The fruitless efforts came to an end in 2007 when the souk was completely full of people. This marked the start of a long process of changing where businesses are located in the new town.

Indeed, if the dazzling development of retail trade outside the Souk has undeniably bolstered the importance of trade in the urban economy in several cities (Stadnicki, 2009), it has also resulted in a reorganisation of Ali Mendjeli's pioneering neighbourhood unit (UV 06), which is now regarded as the city's central business district. This transformation was exemplified by the concentration and densification of commercial operations; the regrouping of commercial premises in the core of the UV 06; and the specialisation of stores, which we shall describe in further detail below. We emphasise that the new settlement of Ali Mendjeli had an unauthorised, open-air fruit and vegetable market in UV 08. Although it was convenient and bustling for the city's residents, who could shop there without leaving the city, this market was also disorderly and unhygienic; it was later replaced by the El Ritaj retail centre (Figure 3). However, the success of the latter greatly encouraged the building of a mall (by the same owner and with the same name) that was larger and offered a greater variety of services and activities.

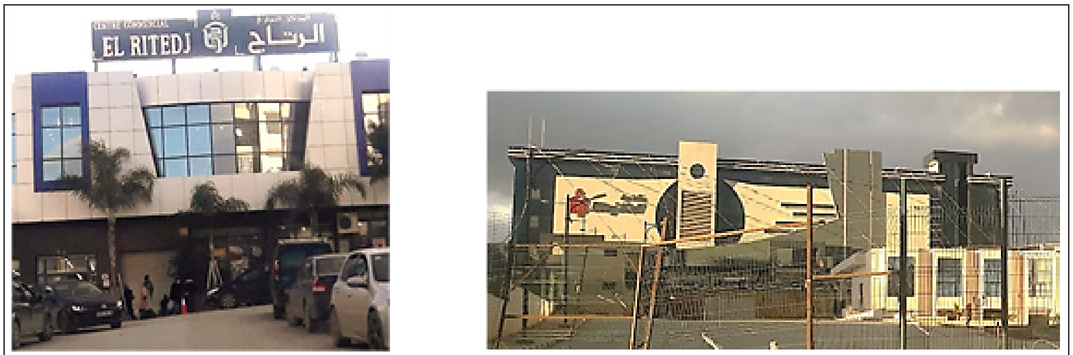

Figure 3. El Ritadj shopping centre on the left, El Ritadj Mall on the right

AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

Since the establishment of the first retail centre (El Ritaj 1) in 2008, shopping centres in Ali Mendjeli have continued to develop and flourish. This style of commerce has been innovative not only for the new city, but for the entire Constantine's metropolitan area. In fact, through their form and content, which are mostly based on Western models, they have succeeded in appealing not only the citizens of Ali Mendjeli but also a public from all socioeconomic classes and all of Constantine's satellite cities!This attractive capacity generated by the Ali Mendjeli commercial malls is not new. It is an old phenomenon that can be observed everywhere, indicating the extent to which commercial space contributes to urban sprawl and even drives the evolution of cities. The commercial machinery has never ceased to rebuild the urban life of cities through its potential to attract flows and establish micro-centrals in both city centres and on the city's periphery. Their significance and influence in urban life have not been decreased by the transition from bazaars to shopping malls. On the morphology of the city, on the social practices and representations of the population, on the sites of consumption, and on the interaction between the centre and the periphery, shopping malls continue to have an impact!

The present work highlights the effect of shopping centres on the reorganisation and change of space in the new town of Ali Mendjeli, a town that remained a dormitory town for several years after its inception before a new urbanity gradually emerged. Specifically, the question is how the commercial centres that have been built in Ali Mendjeli have contributed to its general territorial dynamics, even to the point of changing its social image, which was hitherto and frequently regarded as that of a suburb?

In addition, the identification of these development poles is typically based on a number of variables, including population density or size, existing amenities, or research on consumer spending behaviour (Shoumaker, 1998). In order to comprehend the two commercial centres stated above in Ali Mendjeli, we have chosen to employ the approach of "floating" observation in our study. The first phase involves making contact with the owner, traders, and consumers through informal interviews and discussions, as well as analysing existing movement patterns and commercial concentrations (Lakehal, 2013).The second quantitative stage consists of quantifying the existing commercial activities in the two commercial centres based on the types of stores (clothing, accessories and leather goods, household goods, services and local shops, maintenance and repair services, health-related services, and other commercial services).

COMMERCIAL DYNAMICS OF ALI MENDJELI THROUGH ITS SHOPPING CENTRES

Parallel to its physical and demographic expansion, the new town of Ali Mendjeli continues to extend its influence over the entire Constantine's metropolitan area, particularly through the formation of commercial poles. In fact, this effect has grown substantially with the establishment of a number of shopping malls, which have greatly contributed to its urban centrality. This phenomena of centrality crystallisation has definitely characterised the urbanisation process of this city, where there is now a shift in the planned centrality and a disparity between what was designed and what is really practiced!

Indeed, despite the fact that the developers (architects and urban planners from URBACO) intended a superposition between the city's major centre and its main axis, the economic actors and common residents have decided otherwise. Today, twenty years after its founding, the new town's centre appears to have settled among the oldest neighbourhood units, UV 06, 07, and 08. In these areas of the city, commercial spaces have been developed, spawning numerous shopping streets and three shopping malls (El Ritaj 1, La Coupole, and Sans Visa). A little further out, in UV 02, a similar commercial concentration phenomenon can be found (Lakehal, 2020). It's caused by the fact that El Ritaj Mall is right next to it and that businesses are still opening up along the city's secondary boulevard up to the line that divides Constantine 2 University.Although commerce is expanding and dispersed in all four corners of Ali Mendjeli, the focus of this study is on these two major commercial centres: El Ritaj and El Ritaj Mall(Figure 4), or Ritaj 1 and Ritaj 2, to use the popular terms usually used to refer to them. Our decision is mostly based on the fact that these two shopping centres are important to the way Ali Mendjeli works and have a big effect on the city of Constantine.

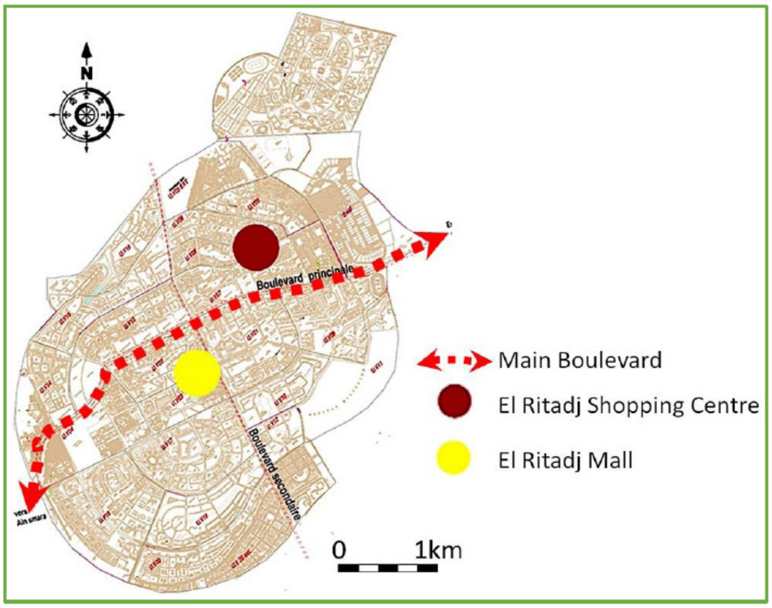

Figure 4. Location of the El Ritadj commercial centre and El Ritadj mall in Ali Mendjeli (source: S. Haifa SIFI)

El Ritaj shopping centre: a pioneering role in the restructuring of the commercial apparatus

If public players oversee the conception and operation of commercial initiatives upstream, it is the private actors who ensure their execution. This is precisely the case with the El Ritadj retail centre, also known as "Souk El Ritadj" by many customers. Inaugurated in 2008 at UV 06, in an area that already held various facilities, this establishment was founded by its promoter, Leknouche, who spent all of his resources to persuade the Wali of Constantine of the necessity of acquiring the land of the old souk in order to carry out his vision. He was inspired by his deep knowledge of the land and, above all, by his confidence that this location would become one of the most commercially bustling areas in Ali Mendjeli, where residents were already shopping and whose appeal was already assured! In this regard, he asserted, *"There was nothing better for the commercial dynamics of the new city than to replace the souk with a retail mall."* And to maximise his chances, he gave his building the name "El Ritaj" to play on the meaning of the name. Using the same word for the fabric that covers the Kaaba in Mecca, the developer Leknouche intended to "make his mark" on the new city (Lakehal, 2013; p. 234).

A strategic position and easy accessibility

The location chosen for the El Ritaj retail centre proved to be significant due to its vast space-time accessibility potential, which made it a highly sought-after location among numerous promoters. It is located in the north-east of the city, one kilometre from the university's main entrance and two kilometres from Constantine University 02, and a few metres from the UV 07 and UV 05 bus stops; it serves a large portion of UV 06 and a portion of Mohamed Boudiaf Boulevard, which separates UV 06 from UV 07 and UV5. In fact, if the first neighbourhood unit is organised around a succession of commercial spaces where each block is surrounded by commercial activities on the ground floor of the apartment buildings, then the commercial boulevard will ensure the junction of the two aforementioned neighbourhood units is already a main boulevard where there are two other covered shopping centres, the BNA bank and the Hocine hotel.

A multitude and diversity of commercial activities

El Ritadj commercial centre occupies an area of 11,000 m^2 and is comprised of two storeys and a roof. It consists of 186 units, 182 of which are currently inhabited. Figure 5 shows that the majority of its economic activities consist of services and proximity commerce (61.54%), apparel (27.47%), accessories and leather products (6.59%), and domestic goods (4.4%). The bottom level contains 97 food-related enterprises, including 75 fruit and vegetable stalls; 15 meat and poultry shops; 5 fishmongers; 2 pastry shops; and 8 shops selling telephone items (facing the facade).The first floor is devoted to the sale of all personal equipment, including the following divisions: 50 locations for the sale of apparel and footwear; 12 locations for accessories and leather goods; 8 locations for domestic products; 3 locations for cafés and restaurants; 2 locations for the sale of books; and 2 locations for the sale of packaged items. In addition, the shopping centre contains a huge parking lot, a children's carousel, and a prayer area near its eastern entrance. This El Ritaj retail centre employs 200 sales associates and 20 security guards (who patrol the parking lot and the interior of the centre).

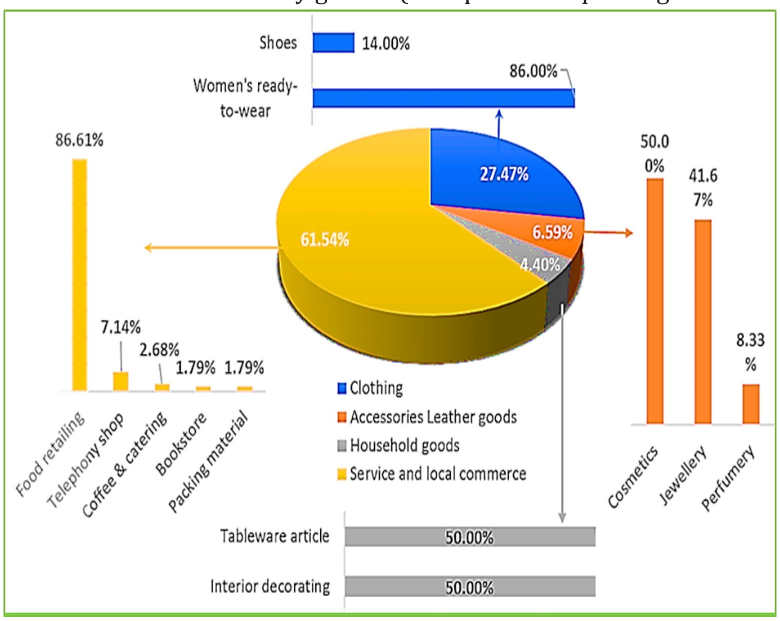

Figure 5. Distribution of commercial activities in the El Ritadj centre (Source: S. Haifa SIFI based on the owner of the El Ritadj shopping centre)

El Ritaj, a space of centrality and a grouping of commercial establishments

The El Ritaj shopping centre has become one of Ali Mendjeli's most exciting up-and-coming growth hubs as a result of its diverse commercial offering and high-quality interior spaces. Shortly after its debut, it became the "trigger" for the emergence of new business endeavours and even other retail centres. Indeed, its creation at the level of UV06 led to the evolution of commerce into new forms as it further accentuated the concentration and densification, in its orbit, of commercial establishments such as shopping malls (Sans Visa and La Coupole) and service providers such as the BNA-bank or the Hocine hotel, ... (figure 6). Motivated by the desire to take advantage of the shopping center's allure, many of the retailers we questioned do not conceal their placement strategy, a plan whose main "*goal is to increase user visibility*"! According to Wayens and Grimmeau (2006), "*companies of this type perform better when they are joined together than when they are operating alone*" (Wayens and Grimmeau, 2006, p. 2).

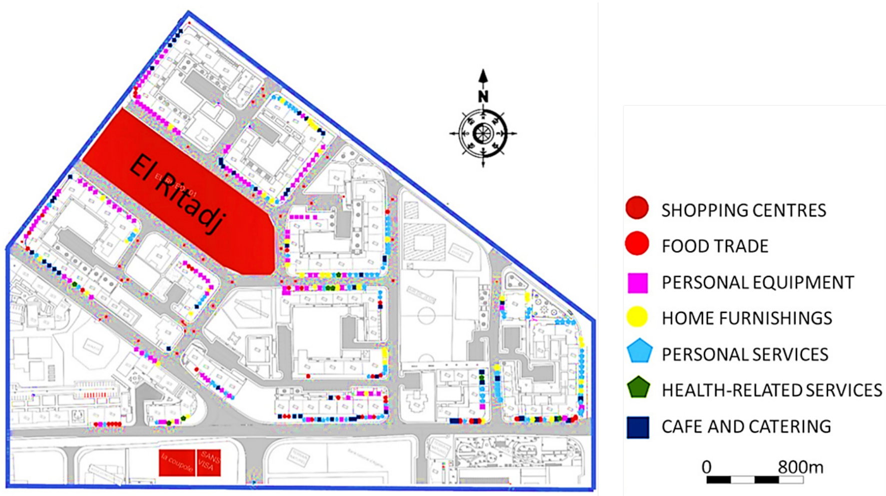

Figure 6. Concentration of commercial activities around the RITADJ shopping centre (source: S. Haifa SIFI)

As Bouzahzah (2015, p.206) notes in relation to the city of Biskra, this clustering of commercial establishments around the El Ritajcentre has led to a specialisation that "*translates into a strong concentration or even a dominance of sales outlets offering similar goods or addressing a very specific clientele*." This specialisation has evolved particularly in recent years in the personal products trade, mainly in women's clothes (Figure 7), where the majority of traders work in a complementary fashion and contribute in some way to the centre'sattractiveness and vitality. A merchant whose business is just a few metres from El Ritaj testifies: "*After the destruction of the souk, we strategically gathered around the retail centre. We are all aware that selling women's clothes is one of the most successful endeavours, especially since many women come to El Ritaj to purchase veggies and fruit before almost impulsively visiting our shops. If a consumer cannot find what she is looking for in one store, she will visit a neighbouring establishment. Due to this segmentation and specialisation, we have been able to ensure the existence of our company''*.

Figure 7. Specialisation of the ready-to-wear trade in the vicinity of the El Ritadj centre (source: S. Haifa SIFI)

Another dealer describes his method: "*I chose to set up shop alongside these vendors and around the El Ritajcentre because of the competitive pricing. I am fully aware that the ready-to-wear retailers inside the shopping centre charge outrageous prices, so my approach is to cut my prices to attract some of the El Ritaj shoppers''*. The success of this technique of specialisation has prompted retailers within the El RITAJ shopping centre to adopt the same approach. At the front of El Ritaj (Figure 8), a shopkeeper specialising in the sale of telephone accessories explains: "*There are no telephones in El Ritaj. The proprietor has specialised in this portion for the sale of telephone accessories in order to make shopping easier for customers. If a person wants to purchase a telephone, there is a whole department devoted to the product. They need not travel anywhere''*.

This cluster of stores surrounding the El Ritajcentre has contributed significantly to the appeal of the area. This traffic involves both automobiles and pedestrians, whose access has been substantially enhanced by the geographical and temporal proximity of the numerous services. This commercial facility has become an integral part of the urban experience and a driving force for the business activity in the vicinity. It is both a factor in centrality and a big sign of it. It is a place where new social activities are happening and where the building blocks of a new urbanity are coming together.

Figure 8. Grouping of shops selling telephone articles on the south side of the El Ritaj shopping centre (source: S. Haifa SIFI)

El Ritaj Mall: the driving force behind the Ali Mendjeli commercial centre

Inaugurated on April 16, 2016, El Ritaj Mall is likewise the work of promoter Leknouche, who did not err in betting on the future commercial appeal of UV 02. As evidence, the entire Ali Mendjeli neighbourhood, where the building is located, has become a true business hub. The success of his El Ritaj shopping centre gained him the confidence of the local authorities, who, he claims, told him of all the large-scale projects planned for Ali Mendjeli, including the bus station, the tramway line that crosses UV 02, and the University of Constantine 02. Proud of his social capital, the promoter Leknouche told us, "*It was the occasion for me to submit my request for the acquisition of property in order to carry out a major project, in this instance, the multipurpose centre 'Ritaj Mall''*. If the accuracy of his statements remains unverified, it is crucial to note that the promoter did not acquire the land as part of the investment but rather through an auction for one billion and six hundred million (Algerian centimes).

Spatial distribution and types of shops

El Ritaj Mall occupies a total area of 13,000 square metres, of which 7,000 square metres are constructed. Ceramic materials are used to create a sophisticated and luxury home design. The bottom floor contains a huge supermarket, mobile operator sales outlets (Ooredo and Mobilis), and a market with 88 fruit and vegetable stands, 19 butcher shops, one bakery, six fishmongers, and three pastry stores. While the first floor is allocated for the sale of personal and domestic items as well as personalised services, the second floor consists primarily of pizzerias, cafeterias, and a few ready-to-wear stores. There is a total of 473 commercial spaces in the centre, of which 297 are occupied by seven principal forms of commerce: apparel, accessories, and leather goods; home goods; services and local trade; maintenance and repair services; health-related services; and other commercial services (Figure 9).

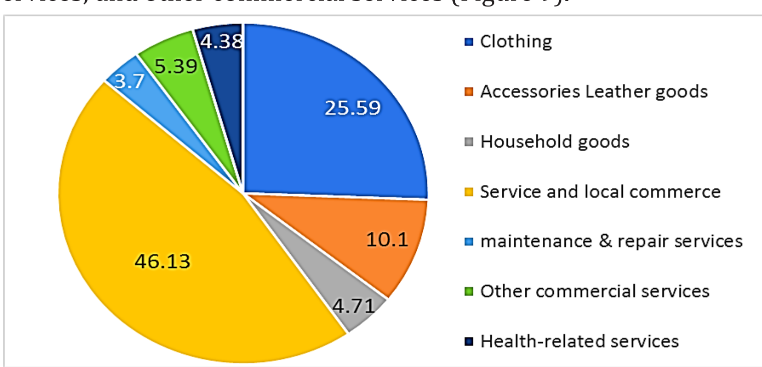

Figure 9. Types of trade in El Ritadj Mall(source: S. Haifa SIFI)

Table 1 displays a selection of products and a relatively diverse offering. The majority of commercial space is used by retail and personal services, which offer services at extremely affordable costs. Local services and shops comprise 63.73 percent of the mall's commercial activity and are allocated as follows: There are 33 restaurants and cafeterias; 12 food stores; three stores selling computer equipment; eleven multi-service kiosks; two telephone stores; one cigarette shop; two bookstores; and a tailor. Commercial services come in second, accounting for 8.82 percent of total commercial activities (03 cyberspaces, an estate agency, two travel agencies, one private recruitment agency, one language school, and a dry cleaner).

Table 1. distribution of shop types in the El Ritaj commercial center. Source: S. Haifa SIFI

Type of business	Commercial activity	Number	Total
Clothing	Ready-to-wear for men Women's clothing Children's clothing Shoes	15 30 21 10	76
Accessories Leather goods	Women's accessories Cosmetics Jewellery Sale of sewing accessories	8 8 11 3	30
Household items	Furniture Sale of household crockery Interior decoration (carpets...) Sale of household appliances	5 3 4 2	14
Local services and shops	Catering-Cafeteria Food trade Hairdressing salon Bath & Shower Multi-service kiosk Tobacco shop Sale of packaging materials Shop selling animal accessories Florist Phone shop	44 43 6 1 24 5 2 3 1 8	137
Maintenance and repair services	Hardware Spare part Sale and repair of computer equipment	3 2 6	11
Other market services	Photographer Driving school Cyber café Real estate agency Travel agency Advertising agency	1 2 3 5 3 2	16
Health-related services	Gynaecologist Dentist Analysis laboratory Treatment room Pharmacy Medical equipment	2 2 2 2 3 2	13
Total			297

With a rate of 7.84%, accessories and leather goods come in third place. They consist of two fabric stores, five cosmetics stores, and one jewellery store. The fourth position is occupied by maintenance and repair services, which account for 6.86% of the total and include one hardware store, two businesses selling spare parts, three shops selling and repairing telephone equipment, and one carpenter. Health-related services occupy the fifth position with two pharmacies, a gynaecologypractice, an internal medicine practice, a dentist, and a medical analysis laboratory. Clothing represents 3.92 percent of all activity, including two women's clothing stores, one children's clothing store, and one shoe store. With one furniture store and two crockery stores, household goods occupy the last position in this classification. In response to this diversity, the shopping centre employs about 6,200 people. If the owner of the shopping centre is to be believed, this figure will certainly quadruple within the next several years, as he plans to construct a leisure park and a multi-story parking garage with 2,400 spaces.

El Ritaj Mall's commercial organisation logic and polarity

El Ritaj Mall has proven to be a significant factor in the redeployment and modernization of Ali Mendjeli's commercial infrastructure. The choice of its location depends on the business logic that responds to the many preoccupations of its owner, but in practice corresponds to techniques of attraction or even indisputable commercial polarity.Among these approaches, we may cite:

The location of the food shop within the shopping centre: Due to the fact that it permits a very high rate of visits and recurrence, the food industry has become a source of attraction for the shopping malls where the bulk of consumers go to do their shopping. The manager of the El Ritaj Mall revealed to us that *"one of Leknouche's (the owner's) major tactics was the development of the food locomotive within the mall, so our supermarket enables us to attract more consumers and create greater revenue."* This technique for boosting the attractiveness of shopping centres based on the integration of the food industry is becoming increasingly effective. The complaint submitted by the owner of a bookstore in the El Ritaj Mall is consistent with this. Since the placement of his sign, he has seen that the bulk of his clients stumble across his store after doing their shopping at the butcher or the grocer, and that is when they see his sign. He stated that people come to him to purchase books and other school supplies because of the food store.

The use of international brands and the modernisation of the shopping centre: Economic operators have embraced a new strategy in order to contribute to the transformation of Ali Mendjeli's new town into a true commercial hub. It is a matter of appealing to worldwide brands to attract an affluent consumer while simultaneously enhancing the reputation of the commercial centre. In this regard, the owner of El Ritadj Mall disclosed that "the success of his first mall, El Ritadj, inspired him to develop and modernise his second mall (El Ritadj Mall) by investing more in the standing of the stores and by integrating international brands such as Celio, LC Waikiki, Jennyfer,… " Even though he thought of teaming up with international brands long before El Ritaj Mall opened, the bad reputation of the new town in its first few years made it hard for him to put this plan into action.

However, the proprietor had difficulty incorporating these multinational companies into the shopping centre. This is demonstrated by the scepticism of "Diamantine" and "Trèfle" in 2016, two brands who hesitated greatly before accepting Leknouche's offer to invest in his organisation. Today, five years later, it is evident that these two businesses are pleased, since they see El Ritaj Mall as one of the most alluring retail centres in the country.The inclusion of these brands has greatly enhanced El Ritaj Mall's economic impact, which now attracts roughly 17,000 visitors every day (according to the mall owner). Its attractiveness is enhanced by its modern architecture, the authenticity of the prevailing atmosphere, and the furniture that punctuates its interior spaces, such as the panoramic escalators and lifts positioned in the central atrium of the structure (Lakehal, 2020). *"Newness attracts people,"* says the owner of El Ritaj Mall, who has made no secret of his desire to further modernise the mall and establish it as a regional leader in the leisure and retail sectors, catering to professionals and consumers alike.

The location of the car park in front of the shopping centre: Unlike the city centre of Constantine which, like other city centres in the Maghreb, suffers from asphyxiation, difficult accessibility and a lack of parking spaces, the shopping centres of Ali Mendjeli are systematically equipped with their own car parks, often in their immediate vicinity. The setting up of these car parks is the result of a common desire on the part of the promoters of these shopping centres to make their establishments more accessible, both in terms of time and space. Thus, they wanted to distinguish themselves from the city centre and certain districts of Ali Mendjeli which are not easily accessible, as the owner of El Ritaj Mall states: *"With the frequent traffic jams and the problems of road traffic in Ali Mendjeli, it becomes more difficult to park (...). The creation of a car park has been a major asset for me to satisfy my customers"* (Figure 10).

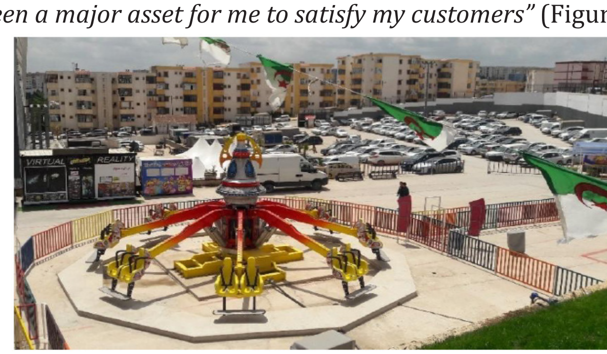

Figure 10. Car Park of the Ritaj Mall (Source: S. Haifa SIFI)

A place for various cultural, religious, and recreational events: It is evident that El Ritaj Mall is no longer merely a collection of stores and brands, but rather a genuine destination for recreation, relaxation, and cultural entertainment. This cultural and recreational vocation of the location is enabled by the organising of a series of cultural events and the commemoration of various days (Women's Day, Mother's Day, Ramadan nights…) within it. These events are held so frequently that they represent the establishment's "specialty" (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Women's Day celebration at Ritadj Mall on March 8, 2018 (Source: S. Haifa SIFI)

THE IMPACT OF THE TWO SHOPPING CENTRES

Changing Business Practices and Social Representations

The inauguration of these contemporary facilities has been accompanied by the construction of unique environmental conditions, resulting in a shift in the deployed activities and social representations. In fact, based on the surveys and qualitative interviews we conducted with consumers, we were able to determine that users no longer regard shopping malls as only sites of commerce and supply, but rather as social, recreational, and relaxing spaces. Consequently, they are venues where individuals shop for a variety of reasons. A sixty-year-old Constantine resident told us: *"I visit these retail centres because I find them to be quite convenient. I go to El Ritaj every weekend to take advantage of the inexpensive costs and abundance of things. It is also an opportunity for me to escape Constantine's downtown. "*As one citizen attests, other Ali Mendjeli residents visit shopping malls just for retail therapy*"I go to El Ritaj Mall with a shopping list at the end of the day, specifically to get... There I found everything. I begin by visiting the grocery store and conclude with the meat, fruit, and vegetable sections."*

During our interviews, we discovered a habit that relates to another aspect of retail centres. This is a category of more or less senior users who appropriate the mini-mobility areas (benches, seats…), where they sit throughout the day without making purchases, merely seeking to pass the time and create relationships. This social activity is not exclusive to any one gender. It is about men and women wanting to escape the solitude of home life and the monotony of the daily grind. A 65-year-old woman who lives close to the shopping centre tells us, *"I've developed the habit of coming here practically every day. I sit in almost the same spot. I sometimes bring my newspaper and I'm silent. I've made a lot of friends, to the point where police officers and shop owners know me and sometimes bring me food."*

This woman's situation is not unique. Our poll revealed that many individuals from many social classes view these commercial areas as places of leisure and relaxation, where they can roam freely and without compulsion to purchase. Here is an example of a store owner who appears so embarrassed by this practise that he demands its prohibition: *"Everyone agrees that El Ritaj Mall is very attractive and that the shopkeepers make a good living as a result of the mall's popularity, but I can confirm that the majority of visitors come merely to browse the stores, frequently without making a purchase. If I were the building manager, I would have demanded that the strollers cease coming here."*

Diversification of the customer base

82% of all visitors to the two shopping centres of Ali Mendjeli are female, according to our polls of their clientele. This can be explained by the fact that women have a stronger propensity to spend than men. Young adults between the ages of 20 and 40 already make up 76% of users who regard these shopping malls as being an attractive place to visit in groups or couples, particularly in the consumption sections (pizzerias, cafeterias, etc.). 28% of these young people are students who, with the opening of El Ritaj Mall, come to enjoy themselves during their lunch break. One of the pupil's comments, *"The Mall's opening in 2016 was a revolution for us." No longer are we required to dine at the fast-food restaurants opposite our university... We arrange with our friends to have lunch at El Ritaj, and we take advantage of the opportunity to window shop."* 24% of users are civil servants, followed by 16% each of shopkeepers, artisans, and consumers in the liberal professions. Despite their insolvency, 12% of unemployed individuals are also users of these centres.

Regarding the time slots associated with these occurrences, we have identified three primary time slots. The first corresponds to weekdays and, in particular, mornings, which are convenient for students and, in particular, non-working women who shop during the day. The second coincides with lunchtime for students and government employees who work in close proximity to shopping centres. The third corresponds to the afternoons and weekends and is open to all age groups. Concerning where consumers live, it's important to note that 54% of them live in the new town of Ali Mendjeli, 28% are from the city of Constantine and its many districts, and the other 18% are from smaller towns nearby (Figure 12).

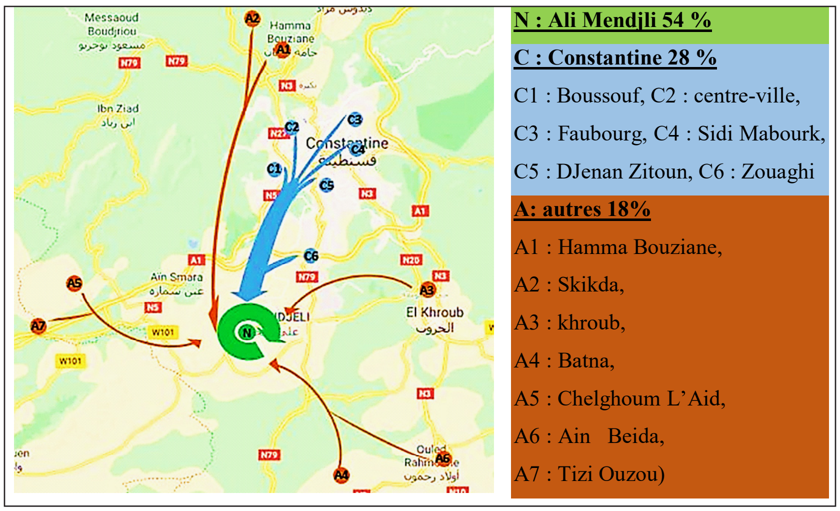

Figure 12. Place of origin of shopping centre customers (S.HaifaSifi)

CONCLUSION

The meteoric rise of the commercial apparatus in Ali Mendjeli has prompted the establishment of commercial centres whose promoters (private investors) are among the most significant players in the emergence of these new commercial forms. Their participation in the modernization of business activity is not an accident, but rather the outcome of varied and strategic location decisions. These economic actors are predominantly affluent and influential merchants who have already taken advantage of several opportunities in other regions or even cities. This is the case with the owner of El Ritaj 1 and El Ritaj Mall, who is already an expert in the spare parts industry and the proprietor of a MALL in Oran and another retail centre in Algiers. This business owner was mostly motivated by Ali Mendjeli's growing business scene, as well as the fact that land was easy to find and the city was growing economically.

Through the case of El Ritaj and El Ritaj Mall, we have highlighted in this essay the undeniable role of these new commercial forms in the emergence and development of the commercial polarities in a city that was classified as a dormitory town for less than a decade. This infrastructure has caused a lengthy process of "refining" the commercial apparatus of the new town due to their modern and opulent appearances, as well as the variety and quantity of activities and services they provide. Consequently, they have created a polarity whose impact goes far beyond the boundaries of the new city. Their influence on urban behaviours and social representations validates the commonly held belief in urban studies that commerce affects and (re)qualifies the (new) city's space.

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