

The Reality of Urban Heritage in the Aures Region: The Case of the Old Dachra in the Town of Menaa (Batna Province, Eastern Algeria)

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Received: January 03, 2023

Accepted: January 23, 2023

Published: January 28, 2023

Abstract

Besides the importance of the architectural and urban heritage as a pillar of modern economics, it constitutes a significant element that contributes to determining a set of collective values that assist in building the national character, and serve the historical extension of the local identity. Furthermore, it comprises a bountiful source that provides lessons for researchers of all specializations. This explains the interest of different countries in the ancient cores of cities through the enactment of protection and maintenance measures for this heritage, which is a subject to constant alterations that threaten its demise due to the absence of research and efforts that go beyond mere protection, and instead seek to adapt the heritage to the requirements of the modern city without prejudice to the constants that constitute its specificity as heritage, in order to guarantee its permanence. This paper deals with the problem of the urban heritage preservation within the ancient cores of the Algerian cities. It addresses one of the forms of this heritage represented in the old Dachra of the town of Menaa (Auras region) in eastern Algeria, along with the changes it is exposed to. The results of the study showed the deficiency of local policies in restricting interventions that threaten the demise of this heritage.

Key words: Urban heritage, Dachra system, Menaa.

INTRODUCTION

Urban heritage and the local collective identity constitute an inseparable pair, the components of which cannot be separated in time or space; for the tangible and incorporeal heritage is the code by which the elements of identity are recognized as a collective awareness of this heritage's components, which represents a vessel for a collective heritage. Therefore, it forms what is known as the collective self that distinguishes a group from others, and protects it from fusion in an undefined world established by communication technologies that have been shrinking the specifics of the local, in face of the widespread of the universal individual concept with a global language. The urban heritage in this sense constitutes a mirror through which the history and culture of society is reflected, not to mention that it serves as a guiding element for a collective vision that paints the features of the latter's future based on local determinants that preserve its distinction and prevents it from disintegration in a crucible of globalization.

From a purely economic perspective, attention to heritage, tangible or intangible, contributes to the promotion of activities that aid local development. By virtue of establishing a sustainable economy that stimulates the appreciation of heritage, as well as the transition from viewing the latter as a burden on the local budget to a tool for generating added value that combines preserving collective memory and the creation of jobs. Thus, contribute to the development of a sense of local identity within a three-pillar integrated approach: Exploitation of geographical heritage (scenes, natural sites), protection of urban heritage and marketing of intangible heritage.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Algeria boasts a rich and diverse urban heritage, which is no less than the diversity and abundance of the natural landscape draped over the vast geographical extension of the country. The Dachra system in the Aures Mountains represents a significant example, which does not obtain its fair share of research and analysis, despite the efforts made in this field. Hence, In this paper, we review the problem of urban heritage in the Dachra of Menaa (south of Batna Province), as the choice of preserving it has become an actual wager for local administrators in light of a progressing

fragility that combines the physical deterioration of traditional architecture on the one hand, and its targeting by irresponsible interventions by the population that threatens its demise on the other. Moreover, the existence of a real estate crisis that reflects the failure to accompany the urban policy with an effective real estate one that translates locally into mechanisms which contain the housing demand and preserve the heritage.

The aforementioned indicates that the research problem revolves around the state of the urban heritage in the old Dachra of Menaa under which these sub-questions fall:

- What is urban heritage?
- What is the reality of urban heritage in the town of Menaa?
- What elements distinguish it from other heritage sites?

In order to answer these questions, we must first outline concepts pertaining to heritage and identity along with their levels, and clarify the importance of the relationship between them. Subsequently, we showcase the characteristics of the urban heritage of Menaa Dachra, its physical condition, and the extent of its social life pulse, as well as inspect the manner by which the population deals with this heritage as an urban heritage.

Case Study Presentation “Menaa Dachra”: Distinguished Urban and Architectural Heritage

The Dachra’s Geographical Location

The Menaa Dachra is located within the territory of the commune of Menaa, which in turn is located within the Auras cluster that forms a part of the Saharan Atlas extending towards the southwest/northeast of Algeria. Additionally, Wadi Abdi and National Road No. 87, which extend in the same direction, constitute the main components of the site. Owing to the elements of natural unity, this location lead to its openness to the desert’s climatic currents, and ensured its connectivity on the south/north axis between Biskra and Batna, the center of the province.

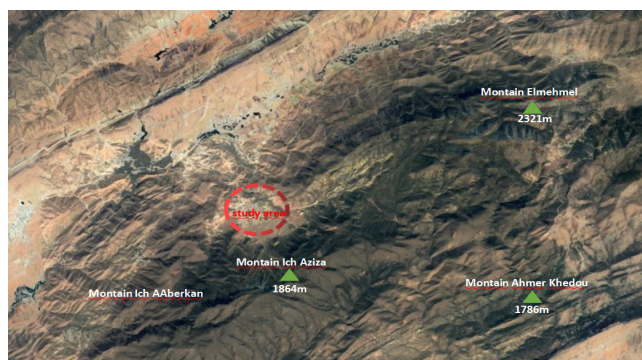


Figure 1. The Geographical Location of Menaa within the Aures Cluster

The Position

Al-Dachra (“Thaqli’ath” meaning the castle) is located on a rocky hill at the junction of Abdi valley with Bu Zaina valley, where the altitude at the lowest point in the valley does not exceed 926¹ m above sea level. The valley surrounds Al-Dachra from the east and the south. As for the western side, the Dachra ends at the outskirts of the agricultural terraces. Thus, the place is subject to the same principles of the field exploitation system in the Aures region, which combines the elements of fortification and proximity to agricultural lands. It is also bordered from the north by National Road No.87.

The Foundation

There exist no available data regarding the date of the Berbers’ first settlement in the Dechra of Menaa; however, Roman ruins in Al-Dachera date back to the second century AD (201-146) (Meddour, O. 2009)². The arrival of Beni Abbes

- 1 Plan Directeur D’aménagement et D’urbanisme de La Commune de Menaa (Master Plan for Development and Urban Planning of the Menaa Commune),1998
- 2 Meddour Oualid, Urban Transformations in a Mountainous Region: The Case of Wadi Abdi (Aures: Teniet El-Abed, Chir, Menaa,Tigherghar), University of Constantine 2009.

represents a historical witness that still exists today; a religiously oriented family whom arrived from Sakia El-Hamra and settled Along the Dechra, where they established a mosque on the Qadiriya corner that still exists today, in addition to the family residence, which turned into a museum that includes the tombs of the leaders of Beni Abbes³

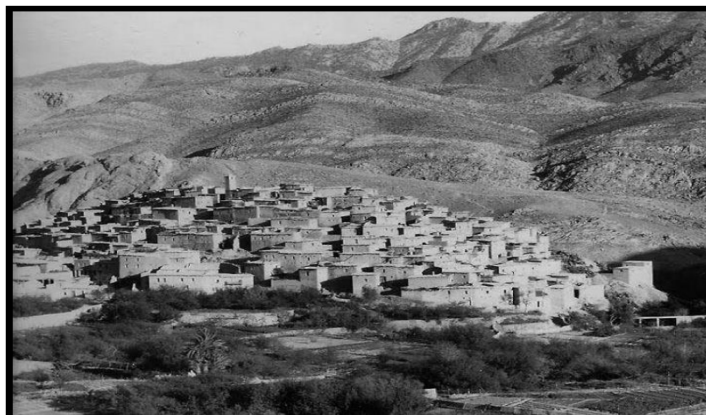


Figure 2. The Dechra of Menaâ 1900 Source: Cultural and Heritage Association "Tafsout", Menaâ

It is believed that the origin of the name «Menaâ» refers to a feature enjoyed by the Dechra's site, which is useful for fortifying and hiding from the enemy. The origin of the inhabitants of Menaâ has been debated between Arab and Berber origins belonging to the grandfather «Burke» who settled in the castle of «Balul».

Al-Dechra constitutes the first core of Menaâ's aggregation, which is 86 km from the state center towards the south. The city later developed from this very core and extended along the National Road No. 87, to appear later on in different stages many neighborhoods, such as «EJEMDAN» and «BERBI'A» in the west, «EKHF OFOUZ» neighborhood and «BUJBER» neighborhood in the north on the southern bank of Bouzina valley, and «AMSHAD» neighborhood in the east.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Urban Analysis of Al-Dechra

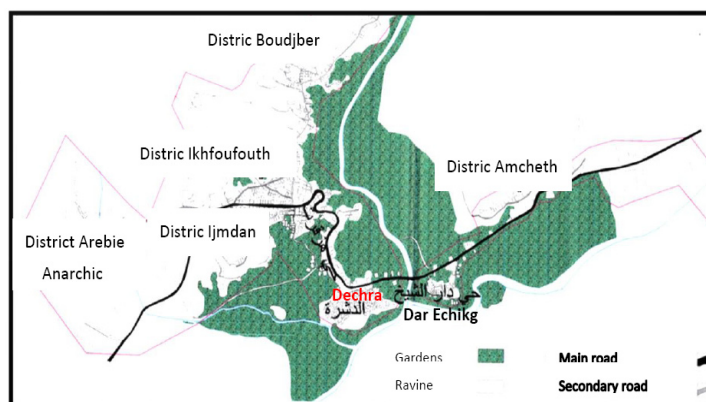


Figure 3. Location of the Menaâ Dechra in Relation to the City and Groves / Source: The Commune's Technical Departments + Researcher's Treatment

Menaâ's Dechra is defined by a special urban character, as it differs from the well-known Aures Dechra pattern, and it also differs from the «Thaqli'ath» pattern, which was known as a site for food storage (Granary). One of the characteristics that add to the affluence of the urban heritage of Menaâ's Dechra is its integration with the attractive elements of the landscape, the «Thasriveth» waterfalls, and its view of the extended groves.

From an urban perspective, Menaâ's Dechra combines, on the one hand, some of the yard's characteristics regarding building materials, and on the other hand, it includes many of the characteristics of the palace system in terms of the urban structure, the presence of the wall, and several covered paths. This is what we will discuss in certain detail.

³ Monographie des potentialités socioéconomiques et touristiques (Monograph of socio-economic and tourism potentialities)

Urban Structuring

Menaâ's Dechra displays a model of the traditional city, as it is distinguished by the density of its buildings and its organic form, which surrounds the "Sidi Musa Mosque" that is located at the top of the hill. The development of the buildings in Al-Dechra went through different stages, the first core of which was formed around the mosque on an area of 2324 square meters, then expanded east and west to reach an area of 12058 square meters, and in a third stage, the area of the Dechra reached 19109 square meters. Moreover, the number of families in it reached 151 families with 877 people, according to the data acquired from official bodies⁴.

The most important characteristics of the Dechra structure are the following:

The Road Network

The road network in Dechra is characterized by a zigzag pattern and extends in parallel with the level of altitude; it also varies in terms of level, we notice:

- There are five (05) main roads connecting the neighborhoods, whose width varies from 2.5 to 3 meters. These roads end at five entrances to the Dechra, one of which represents the principal entrance used by people foreign to the Dechra, this entrance is the "ASQIF EL-QAHWA" and is located along the national road that passes by Al-Dechra, while the rest of the entrances connect Al-Dechra with orchards and mountain grazing areas. These four entrances are intended for residents only, as the buildings touching at the outskirts of the Dechra form a wall that protects it.
- Secondary (sub) roads, with which islands (residential groups) are formed in accordance. Their width varies from 1.5 to 2 meters.
- Paths with a dead end (cul-de-sac) and can be considered as tertiary paths that end at residence's doors.
- Covered paths: of which there are 17, it is the part of the road that is covered with the same materials as the roofing of the houses and seems similar to the "Sabbat" in the Saharan palaces.

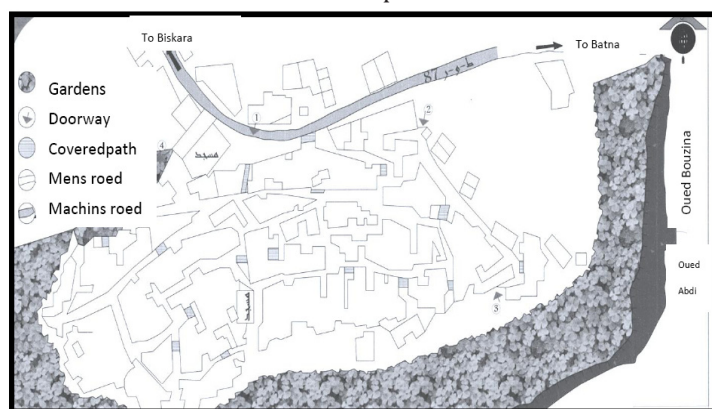


Figure 4. The Dechra's Urban Structure/ Source: Technical Department + Institute Students Workshop May 2020

Technical (base) networks

The Dechra was entirely (100%) supplied with electricity in the year 1980, in addition it was connected to a sewage system, especially since the slope that characterizes the site helps in that. In the year 2002, the Dechra was connected to the natural gas network, and despite its importance, these development works caused a progress in the deterioration of some of Al-Dechra's buildings.

Public Spaces

The Dechra lacks public spaces due to the density of construction and the rough terrain that characterizes its location. However, the residents' occasional utilization of the covered paths as leisure sites, especially in the summer, poses the idea of classifying them as public spaces. Furthermore, the allotment of the stone place called "Aghesdis" for public events such as weddings or organization of the "Taffsouth" festival makes us categorize it as a public space despite its rocky nature.

⁴ Services techniques de la commune de Menaâ (Technical Department of the Menaâ Commune) + 2008 Statistics

Urban Structure

The residences in Al-Dechra are marked by a high density, and their construction is recognized for continuity. In addition, these residences directly open to the roads and passages without pavements. Moreover, aside from the mosque, which serves as a place of worship, there is no other function for the buildings other than residential purposes.

The Fundamental Unit (Residence)

The houses in Menaâ's Dechra often constitute two floors, ground and upper. The ground floor is functionally divided into three sections according to the activity of the population in rural areas. The first section is dedicated to the living room, whereas the second is a space that serves as a barn for cattle. The final section is designed for agricultural crops storage. The aforementioned sections are separated by an exposed area (yard), which ensures a sunlight supply for the various sections, and also provides a space for certain household activities which include weaving or laundry. As for the second floor, it is meant for residence rooms. Additionally, the rooftop is used in winter for sunbathing and in summer for enjoying the breeze in the evenings and nights.

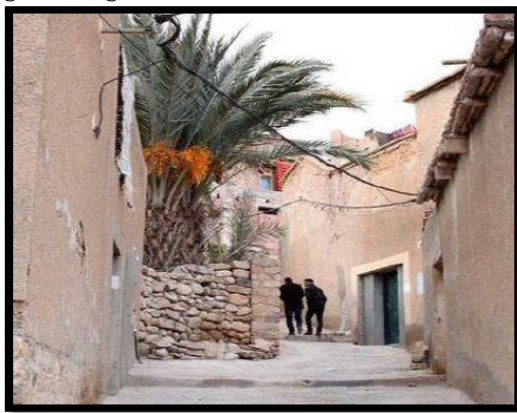


Figure 5. Local Building Materials: Mud, stones and wood (note the covered path)

Building Materials

The Dechra, like the traditional city, is known for its complete harmony and merge with the natural environment. Hence, the building materials are locally sourced, and in the case of Menaâ, the building materials include stones, mud, and wood which are often acquired from the juniper or pine trees that are transported from the adjoining forests (Blue Mountain).



Figure 6. The Narrow Paths/ Source: The Researcher May 2020

Walls

The walls often have a thickness of 40 cm or more, and are double for the purpose of ensuring thermal insulation and guarantee security. It typically consists of stones or clay mixed with plant fibers, as for the adhesive, it is clay.

Beams and Columns

Juniper and pine logs are used to support the ceiling alongside the walls, which are also considered load-bearing. The ceiling consists of plant materials of varying durability, to which clay is added.

Facade and Openings

The width of the house's facade in Menaa's Dechra varies from 4 to 7 meters. It is characterized by simplicity and is decorated with various openings, the most significant of which are:



Figure 7.

-Decorative Elements: It takes the form of a triangle or a rectangle that is located at a height greater than the average human stature, which provides privacy to the residence, and reduces the passage of hot currents in summer and cold ones in winter.

-Windows: It often takes a rectangular shape, and is small in dimensions, usually not exceeding ½ meter. It consists of wood, which takes a brown over time that tends to mimic the color of the soil, and blend with the surrounding environment.

-Doors: It has a width of approximately 2 meters and normally consists of two parts. The second part is used only when loaded cattle enter; meanwhile, the residents utilize only one of the two parts during daily life. These doors are made from pine or cedar trees by the Dechra's craftsmen.

-Balcony: It comprises of carefully selected, similarly sized, and relatively large stones, which are processed and given sharp and straight angles. They are paved to form aesthetic elements as well as serve role in providing protection to the roof and walls from rain water.

RESULTS

The Dechra of Menaa Town between Continuity and Extinction

Among the highly significant advantages of Menaa's Dechra as a material heritage is its continuous vibrancy. It houses 151 families with 877 people, most of whom practice agricultural activities in the groves adjacent to the Dechra, despite the significant decline in the agricultural produce of apricot trees in recent years. Additionally, there hardly exists a residence without the livestock. However, through field inspection, the following observations were made:

- Restorations were conducted in a neglectful manner by certain owners using modern manufactured materials such as bricks, cinder blocks and cement.

- Total renovation of several houses, using modern methods (reinforced concrete structures with manufactured building materials), which contributes to the urban façade distortion in certain parts of the Dechra. This state is in constant increase in light of the severe housing and real estate crisis in the town by virtue of its steep slopes characterized location and the dominance of private real estate ownership.

- The weakness of urban management tools, especially in light of the failed attempts to register the Dechra as a sector that requires preservation, despite its registration as a natural site since 1928, which led to a shortage in the necessary funds for its restoration.



Figure 8.

- The neglect of a major percentage of the uninhabited residences, after their owners' migration, as well as the lack of interest in some of them due to the multitude of inheritors.
- The deterioration of certain homes due to weather conditions; specifically, heavy rains. According to the technical departments of the commune, the collapse of more than two homes is recorded yearly, without the concern of the owners. The complaints and reports of the commune did not receive any attention from the province headquarters.
- We also noticed the significant effort made by the local civil society, which is represented by the "Thafsouth" association, whom organize an annual festival to introduce the local heritage, both tangible and intangible, in addition to the natural landscape of Menaâ. The association also ensures educating the population about the importance of preserving Al-Dechra as a local urban heritage.

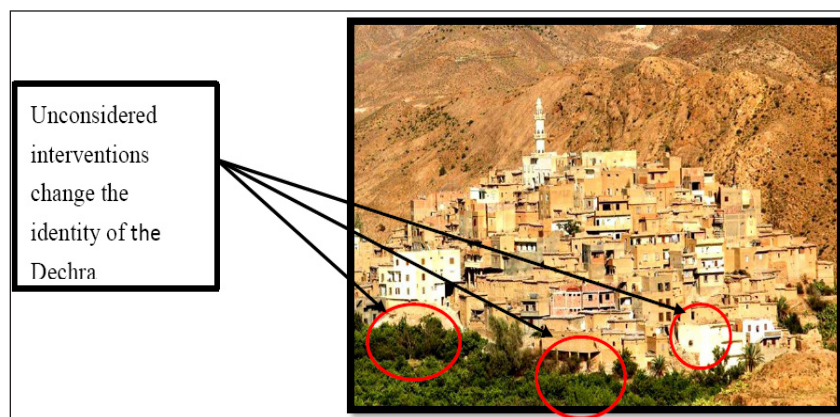


Figure 9. Source: The Researcher 2020

CONCLUSION

The analytical study of Menaâ's Dechra highlighted the latter's availability on urban and architectural elements that qualify it to become a heritage site, which reflects a side of the local character rich in historical and cultural value. Not to mention, the role it can play to revitalize the tourism sector, which is encouraged by the fact that Menaâ's Dechra is still vibrant and is inhabited. Thus, it allows diversifying the commune's revenues, especially since, from an environmental perspective, it is located within a sensitive region, which supports the trend towards the tourism sector. For that purpose, it necessarily requires its classification as a preserved section in the near future, due to the advanced degree of deterioration in several of its parts.

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Citation: Dr. Hamdi Djamel Abdenacer, Dr. Merdassi Abdelmoumene. *The Reality of Urban Heritage in the Aures Region: The Case of the Old Dachra in the Town of Menaâ (Batna Province, Eastern Algeria)*. *Int J Innov Stud Social Humanities*. 2023;8(1): 363-370. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2456-4931.080138>.

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