

Giving Meaning to the Urbanity through Urban Practices: Case of the City of Constantine, Algeria

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Abstract

Our research attempts to reveal the interactions between the city space and the users, by capturing them through urban practices, adaptations, skills and forms of urbanity that are built there. The interest was focused on the case of the city of Constantine, first by analyzing its traditional downtown fabric, where the urbanity characterized by urban density and functional diversity, is an old fact. Then in residential neighborhoods where urban and commercial practices are emerging, attenuating this residential character in favor of a new commercial dynamic, thus revealing an emerging urbanity, which seems interesting to us to grasp.

Key words: urbanity, urban practices, commercial dynamic, polarities, Constantine.

INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on the relationship that inhabitants have with their urban space through socio-spatial and urban strategies that translate into new forms of urbanity that are the subject of our research. In the Arab city, researchers propose to look at the city from above (the city of designers) and to evaluate what distinguishes it from the city below (the city of users), the city where interactions between spaces and individuals are organized at different scales (the neighborhood, the city, the agglomeration), the adaptations and transformations, the skills that are built there; the renewal of practices based on contact between populations of different origins and social categories, etc,

During the last decades, Algerian cities have experienced various forms of skills of the inhabitants who try to adapt the urban space to their needs. The interest will be focused on the case of Constantine, by analyzing its dynamics, its mutation, as well as the interaction of influential factors of social, spatial, land, legal, economic, and political type that reveal new urbanities. First, it seems important to us to give an overview of the meaning of urbanity according to a multidisciplinary approach, according to different authors; then to analyze some research on the urban and urbanity in the countries of the South and in the Algerian context for a better understanding of the making of the urban, the problems that arise, the forms of mutation undergone and the emerging urbanities. Survey results will be analyzed and discussed concerning the neighborhood

The concept of urbanity currently seems to be a “fuzzy” concept (Bourdin, 2010), although it is frequently used, it is indeed very little explained. “Thus, urbanity has become today a catch-all word, used in titles of scientific publications without any real reflexive logic on the term, or even without it being taken up, or defined in the body of the text afterward” (Bisson, 2019). Nevertheless, we note the effort of a few researchers during the 1990s and 2000s to reinforce the meaning of the concept through works that will reveal fairly measurable indicators of this concept. This is the case of the geographers Lévy (1997, 2003) and Lussault (2003) or the urban planner and sociologist Chalas (2001).

Lévy proposes to analyze urbanity through its gradients, starting from the center to the peri-urban area, because according to him “it is a question, in a logic of measuring the city and what characterizes it, of finding indicators and thinking about gradients of urbanity that would make it possible to characterize certain urban configurations” He suggested this notion to hierarchize spaces “the greatest level is found in the centers and the farther away you go, the

more this level decreases... However, some researchers contest the idea that the urbanity of the peri-urban area is less than that of the centers” (Charmes, 2015).

According to M. Lussault, (2003) in the Dictionary of Geography and Space of Societies, Urbanity is considered as the “Properly urban character of a space (...) urbanity proceeds from the coupling of density and diversity of objects of society in space, as well as the spatial configuration of this coupling”. And it is indeed with the interaction of these two elements and the strength of this coupling that urbanity becomes more apparent.

The sociologist Chalas, (2002) in his work “Les Villes contemporaines” wonders about the future of this urbanity, he supposes that we are witnessing a de-urbanization of society because of the monopolization. The peri-urbanization favors the withdrawal into the family and the feeling of exclusion from the center of the cities, he affirms that access to the city center is the right of every inhabitant. He tries to describe and measure the mutations of these cities whose new urbanity, as opposed to the traditional city, the author, exposes these 7 pillars as follows: mobility, territory, nature, polycentrism, choice, emptiness, and continuous time. We note that the definition of urbanity is considered dual, as it affects both the interactional links of people in urban space and the characteristics of these spaces. The richness of urbanity lies in its multidisciplinary approach, between sociologists, geographers, philosophers, urbanists, and many others.

Urbanity and Urban Practices in the Algerian Context

This concept has been approached concerning the Algerian city by several researchers, most of them sociologists. Saïd Belguidoum (2015) exposed the evolution of the concept in the Algerian context, in his article on urbanity in the Maghreb he relates “the process that led from the colonial city to the current city, at the same time that society was recomposed and that social and economic changes were carried out, how the current urban fabric has taken shape, According to the same author, the city of today depends largely on the social structuring observed after the reappropriation of the urban after 1962. At the same time, the Algerian sociologist Abdelkader Lakjaa (2001) assumes that this concept, urbanity, facilitates the understanding of social change through its spatial dimension, but without neglecting that the social issue remains dominant compared to the urban issue. For her part, SEMMOUD Nora (2001) analyzes the forms of strategies and residential mobilities of appropriation of space in the city of Algiers, while linking urbanity to the social and spatial fragmentation of the capital.

METHODOLOGY

The chosen research methodology takes the form of a bi-dimensional approach; qualitative and quantitative based on:

- Direct observation on the ground, of indicators concerning urban practices deployed, on the scale of two districts, the first being in the city center of Constantine, where the marks of urbanity are very strong, and the second, in a peri-central district, the Sidi Mabrouk district. This observation lasted several years, for a better perception of the evolution of the phenomenon and the reality of the field.
- The elaboration of a survey using a questionnaire and interview (direct and indirect questions) with the inhabitants, the users, and the traders of the 2 districts, as well as the collection of the necessary information. The questionnaire was addressed directly to the heads of household or indirectly by its distribution in the school the district.
- Analysis and interpretation of the results, an urban analysis was carried out, enriched by surveys on the ground, photographs, and cartography, according to a chronological approach. a bibliographical reading and the statistical exploitation relating to the question were also essential to us to explain the reality on the ground.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The city finds itself the receptacle of different urban practices on the part of the inhabitants leading to new forms of mutations; the inhabitants through these deployed actions, give themselves the right to transform the space according to their needs, this corresponds to the reflection of Henry Lefebvre who legitimizes these actions, he attests that this “right to the city must be formulated as a right to urban life (...) manifests itself as a superior form of rights: the right to freedom to individualization in socialization, to habitat and to inhabit. The right to work (to participatory activity) and the right to appropriation (quite distinct from the property right) are involved in the right to the city.” (Citeres, 2018) Our case study is focused on, Constantine a city whose identity has always been characterized by the prosperity of traditional crafts since ancient times when it was considered the Numidian capital “Cirta”.

The Traditional Fabric, Heritage, and Urbanity, an Ancient Fact

These trades such as jewelry, brassware, and traditional clothing were the basis of the city's economy and allowed the establishment of important stores thus promoting its commercial centrality. The strategic geographical location of the city and the density of the land network connecting it to the coastal fringe or linking it to the major cities facilitated the acquisition of raw materials, marketing, and sale of products. The traditional city, by the houses it contained, was organized around its large mosque. It was centered on this spiritual equipment from which emanated the set of moral principles and behavioral values that the inhabitants observed through their cultural and even daily practices. The city is composed of neighborhoods oriented towards the central point, streets that branch out into alleys, and dead ends to reinforce the withdrawal of family spheres while ensuring access to the houses. The existence of traditional squares in the middle of this fabric, such as the place *sidi el djellis*, *rahbet essof*, or even *souk el Asser*, the real role of public space of grouping around a fountain, or commercial activity or even of simple grouping around an evening of *Malouf*. This is the example of the *cafe enédjma*, (see fig 1) whose adjacent outdoor space is well known for its attractive role, especially during the evenings of the holy month *Ramadhan*, this space emitted until then of culture. Its restoration programmed on the occasion of the event 'Constantine capital of Arab culture' in 2015 has never seen the light of day. The closure of the cafe has involved the disappearance of tradition and the loss of places, and this is an example among others, of these spaces of conviviality that reinforced the urbanity of the old city.



Figure 1. Nedjma coffee in Constantine. Before closing

The urban density and the functional diversity, which characterize the urbanity of the traditional fabrics were disturbed, because of the quasi-total transformations of the DRC of the houses in favor of the bazaars spreading on one or two levels, and of the illegal trade which invested the streets of the old city of Constantine. Thus, the public space has become a receptacle of urban activities and socialization of another type to note, the *trabendo* or illegal trade.

Urban and Commercial Practices in Residential Areas, an Emerging Urbanity

The forms of mutation of the inhabitants in their space, can generate several aspects. Our interest is in the phenomenon of demolition-reconstruction. The first example in the city center seems interesting to us, in the Saint-Jean district, which is considered one of the oldest colonial districts in the city. The survey revealed the demolition of some individual houses in favor of the reconstruction of a house by the same owners, in a new and more contemporary style (see Figure2).



Figure 2. Mutations across the downtown, Demolition of an old building, and reconstruction of a new, more modern one, Source, Bensakhria 2016 and 2022

This aspect also affects the demolition-reconstruction in favor of new service equipment after the sale of the property due to inheritance conflicts (see Figure 3) or the removal of rooms of the houses R.D.C and their transformation into commercial premises, with lucrative character, along with the boulevard belouizdad, a main artery of the city center (see Figure 4) Where whose style breaks with the usual aspect. The goal sought the aspiration to a better socio-economic situation.



Figure 3. Demolition of old building And reconstruction of a facility



Figure 4. Transformation of R.D.C. into commercial premises source, Bensakhria 2021

Other areas of the city are experiencing the same phenomenon, such as the district of Sidi-Mabrouk, located in the northeast of the city, characterized by individual housing, dating from the colonial era, and known for its very recent luxury trade. According to our field survey, its buildings have experienced unusual changes modifying the morphology of the district and promoting the proliferation of trade to the detriment of residential character and creating a commercial dynamic along the main arteries. Its proximity to the city center and the ease of access to it have contributed enormously to this. The analysis of the land has revealed different strategies on the part of the owners: Vertical elevation by the addition of extra floors by the owner himself when the family was expanding. According to the survey data, 11.3% of the buildings were modified and modernized from the 1970s onwards and 8% from the 2000s onwards (see Figure No. 5).

- Modification of the function of the R.D.C., by its owner in favor of a lucrative commercial activity or in the form of a store for family use replacing the old garage to improve its income.



Figure 5. state of the modified constructions of a block in Sidi Mabrouk district source Bensakhria2022

- Demolition and reconstruction, after the sale of the real estate and transformation of the entire plot into an equipment, service or trade island (multi-story shopping mall, sometimes restaurant space and pizzeria and gym on the top floor. (see Figure 6) In general, these strategies are the work of traders specializing in imports, whose origin comes from small neighboring towns such as Ain fakroun or ain mlila, known for their commercial boom. For these traders, investing in the central districts of the city of Constantine, and taking advantage of the standing of the district, remains an investment guaranteed for many years to come.

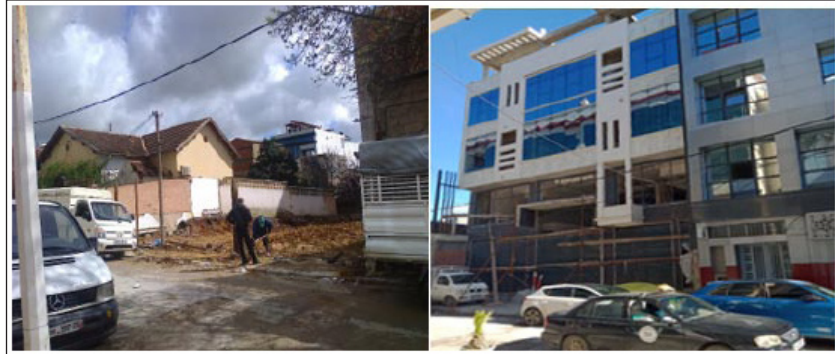


Figure 6. Demolition and reconstruction / before and after in sisi mabrouk district source Bensakhria 2016- 2021

CONCLUSION

These new urban and commercial strategies promote economic diversity and strengthen new polarities that contribute to the emergence of unprecedented urbanity in Algerian cities, especially Constantine. In the end, urbanity is strongly linked to the strategies of the inhabitants, not only those originating from the city of Constantine itself but also the new migrants to the city, coming from medium-sized cities, with a great commercial expansion and who find a profitability ground favorable to their aspirations. The easy accessibility and the quality of the goods provided, make these districts a very attractive place of consumption. These new emerging polarities are excellent indicators of the search for and demand for a right to the city on the part of users. We must remember that the human being is an important actor in the city. Urban, planning and management studies should take this aspect, in order to give meaning to the urbanity.

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