

The Old City of Mila (Algeria): A Heritage in Distress

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Abstract

The old city of Mila, a real open-air museum, this small thousand-year-old city still inhabited and bearing the imprint of several civilisations, contains priceless architectural and archaeological treasures, which are deteriorating day by day. This heritage has undergone these last three decades of the worst exactions, felt as an aggression by its inhabitants on the one hand, and as a waste of wealth by the authorities on the other hand. In order to preserve and conserve this value of built heritage, the historic center of Mila has been classified as a protected national heritage since 2007, then a safeguarded sector in 2009 with a plan for safeguarding and development, but no intervention has been made so far, so that this heritage may disappear.

Key words: Old city of Mila, Cultural heritage, Sector safeguard, PPSMVSS, cultural tourism.

INTRODUCTION

The old cities or historic centers, “with their natural or built environment, which, in addition to their quality of historical document, express the values of traditional urban civilizations. However, these are threatened by degradation, destructuring and even destruction, under the effect of a mode of urbanization born in the industrial era and which today affects all societies universally” (ICOMOS. 2011).

Algeria has an enormous heritage wealth such as the old cities, which reflect an exceptional urban and cultural heritage, recognized under several names Medina or Casbah in the north and Ksar in the south, they are considered “places of memory as much as history, and stage a traditional urban structure associated with a great sense of community” (Lilia Makhoulfi. 2012). These cities have long been neglected and marginalized, which has contributed to their deterioration. For this reason, the State has adopted a strategy of protection and conservation of cultural heritage, translated by the law 98-04 and its various texts of applications which allowed to classify 25 old cities in safeguarded sectors endowed with plans of safeguard and development (Bouldjemar.L, Benelmadjet.A, & Bitat.B. 2021).

The old city of Mila is one of the first cities of Algeria, with its own architecture that bears the imprint of many civilizations. It is an ancient city whose remains are both historically and archaeologically original and diverse, it is a common place in the local memory. Unfortunately, during the last three decades, it has suffered the worst exactions that have tarnished its splendor and deformed its architectural character. Within the framework of the conservation of the cultural heritage, the old Mila was classified since 1999 among the sites and historical monument, then a protected national heritage in 2007, of which it benefited from some operations of restorations, and to slow down the degradation and to develop this heritage, this last one was set up in safeguarded sector in 2009, endowing with a permanent plan of safeguarding and development of the safeguarded sector (PPSMVSS). In spite of all these conservation procedures, the old city still suffers from continuous deterioration. In view of this situation, a question arises: why is it not possible to protect this heritage and how can it be conserved and preserved? The present study attempts to answer this question in order to identify the causes of this deterioration, and to propose solutions that can contribute to the protection and preservation of this heritage.

This work is based on a descriptive approach to determine the state of affairs in the study area based on statistical analysis and field trips.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Area Study

Mila was an important city in the antiquity and one of the oldest cities built in Algeria, it was one of the four military bases which ensured the protection of Cirta (Constantine today recognized as “ancient capital of the Numidian kingdom under king Massinissa 203-149 BC”(Badjadja. A, 2007)). The city has known the passage of several civilizations: Numidian, Roman, Byzantine, Vandal, Muslim and Ottoman. It is recognized today as the chief town of wilaya which is located in the Algerian North-East, it is 450 km far from the capital Algiers and 50 km from Constantine (fig1).

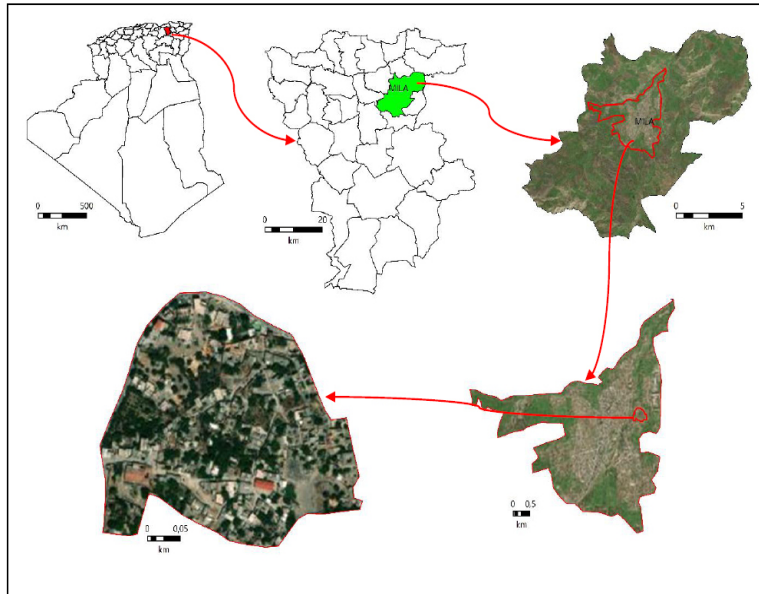


Figure 1. The old city of Mila: Location

The old city of Mila is the historical center of the city which carries the prints of the various civilizations, it is completely closed on itself, by an ancient wall, with an irregular form, its surface is of 7,12 hectare. It is surrounded by gardens to the east and new constructions to the south and southwest. It presents different routes and different directions that allow us to pass from one door to another, which are four in number, namely: Bab el Bled, Bab el Djamaâ which allow the access to the city, on the other hand Bab el Hdid and Bab Errous remain closed.



Figure 2. Some monuments of the old city of Mila A: Bab El Bled B: Byzantine rampart C: Fountain of Ain El Bled, D: The mosque of SidiGhnem, E: status of Milo

It contains several buildings and remains between traditional houses and historical monuments; in particular the status of Milo which is in the middle of a garden, without presentation, nor explanatory notes, it is the largest statue in the world made from a single piece of marble, this sculpture represents a human form of almost two meters high, in a sitting position, with a face and undetermined limbs. There is also the Byzantine wall that would enter it over a length of 1,200 meters, punctuated by a multitude of strange windows wide on the outside and narrow on the inside, visible to this day, and endowed with 14 watchtowers up to 12 meters high. The fountain of AinLebled which dates back to Roman times, and whose water still flows abundantly. The Abu al-Muhajir Dinar mosque the second oldest mosque on the continent after the one in Carthage in Tunisia. (fig2)

DATA AND DISCUSSIONS

Policy of Safeguarding the Old Algerian Cities

“Old towns are generally urban environments marked by a long urban history and which cover a varied typology as well in size as in morphology: historic cities, exceptional urban centers, hearts of cities, old boroughs, districts...” (Direction of the culture wilaya of Mila; 2021).

The ancient cities were classified as archaeological monuments under Ordinance No. 67-281, which was a major contradiction in determining how to intervene on this urban heritage, living and populated is of an evolving nature over time, which requires multiple interventions unlike the archaeological site which is limited to the restoration.”The consequences of such a conceptual restriction has considerably reduced the field of intervention of the various programs and the attempts of study and realization carried out on the Kasbah of Algiers, or in the Valley of M’zab, could not avoid being inevitably confined in the development of monumental buildings (palaces, mosques, fortresses, fountains, etc.) “(YassineOuagueni).

In the perspective of ensuring the preservation and management of the built heritage, the State has adopted a strategy to prevent the obsolescence of the built heritage, through a regulatory device” (Mazouz. F. 2015) translated by Law 98-04 on the protection of cultural heritage aims to protect, conserve, enhance and enrich the cultural heritage while opening access to the widest possible public.

This text “which departs from a restrictive vision where the heritage dimension reduced to the only monuments, sites and objects is widened to the wider notion of “tangible and intangible cultural goods” whose contents refer to the history and the memory” (Zadem. R), which allowed to give a new definition to the concept of the old city; by conceding it as a real estate cultural good, included in “the urban or rural real estate complexes” (according to the article 8, law 98-04).

New mechanisms have also been put in place to protect and preserve our ancient cities, by classifying them as protected areas that include “urban or rural areas such as Kasbahs, Medinas, Ksours and traditional settlements characterized by their predominance of habitat area, and which, by their homogeneity and their historical and aesthetic unity, present a historical, architectural, artistic or traditional interest of such a nature as to justify its protection, restoration, rehabilitation and development” (Article 41, Law 98-04). These sectors “are no longer intended to protect the old districts as an element of enhancement of a historic monument or a site, but to ensure the conservation of their organization, their framework and their atmosphere” (GilletLorenzi. E, 2014).

The safeguarded sectors are endowed with a Permanent Plan of Safeguarding and Enhancement of the Safeguarded Sector (PPSMVSS), which is an instrument of an urbanistic nature proceeding from a policy of conservation similar to the Land Use Plan (POS). Its purpose is to “set the general rules and easements of land use which must include the indication of buildings that must not be demolished or modified or whose demolition or modification would be imposed. It also sets out the architectural conditions under which the conservation of buildings and the urban setting is ensured. The PPSMVSS lays down special protection measures, in particular those relating to immovable cultural property listed on the supplementary inventory, pending classification or classified, located in the protected sector (Article 2, Executive Decree No. 03-324)”.

Since 2005, the Ministry of Culture has been responsible for the management of these sectors until the creation of the National Agency for Safeguarded Sectors in 2011 under Executive Decree No. 11-02, its main mission is to ensure the implementation of the PPSMVSS at the national level, which implies a centralization of decisions taken at the local level.

Degradation of the Old City of Mila

The old city of Mila is marked by a significant deterioration in several aspects: An advanced degradation of its built framework, of which more than 54% of its constructions are in ruins or in bad condition, affected by the climatic conditions, neglected since the independence by the local authorities, attacked by a part of its inhabitants who erected new constructions in the place of the old houses and confronted with the land speculation which dreams of its total destruction with a view to recovering bare grounds in the middle of the city center (fig2 &3).

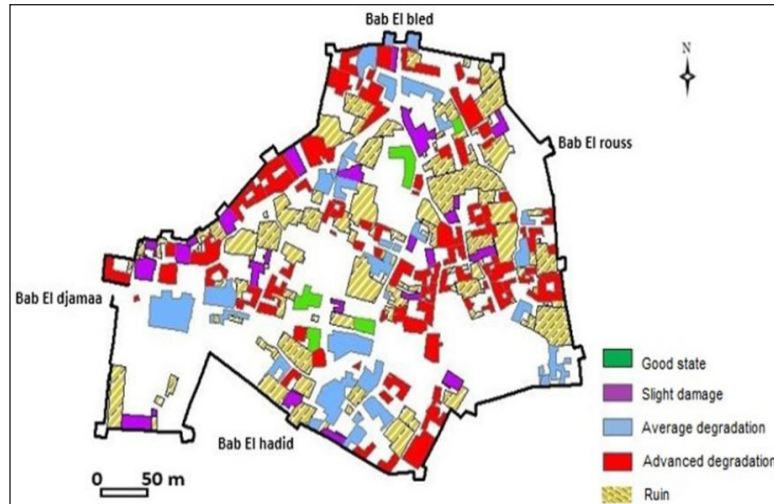


Figure 3. The old city of Mila: State of the buildings (Source: Zouaghi S 2017)

The old city has experienced a regression of its population from 1118 inhabitants in 2008 to reach 920 inhabitants in 2017 (ZOUAGHIS, 2017)), mainly due to the dilapidation and collapse of the built environment, which makes the center is losing its residential function. Today, it is delivered to these new tenants, deprived of the least link with the history of the place they occupy, after having been transformed for several decades into a “socio-locative” city, through which transit the populations requesting housing from Mila but especially from the neighboring rural areas.

The city also suffers a degradation of its roads composed of streets not drivable covered with cobblestones in poor condition, after the opening of the breakthrough on the side of the barracks a part of the site has become accessible by car, which has worsened the condition of its roads.



Figure 4. The old city of Mila: State of the buildings and roads

Indeed, the gardens of the old city of Mila were once a key element of its cultural and landscape heritage. However, they are threatened with disappearance due to uncontrolled urban expansion resulting in the removal of these gardens to make way for new buildings. The public space is in poor condition, the example of the public space behind El Markez which is transformed into a dump, while it should be a dynamic space of the city. Public lighting is almost absent except for a few spotlights.

Conservation Procedures Applied to the Old City of Mila

In order to reduce this deterioration and to preserve this heritage, the city of Mila was able to benefit from a classification as national heritage by order of November 3, 1999, (in accordance with the law 98/04). Then classified among the sites and historical monuments dated 23/04/1910, in accordance with Article 62 of Ordinance No. 67-281 of 20/12/1967, which has allowed to launch some restoration operations of the mosque of SidiGhanem since 2012, which have not yet been completed due to insufficient funding and a lack of specialists in restoration.

In 2004 the old city of Mila was erected as a protected area on an area of over 38 Ha by Executive Decree No. 09-404, composed of 3 zones: central part composed of a traditional fabric (intra-muros), peripheral part composed of a new fabric in the South and South-East (extra-muros), and the last includes the gardens to the North and South.

In accordance with the executive decree N° 03-324, its permanent plan of safeguard and development was launched by the direction of the Culture of the wilaya of Mila in collaboration with the Association of the friends of the old Mila. It aims at determining the procedures and the interventions to make of it this historical center a tourist pole of cultural value. It was approved on June 10, 2021 and becomes applicable

The developments recommended by the PPSMVSS for the old town of Mila are summarized in the following points:

- Develop tourist circuits to enhance the value of the city's monuments and streets of architectural and historical value by creating a tourist circuit around the city wall and another circuit inside the historic city that links its gates.
- Introduce the different operations of intervention on the built heritage (restoration, rehabilitation, restructuring, reconstruction, restitution), the monuments of great architectural, historical and archaeological value (the ancient gates, the Roman fountain, the Byzantine rampart...), and the public spaces.
- Reconversion of certain buildings for cultural and tourist purposes.
- Rehabilitation of the roads and various networks: repairing all the deteriorated roads and restoring the pavement of the lanes in the historic center, renovating the drinking water supply and sewerage networks and repairing the connections to the houses, extending the gas network for the houses not connected.
- Upgrading the shopping street and reclassifying certain premises to make them suitable for craft activities

To date, no action has been taken, as this plan was not approved until June 2021. The protection and conservation of the old city of Mila faces difficulties in spite of the efforts employed which remain defective, because of the duration of the elaboration and the approval of its plan of safeguard what worsened its situation. The lack of coordination between the different actors and the absence of the tourist operators, the problem of property, which is always imposed, accentuates the risk of demolition or modification of the houses, and the insufficiency of the financial envelope granted to these operations of safeguard.

Recommendations

To protect and preserve the old town of Mila an approach is proposed to integrate a tourist and economic development, to promote the creation of a tourist pole of cultural value:

- *Rehabilitate the old neighborhoods and make them livable with the inclusion of elements of contemporary life: for this it is necessary :*
 - ✓ To highlight the recommendations of the PPSMVSS of the old city of Mila, and the launching of rehabilitation and restoration works of the architectural and urban heritage;
 - ✓ The introduction of elements of contemporary character, provided that they do not harm the harmony of the whole, can contribute to its enrichment; by the improvement of the habitat which must constitute one of the fundamental objectives of the safeguard, the adaptation of the infrastructure networks to the specificities of the city, and the respect of its existing spatial organization when it is a question of transforming buildings or of building new ones.
- *Promote commercial and economic activities:* The main characteristics of ancient cities are their commercial character; where markets, crafts and traditional industries are active; the urban environment provided encourages walking in their narrow streets and increases the possibilities of shopping to become attractive areas for tourists. This requires encouraging this type of economic activity, to make the old town of Mila a vital and attractive center for new traders.

- Introduisez des installations touristiques : Construisez-les dans des zones non développées telles que des poches vides ou exploitez des zones avec des bâtiments effondrés ou classés pour la démolition. Some monuments can be converted into cultural symbols, transformed buildings into restaurants or hotels, revived mosques, traditional markets, Hammams.
- Preventive measures against natural disasters and against all kinds of nuisances: Historic towns should be protected against natural disasters and nuisances such as pollution and vibrations in order to safeguard the heritage and for the security and well-being of the residents. Whatever the nature of a disaster affecting a historic town or urban area, preventative and repair measures must be adapted to the specific character of the properties concerned.(ICOMOS. 2011).
- Activate the role of tourist offices and agencies: National tourist offices and travel agencies, must be involved as manufacturers of the local tourist product, and market it to the profile of the old city on the national and even international market by :
 - The development of tourist routes, which allows the exploration of its monuments and secrets, accompanied by specialized guides with a complete knowledge of the history of its characteristics;
 - Organiser des visites aux propriétaires locaux et aux artisans pour les intégrer dans la vie sociale et professionnelle;
 - Relaunching the home-stay formula, to allow tourists to be welcomed in the homes of residents, and to participate in their daily lives;
 - programmer des expositions thématiques (Art culinaire, Architecture vernaculaire, Artisanat...), animations (ateliers, visites guidées, balades commentées, conférences...) et diverses manifestations ;
- Development of a decision making process: with the participation of all stakeholders in the operation, which explains roles and responsibilities during the planning and implementation phase (Fantazi.I, Bernia Z.H. 2018).
- Elaboration d'une stratégie de financement, which makes it possible to finance the operations of restoration, because neither the state nor the population, in particular the inhabitants with low incomes, can afford its costs;
- The participation and the involvement of the residents are essential for the success of the conservation programme and should be encouraged. The conservation of historic towns and urban areas concerns their residents first of all. (ICOMOS. 2011).

CONCLUSION

The advanced degradation of the built environment of the old city of Mila is a serious problem that threatens the preservation of this historic site for future generations. It is crucial to take measures to strengthen the building structures, maintain their structural integrity and protect the buildings from harsh weather conditions to preserve this historic site for future generations.

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