The Casbah of Algiers: From a Fortified City to a “Ghetto”?

Issam Sekkour
The Bartlett School of Architecture, University college of London
Issam.sekkour.17@ucl.ac.uk

Laura Vaughan
The Bartlett School of Architecture, University college of London
vaughan@ucl.ac.uk

Keywords: Casbah of Algiers, segregation, Ghetto, Space Syntax

Abstract
The transformation of the Ottoman city of Algiers by the French colonial power into Alger La Blanche, or white Algiers, was accompanied by a deep segregation between its historical Medina, the Casbah, and the European city. Later, this segregation transformed the Casbah into, in all intents and purposes, a ghetto, with limits on movement of its inhabitants, as well as their political marginalisation and social isolation. In order to understand this transformation, this study focuses on the temporal process of segregation on two levels. The first level can be described as the French colonial urban planning, and colonial policies in general, applied to the city of Algiers since 1830, which aimed to both control the indigenous population and isolate it, by building a European gridded town plan on its southern boundary. The second is the socio-spatial transformation (and degradation) of the Casbah as an effect of its isolation. Using space syntax methodology, the street network of the city was analysed in three periods of time, using historical maps of Algiers. The results suggest that colonial urban planning played a role in segregating the Casbah, however not through a systematic spatial segregation as it is usually suggested whilst discussing the morphological evolution of Algiers, rather this study suggests that socio-economic transformation of the Casbah was the most important implementation of the colonial policies in relation to the segregation of the Casbah.

Introduction
Researchers from across the disciplines have long proposed that town planning of colonial powers in Africa and Asia was a strong instrument of power and dominance (Home, 1984); (Write, 1991); (Çelik, 1997); (Njoah, 2009). In fact, since the ancient ages, conquering powers have erected imposing structures or carried out significant infrastructure projects in cities in order to assert their power for generations onwards (Henrich, 2009). The effects of the built environment (and any religious/social signals it gives out) on an individual's feelings of connection to a wider social group – or the feeling of rejection by that group – remain a strong expression of power in cities worldwide.

This study is part of ongoing research on the historical evolution of the city of Algiers. The research described here uses space syntax to investigate the phenomenon of the continuing socio-spatial segregation of the Casbah, the site of the city’s historic walled district, from its conquest by the French in the 1830s and through to the period of the war of independence (1954–1962). This research will deal mainly with the relationship between economic and social segregation and spatial segregation. The main argument here is that policies toward the indigenous city and the people’s way of life have reinforced the gap between the two cultures, while the emerging economic segregation ensured the persistence of this gap as a natural result. Those processes led to the
transformation with time of the Casbah, from an autonomous city into a segregated area that some might term a “ghetto”.

Given its strategic position as a port town, Algiers was the landing point for the French army invasion in 1830. Initially they entered the country under the pretext of improving the local supposedly inferior culture and bringing civilization to the Barbary Coast. While these were the claims since the beginning of the colonization, a city of two separated entities was subsequently created, with new European style city constructed alongside the old indigenous streets, with a deep segregation between the dwellers of the two cities that emerged with time, between “the settlers’ town and the hungry native town” (namely, the walled Casbah) as described by Frantz Fanon (Çelik, 1997). Throughout the decades following the invasion Casbah was indeed folding around itself with a population living in deep poverty; this situation was due to two processes: a bottom up process related mainly to the population movement in and out of the Casbah, and a top down process related to colonial policies.

The movement of the population started before the colonization with the exodus of two thirds of the population escaping the French army; this exodus was followed later by a second one by the end of the 19th century. While the first exodus was for safety reasons, the second one was motivated by socio-economic reasons: the environmental degradation of the Casbah meant that any family who could afford to leave, did so, leaving the houses to be rented by the room to less fortunate families; the houses that were designed to accommodate a family were by then accommodating up to 20 persons (Abdulac, 2011). Census records show that the density of the Casbah’s population jumped from 1436 person per hectare in 1881, to 3500 people per hectare in 1947.1 In 1932 Dr. Lemaire, a lung specialist in Algiers, noted that the number of people dying of tuberculosis in the Casbah could not be but a sign of poverty and overpopulation. This deep segregation between the two cities was aggravated by a colonial policy of dividing the two populations. The pretext for this policy was that the Casbah, or what remained of it, was a refuge for the indigenous population and their specific way of life. The interior minister declared in 1843 that authorities should not facilitate the access for European immigrants to the upper Casbah (namely, the western area; the eastern area is known as the lower Casbah, see Figure 1). His argument was that the population had already left the lower Casbah because of the lack of intimacy due to the presence of foreigner neighbours, therefore the upper Casbah remained the last refuge for them (Lespes, 1930). Later, in 1857, a report in response to an urban intervention in the upper Casbah declared that any kind of operation there would deprive Algiers of its orientalism (Lespes, 1930). While these statements helped in a way to save the architectural and urban heritage from any further destruction, they left a decapitated city and a deprived population to organize itself.

The conceptualisation of the Casbah as a ghetto did not appear in print until 1960, not coincidentally, at the time of the war of independence. *Al Moudjahid* (The Fighter), the liberation front newspaper, published an article in December 1960 entitled: *the Casbah: the new Ghetto of Warsaw*. On the 23rd of September 1956, smaller streets around the Casbah were barred from circulation "for an indeterminate amount of time” and only a few controlled exits were left for people working outside the old city (Çelik, 1997). The population of the Casbah was indeed entrapped within, and people’s movement in and out of, and even inside the city was controlled.

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1 Census from the *Documents Algeriens* (Algerian documents): volume 56, September 1951.
After Algeria’s long fought-for independence in 1962, the Casbah continued to be both a deprived place and a transitional place. Poverty finally pushed the dwellers of the old city to revolt, and riots were organized in central Algiers in April 1985 demonstrating that the population of the Casbah was isolated socially and economically from the rest of the city. This feeling of injustice along with the spatial nature of its streets and houses pushed the Casbah to make of itself a refuge for terrorists, like Mustapha Bouyali in 1985, and later “AFGHANS” the armed wing of the FIS\(^1\) in 1992. After the invasion of the Casbah by the Army in the same year and the multiple operations of its isolation in 1993, the Casbah ended up folding again on itself. People preferred to stay inside its streets, and the isolated “ghetto” emerged again (Verges,1994).

The use of the term “ghetto” at this time carried significant political weight. While it originally was the name of the enforced enclosure of the Jewish inhabitants in Venice from 1516 onwards, and was subsequently used to describe districts of voluntary clustering by Jewish people, by this point in time it was more commonly used to describe the more extreme instances of racialized segregation in the United States, where social and economic separation coincide in space. Using the appellation “Warsaw Ghetto” was a stronger statement still clearly intended to recall the Nazi ghettos, which were one of the steps in the process of separating, persecuting, and ultimately annihilating Europe’s Jews.

This is the stepping off point of our analysis: given that “ghetto” is a common descriptor of entrenched socio-economic segregation, we assess the extent to which this description indeed holds true when considering the spatial segregation of the district. We do so by going back to the start of the colonial period, questioning whether there was a spatial segregation that contributed to the transformation of the Casbah into an apparent “ghetto”. The second part of the analysis traces the shifting fortunes of the city’s principal commercial streets, to trace the shifting centrality of the city.

The transformation of the Casbah

The Casbah of Algiers, or what remains of it, was originally its upper part, (what used to be called Ledjbel, or the mountain), its lower part, Louta: the plain, which nowadays constitutes the marine quarter and Martyrs Square; in between which still exists a hybrid zone of Ottoman and colonial buildings. The centre of the Casbah was its lower part, where one would find the large concentration of commercial activity, the Suqs streets, and the commercial structures (*Fondouks*).\(^2\) It was also a political and military centre where the Dey\(^3\) had his palace and its structures, the harbour, the *Badistan*\(^4\), and a religious centre with the presence of the largest mosques in the city. While some commercial activities existed in the upper part, it was not considered as important as the lower part; we can see that for instance in the distinction between the appellation of *Suq* for the numerous commercial streets of the lower part and the appellation of *Swika* (the small Suq) or *Hwanit* (shops) in the upper part. The residential area was divided into neighbourhoods in the upper part; each functioned as a separate structure with its own mosque, mausoleum and fountain. In that context, the lower part was considered as central to the Casbah overall, hence unifying it.

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1 *FIS*: The Islamic Salvation Front formed in 1988.
2 *Foundouk*: the north African appellation of the Caravanserai, there were 20 in Algiers, all in the lower Casbah, and they have disappeared entirely within the first few years of colonization.
3 The *Dey* is the Ottoman governor of Algiers. His residence was in Djenina palace in the lower Casbah, and later, shortly before the French colonization, the Dey residency moved to the citadel in the upper Casbah.
4 *Badistan*: is the white slave market, situated near the sea gate.
Conference topics: URBAN FORM and SOCIAL PHENOMENA

Figure 1: the evolution of the Casbah, indicating its principal street and its shifting alignment and naming from Cardo Maximus to Bab El-Oued/Bab Azzoun Street.
The main interventions in the Casbah started in 1830 following the French invasion; the Casbah was under the authority of the war minister and had to respond to military needs; the soldiers occupied houses and mosques of the lower part and between the Casbah and Bab el Oued “wadi gate”, while officers occupied the palaces and big houses. Most of these houses were already empty due to the exodus of more than half of the population escaping from the French army. The Casbah had to adjust itself to other military needs; assembling space for the troops was needed, therefore the army engineers decided to open a large square in front of Djenina, the old Dey palace.

The creation of this square was the starting point for many other operations that changed the physical, economic and social structure of the city. It was shortly followed by the creation of three streets; Bab El-Oued, Bab Azzoun and the street of the Marine. The creation of these streets in the place of the old suqs streets and the café street both deprived the population of its most important source of income and deprived the city of its centre. These changes immediately transformed the commercial city into a martial city (Lespes,1930).

Commercial activity persisted in the upper part of the Casbah and a depleted version of a suq took place in the Place d’Arme after 1832, while some French commercial activity, mostly in the service of the army, started to flourish on the newly created Bab Azzoun Street. A building serving as a market was later created to replace the suq of Place d’Arme. In parallel, the houses of the lower part of the Casbah were continuing to decay, following occupation by French soldiers. Ultimately, the lower section became dominated by Spanish and Italian immigrants.

The creation of a new wall for the city in 1839 accelerated the emergence of a new city in the suburb of Bab Azzoun, which prior to then had been outside the city walls. Between 1840 and1844, 400 buildings were built between the two walls. Meanwhile, extensive commercial activity started to emerge outside these walls between the city and the military encampment in Agha and Mustapha (Figure 1).

It wasn’t until 1846 that a radical urban decision was taken: to erasing the Casbah and thus erase the mistakes of the past; this project would start by the creation of more European streets inside the city, while gradually demolishing the old city. This way Lyre Street came to existence and with it the demolition of the last bazaar of Algiers. While the Lyre was inaugurated in 1870, Europeans were not ready to invest in what appeared to have become an old centre, in fact the Place d’Arme that was destined to become the centre of the city was already on its edge, and many projects, like the city hall, shifted their locations to the south, hence the new city was more attractive for investment. Lyre Street was eventually occupied by the Jewish and the Moors’ commercial activity, described at the time as “resembling Algiers’ Bazaars, but in a less exotic and beautiful way” (Dalles, 1888).

The same bottom-up processes of commercial activity continued the old city’s shift in focus towards Rue Michelet. Eventually with the intervention of Napoleon III in 1865 the upper Casbah survived any further demolition. After this the site was abandoned for good (Lespes,1930).

The destruction of the old suqs street and its replacement by the market buildings (and later by abandoning the newly created streets to the indigenous population) resulted in two classes of commercial streets, rather than two types of commercial streets (and later three classes of streets, with the emergence of Michelet Street as the new prestigious street). The same processes of impoverishing the Casbah residential area affected its commercial streets. As described in the
cultural series of Algiers (Documents Algeriens, 1951), as soon as a shop owner becomes comfortable financially he tries to change the location of his business to the European city and its fringes. Thus, the space of the old city became a space of constraints, worsening the conditions of both its inhabitants and the businesses in its district.

Methods

This paper focuses on three points of time of the evolution of the city of Algiers: before the colonisation of the country by the French in 1830 when the city was still inside its original walls, 1870 when the city was growing between its two walls (the Ottoman wall and the later, French wall), and 1930, when the city lost its walls entirely and was starting to grow on the hills surrounding the original city. The latter is also the period of the worst poverty in the old city and is also the point when Algiers was established as an important touristic and commercial city among French colonies. Three spatial models of Algiers were constructed manually for the three time periods, using space syntax methods to overlay axial segment maps over contemporaneous maps of the city.

Further comparison was made between four commercial streets in the city: Bab El-Oued Bab Azzoun street, the oldest commercial street in the city, and the former Cardo Maximus of Roman Algiers (Icosium); Lyre street in the heart of the Casbah, the street that was created by the authorities to become a new commercial street of the city and a part of the project of erasing the Casbah; Isly Street that emerged between the two walls of the city in the Faubourg of Bab Azzoun; and Michelet street outside the area that was walled. The creation of the latter two streets was influenced by private French investments.

Space syntax set of methods and tools help analyse the urban spatial network and help understand how it influences people’s behaviour and movement through space. It defines space as unit or as a part dependent on the whole, and a spatial system’s configurational properties take account of each street’s relative connectivity to the overall urban structure. Starting from Hillier’s argument that cities accommodate difference by organizing patterns of accessibility, the strength of space syntax in analysing segregation resides in its capacity to isolate the properties of a city’s spatial form from its social factors, which make it possible to capture the influence of one upon the other (Vaughan, 2007).

Amongst the measures of space syntax, we analyse in detail the normalized angular choice (NACH) and integration (NAIN) measures. The spatial calculation of choice considers how likely an axial line or a street segment it is to be passed through on all shortest routes from all spaces to all other spaces in the entire system or within a predetermined metric distance (termed radius) from each segment. It is used here to compare the potential movement through the spatial networks on the shortest path between spatial elements. Integration calculates how close each street segment is to all other spaces, taking account of network distance. Normalising the values of choice and integration allowed us to compare the three models of the city of Algiers while considering that they have different sizes.

This study will also investigate the process of the shifting of commercial activity towards the European city by analysing land use diversity in four sample streets at a single point of time (1935). This part of the analysis also enquires whether this shift has a spatial relationship by analysing the evolution of the street network.
Analysis

The change of the structure of the city of Algiers was represented mainly through normalized angular choice values. The comparison of NACH values between 1830 and 1930 gives us the possibility to verify whether the Casbah and its upper part in particular was segregated spatially over time. However, a comparison between the integration maps of the city, using the normalised segment angular values, is needed to capture data on the accessibility of the central core of the city in each period.

The choice and integration values were examined for the three models in the global (namely, city-wide) scale (radius n) and the local scale at a 400 metres radius. We selected the latter radius following a test of different metric values on the map of the Casbah which showed that the local suqs (Swika) of the upper Casbah are accessible for journeys of around 400 metres, which is in fact about 10 minutes’ walk if we consider the slope and the non-orthogonal nature of the street network, which results in severe angular bifurcations of the streets.

The comparison of the integration models of the city (see Figure 2) shows that through one century of colonization the accessibility core of the city had not shifted significantly from the area of the old city. While before 1830 the lower part of the Casbah was the most integrated part of the city at that time, by 1870, the European city that replaced it became the most integrated part of Algiers while expanding toward the south on the seafront with the growth of the city between the two walls. The map analysis for 1930 in Figure 3 shows that the lower part of the Casbah had not lost its importance while the integrated core continued its southern growth. The northern growth that emerged between 1870 and 1930 was however much less integrated by 1930 when compared with the rest of the city.

Nevertheless, at the local scale of integration at 400m radius, this growth has less impact over time; the lower Casbah remains the only part of the old city that is prominent within the wider network for this scale of potential activity. In other words, only a handful of streets would have been at all central to local movement within the vicinity of the old city.

When looking at choice values on the local and the global scale we see that the evolution of the city has much more impact on the upper Casbah; despite the creation of Lyre Street and latterly, Randon Street, neither has no major impact on its centrality. Nevertheless, while the values of choice of the upper Casbah have an average of 0.85 before 1830, both on the local and global scale, the map of 1870 shows that the choice values slightly increased to 0.93 on the local scale and decreased to 0.79 on the global scale.

However, the growth of the city by 1930 had much deeper impact on the value of local choice within the upper Casbah (western Lyre Street); dropping to 0.43 in the global scale while on the local scale it maintained an average of 0.93, which suggests that the growth of the city has weakened the structure of the Casbah in relation to the wider city, though it maintained its coherence for very localised patterns of movement.
Figure 2: Integration and normalised angular choice of the city of Algiers in 1830 and 1870. (A) Algiers before 1830 City-wide choice (segment angular choice radius n), (B) Algiers before 1830 City-wide integration (segment integration radius n), (C) Algiers before 1830 Integration for a journey of 10 minutes’ walk (segment integration radius 400m), (D) Algiers in 1870 City-wide choice (segment angular choice radius n), (E) Algiers in 1870 City-wide integration (segment integration radius n), (F) Algiers in 1870 Integration for a journey of 10 minutes’ walk (segment integration radius 400m)
Figure 3: Integration and normalised angular choice of the city of Algiers in 1930, (A) Algiers in 1930 City-wide choice (segment angular choice radius n), (B) Algiers in 1930 City-wide integration (segment integration radius n), (C) Algiers in 1930 Integration for a journey of 10 minutes’ walk (segment integration radius 400m)

Table 1 shows that the choice values of the Suqs Street, that later became Bab El-Oued Bab Azzoun street, were the highest on the global scale through the whole period (more than 1.30 on the global scale in the three points of time); in the same period, it maintained high values of choice on the local scale too.

Lyre and Michelet streets have similar local and global values in the analysis. Isly Street on the other hand had lower values on the local scale in 1870 in comparison with its global scale values.
Table 1: Comparison of global and local choice values in three points of time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Upper Cashbah (average)</th>
<th>Southern European city</th>
<th>Bab Eloued-Bab Azzoun street (the Suqs street in the lower Cashbah)</th>
<th>Lyre street (upper Casbah)</th>
<th>Isly street (between the two walls)</th>
<th>Michelet street (outside the walls)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1830 400m</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830 n</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870 400m</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870 n</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930 400m</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930 n</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>1.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results highlight that with the growth of the city, Bab El-Oued Bab Azzoun Street (Suqs Street) remained important on both the local and the global scale. The newly created Lyre Street in the old core of the Casbah, benefiting from connections to the new European city, also has relatively stable high values of choice through time, and on both scales.

On the other hand, Isly Street, that emerged between the two walls of the Casbah and the European city was created in a period of a slow growth of the city which made it a *carrier of through movement* rather than a local centre. It was relatively unimportant locally in 1870, by which time commercial activity was already shifting towards it from Bab Azzoun Street, mainly to serve the military encampments outside the city. With the growth of the city and centrality shifting away from its historic core, Isly Street gained some local importance, as we can perceive in the values of choice in 1930.

The case of Michelet Street was different from all the other cases. It was created after Isly Street in a period of a rapid growth and it gained its local importance rather quickly.

**Land use diversity**

Since detailed data on land uses of the city of Algiers in the different periods of time studied here are not yet available, this study uses a commercial phone directory of 1935 as a source of information. The available directory however does not contain information on Bab El-Oued Bab Azzoun street, thus only three of the four sampled streets are studied for their diversity: Lyre Street, Isly Street and Michelet Street. The land uses classification was based on standard UK classifications, adapted to the local context.

The comparison of the land uses of the three streets (Figure 4) shows some similarities between Michelet Street and Isly Street, though with marginal differences: small production workshops are less present in Michelet, while we find educational activities only in the latter. Lyre Street, the sampled Casbah street, appears on the other hand to be much less diversified, with no educational activities, nor community services. The private services (like doctors’ offices) are very few in comparison with the other streets, while retail is the dominant activity.

It is also worth mentioning that the retail activity within the Casbah street is much less diversified than the retail activity we find in both Michelet and Isly. The names on the directory also shows a striking dichotomy between a dominance of European names (mainly French) on Isly and Michelet, and Arab and Jewish names on Lyre street.
This examination of land uses of three streets of Algiers: Lyre Street in the Casbah, Isly Street and Michelet Street, provide some insight (despite the limitations of the source data) on the difference between the Casbah and the European city’s commercial streets; while the first was a natural replacement of the Suqs Streets (Bab El-Oued Bab Azzoun Street), in fact it did not provide the diversity of commerce and activities that existed before 1830. These findings support the idea of the processes of the impoverishment of the Casbah described above. A more detailed study of the morphological and typological aspects of the Suqs Street and its ambiances in comparison with Lyre Street or Randon Street in the Casbah and with Isly Street and Michelet Street outside the Casbah is needed in order to better understand this process.

While the first hypothesis assessed whether the Casbah was segregated spatially, the analysis showed that this was not the case. In fact, the Casbah maintained almost the same values of choice for a long time after the beginning of colonial transformations. However, with the growth of the city from 1870 till 1920, the upper Casbah started to have much less important role for connections across the city, which is rather a natural process for a residential area. Its commercial streets however maintained high local and global scale values. This could be interpreted by the lack of a clear colonial strategy during the first fifty years of colonization; while the primary intentions were not clear, the colonial authorities settled inside the walls of the Casbah. Afterwards, the slow process of urbanism that was mainly influenced by bottom-up processes and private interests helped the Casbah to keep its importance as a centre of the city for half a century. During this period, the new city between the Ottoman wall and the French wall was relatively speaking a carrier of considerable potential for through movement. It was not until the expansion of the city outside its walls and its conurbations with the districts of Agha and Mustapha, that the street network of the Casbah started to lose some of its city-wide importance.
Conclusion

The study has presented the preliminary findings of a research into the processes of the segregation of the Casbah from 1830 until 1930. Although analysis of the evolution of land uses within the different periods of time and with the analysis of population movement inside and outside the Casbah is still to be completed, it is clear from even this preliminary analysis that the complex process of the evolution of the Casbah as a supposed ghetto was much slower than the traditional narrative of the city’s morphological evolution would have us believe. Evidently, the realisation of the Casbah as a socially isolated district that features in recent narratives only really started well into the 20th century.

The segregation of the historical Ottoman centre of Algiers studied here is a first chapter of a long process of movement and shift of centralities in the city of Algiers that continues until today. Taking the example of a project of the new bay of Algiers (to be realised in 2030) it is notably one of several large projects trying to relate the city again with the sea, although it would mean intervening in the historical colonial/Ottoman centre. While the city is struggling to find its place as a modern metropolis on the Mediterranean Sea through such kinds of urban renewal projects, a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the shift in centralities is needed (see for example the work of Nadia Charalambous and Ilaria Geddes on the shifting centralities of Limassol). It is to be hoped that such an understanding might predict the outcomes of such interventions, as well as providing guidelines for a more sustainable system of centralities in greater Algiers.

References


