



Exploring the Impact of Colonial Legacies in Urban-Related Identity and the Will to Participate in Urban Decision-Making: A Case Study of Morocco

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Abstract

There is a clear absence of public participation in urban decision-making in Moroccan cities. While the systematic marginalization of public opinion in formal planning legislation is regarded in the literature as the main factor for this absence, this research proposes a complementary explanation. It suggests the consideration of the role of the uncertainty of the Moroccan urban-related identity in the weakening of the collective will to participate. Using the reinterpretation of Moroccan planning history, complemented with interviews with Moroccan academics and planners, this research explores how colonial legacies contributed to creating a physical as well as an institutional division between the Moroccan society and its urban context. This research argues that the different urban changes under the colonial administration have weakened the average Moroccan's urban-related identity, and have thus debilitated the collective will to participate in shaping urban Morocco. It explains that any attempt at bridging these divisions has to go through a reevaluation of the Moroccan planning history and a reconstruction of a shared urban-related identity.

Keywords

Colonialism • Public participation • Morocco • Urban-related identity • Urban history

1 Introduction

In the global planning landscape where people are increasingly considered as main stakeholders in the urban governance system, Morocco is still struggling to include its population in urban decision-making. Since its independence, administrative and constitutional reforms were carried out in an effort to empower civil society. Nevertheless, its role remained limited to consultation and information dissemination, with an absence of invited spaces for participation in decision-making (Iraki & Houdret, 2021). While there is no question about the direct impact of the formal exclusion of public opinion, it is still important to understand how the Moroccan society has become increasingly disconnected from its urban context and how it has lost its collective will to participate.

Interviews (2020) have shown that even when municipalities create platforms for people to participate, turnout remains low. Most Moroccans seem to have little knowledge on how the urban space is produced and even less knowledge on their entitlement to an opinion about its development. This is particularly interesting when put into the historical urban context of Morocco, as people had a substantial influence on micro-level decisions in pre-colonial times (Radoine, 2010). This begs the question of how the Moroccan society transformed, in a matter of five decades, from a society with a strong urban-related identity and a deep attachment to its cities, to one that is quite detached from its built environment and with little interest in how it is made. The answer lies in the transformation of the collective understanding of the urban phenomenon during the colonial era. Through the reevaluation of Moroccan planning history and by using data from six interviews conducted in June-July 2020 with academics as well as urban planners and officials working in different Moroccan institutions, this research attempts to make the case for the impact of the physical as well as institutional colonial legacies on creating

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and deepening the division between Moroccans and their built environment.

2 Morocco's Colonial Experience

France's colonial project was presented as a virtuous "humanitarian" mission to "civilize" colonies (Jelidi, 2008). Accordingly, the protectorate's planning policies served this mission through creating new "European cities" away from the indigenous cities as examples of modernization and civilization. This led to the implementation and enforcement of a *physical* division within the urban order. While the new cities were presented as the future of development; original cities, or Medinas were romanticized and presented as "medieval relics" (Holden, 2007). This policy locked Medinas in time and left them at the margin of development. In terms of decision-making, urban planning was a top-down practice that was undertaken by French specialised services (see Bessac-Vaure, 2016) based on the experimentation of western urban theories on Moroccan territories (see Wright, 1987). People were rarely formally included in urban decisions. Their alineation created a deeper *institutional* division between the Moroccan society and space. Meanwhile, many rural areas were considered to be "useless" by the protectorate administration and were thus systematically marginalized (Aït Hamza, 2012). Ultimately, Moroccans were pushed to migrate to new cities in search of better work opportunities. After independence, the newly formed Moroccan government adopted the already existing colonial structure (M.E.L, 1961), and carried out the same colonial policy of housing the increasing urban population using the same legislative frameworks (Rharbi, 2005) and resorting to French technical and administrative expertise (Philifert, 2010).

3 Discussion: Colonial Legacy and Urban-Related Identity

While urban identity was largely linked to the imageability and legibility of a city, urban sociologists and psychologists have introduced the symbolic meaning-related aspects of the environment that constitute the urban-related identity of city dwellers (Lalli, 1988). This urban-related identity plays an important role in the individual's differentiation from "the other" which creates a "sense of we" that makes one more committed to their environment. Accordingly, it is proven that a "highly-identified" person is more likely to be active in urban decision-making (Winter & Church, 1984, as cited in Lalli, 1988). Furthermore, Belanche et al. (2017) found

that the impact of urban-related identity can be translated into behavioral intentions through personal and social norms. In other words, the personal and social institutions of meaning imbued in society make space for how much urban-related identity plays a role in the individual's commitment to the city.

The urban-related identity of Moroccans in pre-colonial times was closely linked to their bond with the Medinas as a familiar urban context in line with their lifestyles and values. However, the "rebranding" of the Medina from a vibrant living center to a traditional fabric to be preserved and protected has caused a rupture in this link. Additionally, the laws which prohibited any kind of development inside the Medinas alienated people from their own context by preventing them from acting on it. The impact of this new dynamic on the relationship between people and cities can be traced in two aspects. First, the focus of the colonial administration on creating an *identity of* the Medina as an authentic architectural heritage resulted in the neglect of how people developed their *identity to* the Medina. In other words, the focus on the image of the Medina came at the expense of how people identified to it. Secondly, as people were in constant search of better economic opportunities and better living conditions, they were forced to migrate. Accordingly, by locating development benefits in the new cities, the protectorate planning system controlled the value attributed to each part of the built environment. Ultimately, While the new cities thrived, Medinas' economic activity reduced and their role was confined within the limits of their aesthetic value.

Furthermore, as Moroccan migrants were made to settle in urban fringes, they would have a hard time appropriating a space from which they have been excluded in all aspects. Additionally, they were seldom informed about urban decisions. Eventually, their lack of knowledge of the European space limited their potential for resistance and constrained their rights to participation. Even after independence, and due to the lack of communication between authorities and the people (Interview, 2020), the average Moroccan citizen rarely knows that she or he is entitled to participate in the decision-making process behind the making of cities. Planning regulations are simply too incomprehensible for law enforcers and populations alike, and they are seldom adaptable to the independent Moroccan context (Interview, 2020). Consequently, their ignorance of the rules and why they are made yielded a certain disdain for them (Interview, 2020). Ultimately, the popular frustration with an incomprehensible context translated through the resistance against the "colonial way" through different urban practices like overstepping planning regulations (Interview, 2020), or withdrawing from the urban space altogether.

4 Conclusion

The lack of participation in urban decisions in Morocco is a direct consequence of the negligence of civil society in decision-making processes. Lacking *the will* to participate in the Moroccan society, on the other hand, is another topic in need of more research. Overall, it seems that there has been a rupture between the Moroccan population and pre-colonial planning practices that have changed the collective understanding of urban space and how it is made. However, there has never been a complete rupture with centralist colonial urbanism that can potentially reorient the collective perspective towards active participation. In this sense, administrative and legislative reforms are undoubtedly paramount in encouraging people to participate in urban development. However, it is also important to raise awareness around urban issues and reconstruct the Moroccan urban-related identity so people can identify to their shared space and potentially be willing to actively contribute to it. This could be achieved through the creation of a common narrative where the different urban histories of Morocco are acknowledged and reconciled, and where the diversity and richness of the Moroccan urban-related identity could be a source of pride and an incentive for a more inclusive future. In this sense, including the “European city” in the Moroccan urban identity remains to be the main challenge that must be overcome in order to bridge the divide and move forward.

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