

Contested Heritages

Contemporary perspective on colonial-era train stations in Morocco via architectural interventions.



The different levels of heritage. Image created by author (Belboukhaddaoui, 2025).

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Prologue

Positioning myself within the public discourse on colonial heritage in Morocco proved to be a complex and personal challenge. Coming from a Western academic background, while being of partial Moroccan descent, made me question my own perspective; in Western discussions, the terms '*decolonization*' and '*colonial heritage*' carry a strong political weight. But, how to perceive these ideas from a Moroccan perspective? Through my research I found that while colonial-era architecture is contested, Morocco's relationship with its past is not defined by the same decolonial discourse we see in the West. Instead of rejecting colonial remains, Morocco integrates them into its evolving urban landscape. This approach does not fully fit in the Western framework of decolonization, where the focus is in undoing colonial legacies.

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Abstract

This thesis examines how colonial-era architecture is perceived in contemporary Morocco, focusing specifically on colonial-era train stations, with the Gare de Rabat-Ville as a central case study. This research explores the significance of colonial-era architecture by an in-depth study of the station's renovation efforts. Furthermore, it compares the Moroccan framework for heritage preservation, which distinguishes between traditional and colonial architecture, with UNESCO's universal approach. Lastly, the interventions are connected to the ongoing public debate about the current value of colonial architecture in contemporary Morocco.

Train stations in Morocco are more than just buildings; they are nodes in a colonial network that reshaped the country's economy, society and spatial layout (Salhi et al., 2024) By examining the renovation efforts at the Rabat railway station, this thesis aims to explore whether the interventions respect the colonial style or change it to fit post-colonial values. This thesis argues that the renovation efforts reveal an ambivalent attitude towards colonial heritage, as the perception of French influence has shifted over time in Morocco.

The methodology includes reviewing both primary and secondary resources such as the public debate, (archival) images that reveal architectural changes, postcards and legal heritage preservation frameworks on both national and international level.

Morocco's relationship with its French colonial past is complex and ambiguous, and this study further aims to explore how the current stance on colonial buildings is reflected in modern renovation efforts. This thesis offers insights in how cultural identity, colonial legacy and infrastructure meet in contemporary Morocco.

Introduction

The Kingdom of Morocco has rapidly been renovating its railway network over the past decades. Today, it is home to one of the most advanced railway systems in Africa, including the continent's first high-speed rail line, the *Al Boraq*, which connects the port cities of Tangier and Casablanca (Chengaou et al., 2025). However, Morocco's railway infrastructure has a much longer history, largely shaped by European influence.

During the colonial period, Morocco was divided into two protectorates (1912–1956): a French-controlled zone covering most of the country and a Spanish-controlled area in the north. It was in territories controlled by a French colonial administration that the majority of Morocco's railway network was developed, with additional sections constructed by the Spanish in the north. While these colonial-era railways laid the foundation for Morocco's current infrastructure, many of the stations and tracks built during this period are now undergoing significant renovation as part of the country's efforts to renovate and upgrade its railway network.

One of the key players in this transformation is the *Office National des Chemins de Fer* (ONCF), Morocco's national railway company. The ONCF has announced ambitious plans for the expansion of rail infrastructure, including the development of *Réseau Express Régional* (RER) lines to improve connectivity in high-density areas, as seen in figure 1 (ONCF, 2025a).

This expansion focuses on the busiest railway corridor in Morocco, the Atlantic corridor, between the cities of Casablanca and Kenitra, crossing cities such as Rabat and Mohammedia. As part of these plans, and in preparation for the World Cup in 2030 which Morocco will co-host with Spain and Portugal (El Atti, 2025), existing colonial-era railway stations are being renovated to meet increasing passenger demands.

These renovation efforts extend beyond questions of functionality. The adaptation of colonial-era railway stations in contemporary Morocco touches upon a more sensitive and ambiguous field: *heritage*. The way in which Morocco engages with its colonial architectural legacy reflects broader debates about national identity and the contested value of colonial-era architecture. These stations, like Gare de Rabat-Ville, are not only transport hubs, but also historical sites whose preservation or transformation reveals much about the evolving relationship between Morocco and its colonial legacy.

This thesis examines how colonial-era railway stations are being perceived in Morocco, using the Gare de Rabat-Ville as a case study. The central research question is:

“How does the renovation of Gare de Rabat-Ville reflect Morocco's changing perspective on colonial heritage, and what does this reveal about the country's evolving views on its colonial past?”

To address this question, this thesis is structured into multiple chapters, each shifting between different scales of analysis. The first chapter provides historical context on Morocco's colonial past and discusses whether the railway network represents its most significant colonial legacy. The second chapter focuses on Gare de Rabat-Ville, analyzing renovation efforts through a comparison of two proposed renovation plans. Finally, the thesis ends with an exploration of the heritage preservation frameworks and the broader public discourse on

decolonization and its implications for architectural heritage in Morocco.

This thesis argues that Morocco’s perception of its colonial heritage is *contested* and is shaped by ongoing *negotiations* surrounding decolonization. The heritage value of colonial-era buildings is often considered secondary to that of traditional ‘*arabesque*’ architecture. This attitude reflects a broader process of decolonization, visible in architectural interventions where colonial-era structures are seen as less aligned with national identity. As a result, they are often neglected or minimally preserved, while traditional Arabesque styles are given more attention.

By examining Gare de Rabat-Ville as a case study, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how Morocco navigates the legacy of colonial architecture in the context of renovation, heritage preservation, and national identity.



Figure 1. Future plans released by ONCF. (Mhannaoui, 2024)

Chapter I.

The colonial blueprint for contemporary Morocco.



I. Rail infrastructure; the biggest colonial legacy in Morocco?

French colonial rule (1912–1956) reshaped Morocco's economy, shifting its focus from inland cities like Fes and Marrakech to cities on the Atlantic coast, particularly Casablanca, Rabat, and Mohammedia. This shift in the economy resulted into a new railway system, built to serve colonial trade and industry. The French started building railways to connect mines, ports, and industrial hubs (Salhi et al., 2024). At the same time, they modernized coastal cities, making them the economic centers for this new colonial economy.

Before the French occupation, Morocco's economy was *decentralized*. Major economic activity was concentrated in the inland cities of Fes, Marrakech, and Meknes, which had thrived as caravan trade centers along trans-Saharan and Mediterranean routes. However, under colonial rule, the French shifted the economic corridor towards the Atlantic coast, prioritizing cities like Casablanca, Rabat, and Mohammedia for trade purposes (Barbour et al, 2025). This shift was strengthened by the strategic development of railway infrastructure, which served colonial interests by connecting resources to export hubs. This development facilitated industrial growth on the coast and marginalized traditional inland trade centers, such as Fes and Marrakech (Bogaert, 2015). This chapter offers a historical perspective on these changes and explores how they continue to shape Morocco's economy, infrastructure, and spatial layout today.

1.1. Early Railway Developments

The first railway infrastructure in Morocco dates back to 1887 when the Belgian government gifted a small train line to the Moroccan Sultan. This railway, consisting of a single locomotive and two coaches, connected the Sultan's palace with the Jardin L'Agdal in the city of Meknes. The Belgians hoped that this diplomatic gesture would secure them permission to develop more railway lines in the country. However, Morocco remained largely without railway infrastructure until the early 20th century (Duchesne, 1965).

In 1907 the *Compagnie Marocaine*, a French colonial holding company, constructed a narrow-gauge railway line from the port of Casablanca to a nearby quarry. Narrow-gauge railways, which have tracks spaced closer together than standard-gauge railways, are often used in difficult terrains for cost efficiency, or for temporary industrial and military applications. This early railway was a significant turning point, marking the beginning of Morocco's railway system.

However, it was destroyed by the Chaouia¹ people in resistance to colonial presence, see figure 2. Despite its short lifespan, this line is considered Morocco's first functional railway line (Mary Evans Picture Library, n.d.).



Figure 2. Locomotive destroyed during the Chaouia uprising (Mary Evans Picture Library, n.d.)

¹ 'Chaouia' is a ethno-geographical region in Morocco in the region of Tamesna. The city of Casablanca is part of this region.



Figure 3. Archival image of the colonial railway system in Morocco. (BNP, n.d.)

Following the establishment of the French Protectorate in 1912, Morocco saw railway expansion, with a strong focus on narrow-gauge networks. Between 1912 and 1935, the French built an extensive 1,700 km network of 600 mm narrow-gauge railways, which was the largest narrow-gauge system in Africa at the time (figure 3). This expansion was not driven by a desire to serve Moroccan society but rather to extract resources, enforce military control, and integrate colonial economic hubs into global trade networks (Salhi et al., 2024).

Between 1925 and 1936, as colonial economic ambitions grew, key railway corridors were further developed by converting narrow-gauge lines into regular-gauge railways (figure 4).

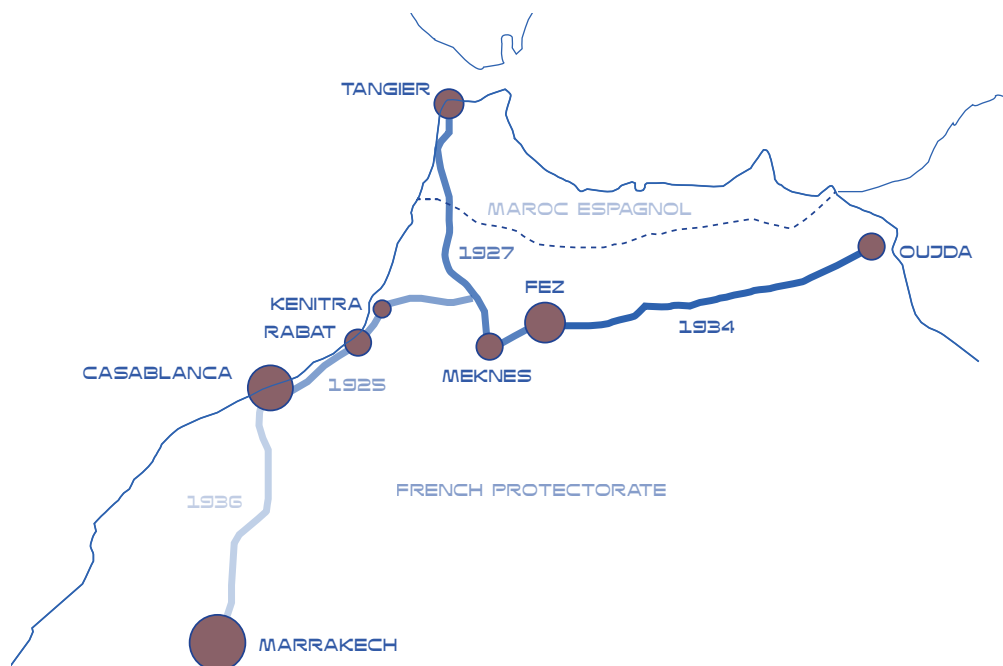


Figure 4. The important standard-gauge corridors in 1936. These corridors still define contemporary Morocco. (Image produced by the author - R. Belboukhaddaoui)

Regular gauge, typically wider than narrow gauge, allows for higher speeds, greater stability, and heavier loads, making it more suitable for long-term economic and industrial use. By upgrading these lines, the French solidified Morocco's role in global trade, further embedding the colonial economy into the country's infrastructure (Barbour et al, 2025).

By the time Morocco gained independence in 1956, four separate standard-gauge railway companies had been established under colonial rule. In 1963, these were merged to form ONCF, Morocco's current national railway operator (BNP, n.d.).

1.2. Urban Transformations

The colonial French power reshaped Morocco's urban fabric, particularly in coastal cities located on the Atlantic corridor² such as Rabat and Casablanca. Unlike pre-colonial Moroccan cities, which were characterized by dense medinas with organic urban patterns, French urban planning imposed European-style modernist layouts inspired by initiatives such as *Bauhaus* and *CIAM*, including wide boulevards, administrative districts, and zoning (Pechota, 2022).

The French transformed Casablanca from a small port town into a Moroccan metropolis and *economic engine* of the country. This was done by implementing a modernist expansion plan, including an extensive port and industrial zones (Cohen & Eleb, 2003). Unlike Casablanca, Rabat was developed as the *administrative center* of French Morocco, with Haussmannian-style avenues, government buildings, and colonial housing developments, setting the foundation for Rabat's current status as the capital (Wagner & Minca, 2014). Mohammedia, originally a small fishing town, was *industrialized* under the French, particularly for petroleum refining and heavy industry, further emphasizing the Atlantic corridor as Morocco's economic heart (Seddiki, et al. 2021).

The combination of shifting the economy, railway expansion and urban transformation laid down a colonial blueprint that still defines the country's dynamics and layout today.

1.3. Railways of Morocco: The biggest colonial legacy?

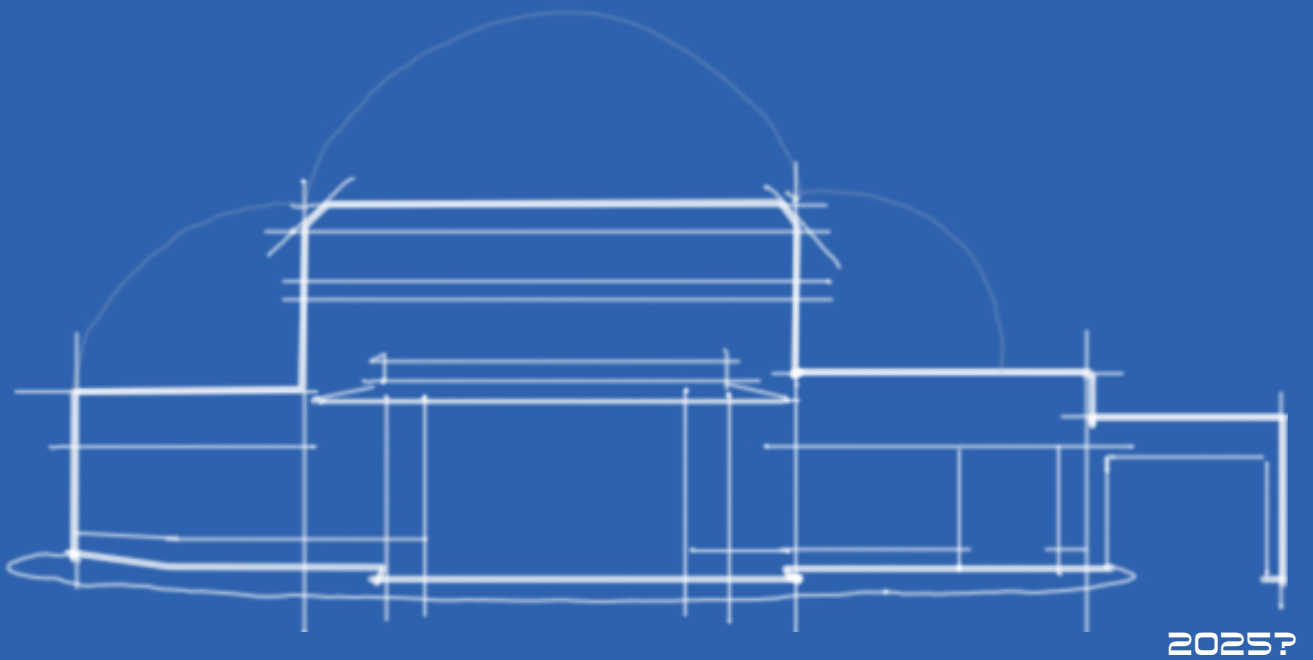
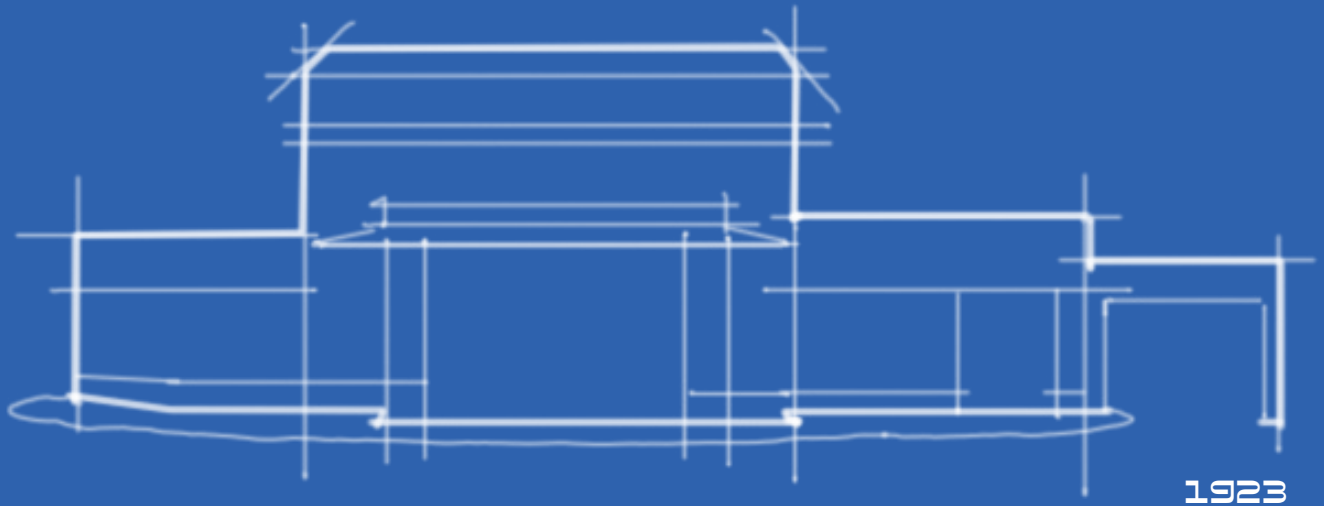
The railway network is a crucial colonial legacy, as the main corridors built by the French are still the backbone of the Moroccan transportation system. However, the urban and infrastructural transformation of coastal cities, like Casablanca, Rabat and Mohammedia, has arguably had an even greater long-term impact. The French not only changed how goods and people moved across Morocco but also *dictated* where (economic) power was concentrated, a pattern that continues to exist in modern Morocco.

Today, the Atlantic corridor² remains the country's most developed and dense region, while historically significant cities like Fes and Marrakech, despite their cultural and touristic importance, never regained their pre-colonial economic status.

² The Atlantic Corridor is the corridor between the cities of Casablanca and Kenitra. This is the new economic corridor of the country established by the French.

Chapter II.

A colonial-era train station in contemporary Morocco.



II. Gare de Rabat Ville

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of Gare de Rabat-Ville, a monumental railway station that serves as a key transit hub within Morocco's rail network. Positioned along the Casablanca - Kenitra corridor, it accommodates a range of train services, from long-distance *Al-Atlas* night trains connecting Oujda, Tangier, and Marrakech with Rabat, to regional lines such as the Kenitra - Casablanca route.

Gare de Rabat-Ville is an important node in the colonial railway system discussed in Chapter I. Designed by French architect Adrien Laforgue and inaugurated in 1923, it reflects the architectural and infrastructural ambitions of the French protectorate. Like many railway stations from this period, it has undergone and is still undergoing renovation and upgrading efforts to adapt to evolving transportation needs. This chapter explores the station's historical development, its current function, and ongoing renovation initiatives, aiming to contextualize the station within the broader discourse on heritage preservation in the third chapter.

2.1. Colonial-era station building

Gare de Rabat-Ville, located on the Avenue Mohammed V, is a significant landmark within Rabat's UNESCO-listed World Heritage zone *Rabat Ville Nouvelle*. Developed during the 1920s by the French protectorate, the *Ville Nouvelle* was designed as a modern *administrative center*. It is home to many of the city's major institutions, including banks, ministries and the Moroccan parliament, all positioned along the same prominent Avenue Mohammed V. This avenue serves as a vital axis, linking the *Ville Nouvelle* with the historic *Medina*, the oldest part of the city located near the Atlantic coastline (figure 5). The positioning of the railway station next to the Almohad city wall is visible in figure 6.



Figure 5. Aerial view of the Ville Nouvelle with the Medina in the distance and the station in the foreground. Annotated by the Author (Gillet, n.d.).



Figure 6. An archival photo of Gare de Rabat-Ville, showcasing the situation of the station in the Ville Nouvelle and the relation of the backside of the station with the Almohad city wall. This image is annotated by the author (Unknown Photographer A, n.d.)

The station served as a critical node in the colonial rail network, connecting the *administrative center* to the rest of the country. While its initial passenger capacity remains undocumented, ridership statistics provide insight into its evolving role. In 2006, the station handled approximately 5 million passengers annually. ONCF projections predicted this figure to double to 10 million by 2010 (AE Magazine, 2011). However, more recent data from 2024 indicates an actual ridership of approximately 6 million passengers per year (ONCF, 2025b), falling significantly short of earlier expectations.

The difference between predicted ridership and actual ridership raises questions about the factors influencing lower ridership. One possible explanation is the long timeline of renovation attempts. The first major renovation project, initiated in 2016, was ultimately cancelled in 2024 after years of delays after a conflict with UNESCO. In the same year, a new renovation plan was announced, further extending the station's renovation timeline (see Chapter 2.2). Another explanation for the low ridership might be the opening of the renovated station of Rabat-Agdal in 2016.

Architectural ideals

Exterior

The main façade, on the Avenue Mohammed V, is composed of geometrical forms and is symmetrical along the central axis. The composition is dominated by the central structure dedicated to the entrance hall, which features a double-height ceiling. The entrance itself is defined by a grand porch framed by two Art-Deco columns, supporting a larger canopy. The predominant building materials are masonry, concrete and marble. The architect, Adrien Laforgue, also made use of artistic wrought ironwork as seen in the detailing (Salih & Amrani, 2011).

Interior

The 1923 station building features a central hall spanning 1,200 m², housing various station facilities. From this main hall, passengers descend to the platforms, which are situated below ground level in a sunken area (AE Magazine, 2011), see figure 7.

The design reflects key modernist architectural principles from the 1920s in several ways. The emphasis on functionality and efficiency, seen in the clear separation of circulation spaces and passenger flow, aligns with modernist ideals of rational planning. The use of a grand, open hall as a central organizing space, mirrors the Beaux-Arts influence, while the integration of subterranean platforms optimizes spatial use and strengthens the station's urban presence without disrupting the street-level cityscape. This approach is in line with the modernist vision of harmonizing infrastructure with urban fabric (Cohen & Eleb, 2003).



Figure 7. An archival photo of Gare de Rabat-Ville, showcasing the subterrain platforms and the monumental station (Unknown Photographer A, n.d.)

2.2 Renovation of Gare de Rabat-Ville.

In 2012, the city of Rabat launched the “*Rabat, City of Light*” initiative, an urban development plan aimed at renovating the city while protecting its cultural and historical values. As part of this vision, the plan included the renovation of Gare de Rabat-Ville. According to the ONCF, both Gare de Rabat-Ville and the newly developed Rabat Hay-Riad station are intended to serve as central hubs for urban life and multimodal transport connections (ONCF, 2024).

As part of this urban development plan, Rabat envisioned a monumental theater on the banks of the Bouregreg river by Zaha Hadid, new multimodal railway stations, Africa’s tallest tower, bridges, and wide peripheral boulevards lined with palm trees (Otazu, 2019). But these projects seem to contradict UNESCO’s principles. The same sources state that “*the authorities do not seem to have taken into account the benefits of being declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site,*” including the obligation to consult the organization beforehand on major urban projects for the capital.

Otazu (2019) reports that two projects in Rabat particularly alarmed UNESCO: the future Mohammed VI Tower and the expansion of Rabat-Ville Station. These projects of the capital were decided upon “*without prior communication with the international organization.*”

The first Renovation plan

The renovation of Gare de Rabat-Ville began in 2016 and included the transformation of the station area. The historic station building, which is built in 1923 during the French protectorate, was planned to be transformed into an art gallery, while a new three-story passenger terminal would be constructed (ONCF, 2024). Additionally, plans included covering the entire station area with a steel structure inspired by the traditional mashrabiya (Incede, 2025).

However, in 2019, UNESCO strongly criticized this renovation plan, as Rabat's historic core is designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. UNESCO expressed concerns that the proposed modifications would compromise the architectural integrity of the station and its relationship with the adjacent Almohad city wall, particularly the section facing the city wall, where metal columns are installed to support a future structure, an intervention UNESCO disapproves of.

The original building, constructed during the French protectorate, has remained "small and discreet" with its underground vaults. It has been preserved in this state for nearly a century, as has the rest of the avenue, an element UNESCO considered exceptional when it declared the city a World Heritage Site (UNESCO, 2019a).

The organization emphasized that any intervention must prioritize the preservation of the city's heritage while integrating necessary modern upgrades (UNESCO, 2019a). As outlined in its resolutions (UNESCO, 2019b), UNESCO urged the project developers to reconsider the design to ensure it aligned with heritage protection guidelines. This ultimately led to a revision of the renovation plans.

The second renovation plan.

Due to the conflict with UNESCO and the COVID-19 pandemic, construction of the 'first' renovation attempt was halted in 2020, providing an opportunity to evaluate the project.

When work resumed in 2023, it followed a revised architectural vision that addressed both technical constraints and heritage concerns. According to ONCF (2024), the interruption allowed for a heritage impact study to be conducted, acknowledging the station's significance within Rabat's UNESCO-listed urban fabric. This period of reconsideration also led to modifications in the architectural approach, particularly regarding the section facing the Almohad wall. A comparison between the two renovation plans focusing on the impact on the Almohad city wall can be found in figure 8.

Figure 9 contains a visual comparison between the two renovation plans.

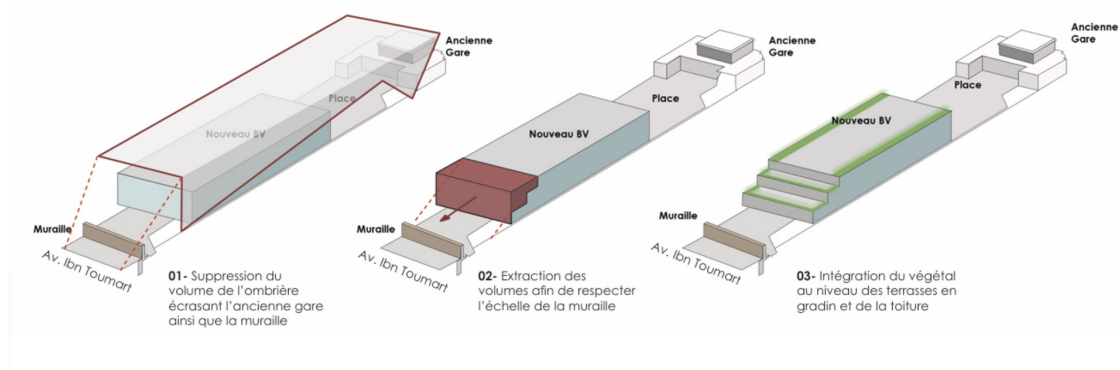


Figure 8. Three diagrams portraying the progress from the first renovation plan (left) to the newest plan (right), focusing on the relationship between the new structure and the ancient Almohad wall (Melehi, 2024).



VUE SUR LA GARE ACTUELLE DEPUIS AV. MOHAMMED V



VUE DE LA NOUVELLE GARE DEPUIS AV. MOHAMMED V



VUE SUR LA GARE ACTUELLE DEPUIS ROND POINT



VUE DE LA NOUVELLE GARE DEPUIS ROND POINT

Figure 9. A comparison of the two renovation plans. (Kaiss, 2024)

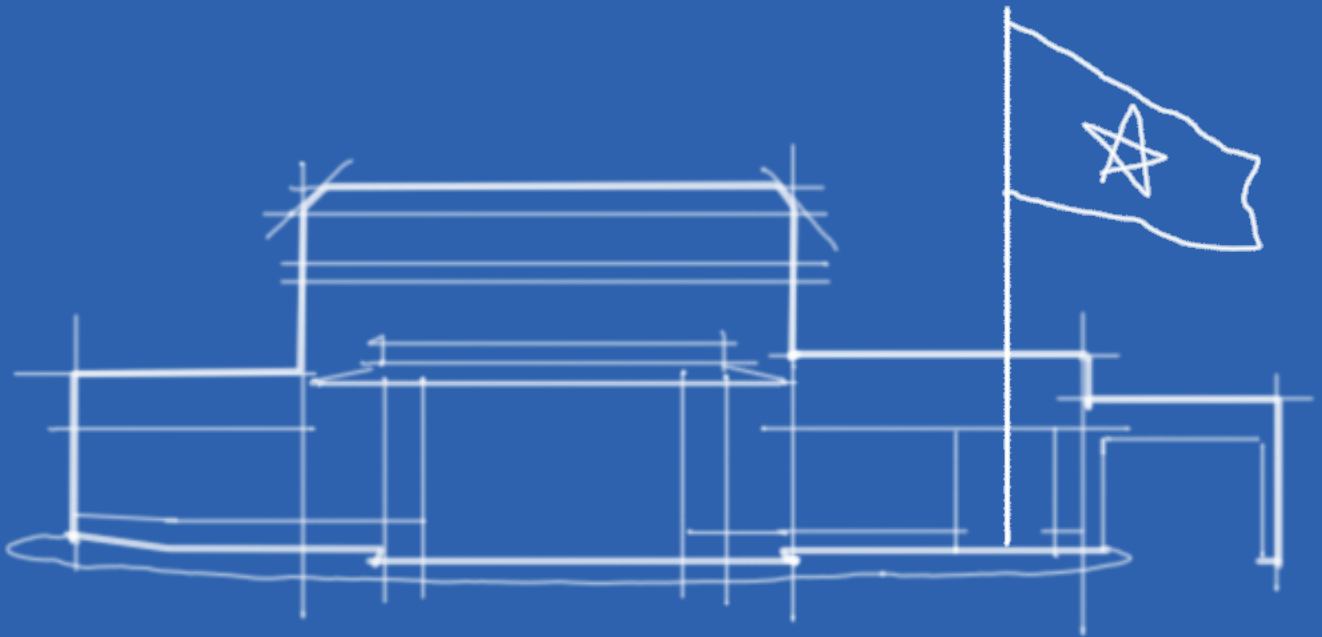
The images on the left portray the first renovation plan (designed by Incide), while the images on the right portray the newest renovation plan (designed by Youssef Melehi).

Chapter III.

Positioning the Gare Rabat-Ville in the broader public debate on decolonization.

"A FRENCH STATION LIKE THIS DOES NOT BELONG IN OUR COUNTRY!"

"THE FRENCH MADE OUR COUNTRY BETTER! THIS STATION IS PART OF THAT PROGRESS!"



"THIS IS NOT OUR NATIONAL HERITAGE... IT'S A COLONIAL RELIC!"

"LIKE IT OR NOT, IT'S PART OF OUR HERITAGE!"

III. Decolonization: a public debate visible in architecture?

This chapter connects the case study of the renovation of Gare de Rabat-Ville to broader legal heritage frameworks and heritage discourses in Morocco. Colonial-era stations lie at the center of a larger debate: on one hand they are deeply *contested* material remnants of a colonial past that is difficult to integrate with post-colonial national identity. On the other hand, these structures are increasingly reinterpreted as beacons of innovation and progress, playing a key role in the country's ambitious infrastructural development. This tension highlights the complexity of Morocco's post-colonial identity, where architecture becomes a medium through which historical narratives are either preserved, redefined, or erased.

3.1. Legal framework for heritage preservation in Morocco

The conflict between the project developers and UNESCO is part of a broader debate concerning the fate of colonial-era railway stations. Many of these structures, along with other colonial-era buildings, have already been renovated or demolished.

Both the *medina*, including its city walls, and the French-built *Ville Nouvelle* of Rabat were inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage in 2012, as part of a broader designation: '*Rabat Modern Capital and Historic City: a Shared Heritage*'. This recognition acknowledges the coexistence of Rabat's traditional and colonial urban fabrics, preserving both the historic *medina* and the French-built *Ville Nouvelle*.

However, on a national level, heritage protection is more selective. The Moroccan Ministry of Youth, Culture and Education (MJCC, 2025) maintains its own registration for national heritage sites (*patrimoine matériel national*), dividing the system of heritage into different levels by maintaining the terms '*classement*' and '*inscription*' to distinguish between two levels of protection (Ministère de la Culture, 2025):

- classification (*classement*): The highest level of heritage protection
- registration (*inscription*): The lower level of heritage protection

The national heritage list includes several prominent landmarks, such as *Kasbah of the Oudayas*, the *Hassan Tower* and the *Chellah* site. The first ministerial decrees (BO 86) regarding heritage for the city of Rabat date back to 1914, listing the *Kasbah of the Oudayas* and the city walls as '*classement*' heritage, followed by the designation of several protection zones along the walls in following decades. In the 20th century, all sites declared as heritage in Rabat were of '*arabesque*' origin.

This changed in 2000, when the *Royal Cinema* became the first colonial-era building in Rabat to receive the national heritage status. Salih & Amrani (2011) argue that colonial-era architectural and urban design were long neglected in national heritage classifications.

However, in contemporary Morocco there is a growing recognition that this heritage is an integral part of the country's history. This increasing recognition seeks to restore justice to this past and to the heritage that was long considered 'non-Moroccan'. The authors argue that colonial-era structures are now part of Morocco's 21st century identity.

In 2011, twenty buildings within Rabat's *Ville Nouvelle* were added to the national heritage register (ministerial decree from 2011, named BO 5972). However, these buildings were only registered (*inscription*) rather than classified (*classement*), indicating a lower level of protection. Moreover the *Ville Nouvelle* as a whole was not recognized, unlike the *medina*. This fragmented recognition reflects the ongoing hierarchy within heritage policies: traditional architecture is seen as authentic, while colonial-era buildings remain contested and often subject to negotiation (figure 10).



Figure 10. Impression showing the traditional architecture (left) next to the colonial-era architecture (right), made by the author (Belboukhaddaoui, 2025).

3.2. Conflict with UNESCO

This fragmented approach to heritage is not only visible at a national level, but also extends to international heritage institutions such as UNESCO. Despite both the Almohad city walls and colonial-era railway station being part of the same World Heritage designation, UNESCO's objections were carefully framed around the protection of the city wall. In one of its official statements, UNESCO mentioned that it '*regrets that only minor changes could be made to the railway station extension project to mitigate its impact on the city walls*'.

While UNESCO's concern focuses on the impact of the renovation on the Almohad city walls, the expression of the *Ville Nouvelle* and the Rabat-Ville railway stations experienced significant changes as well. It's notable that UNESCO holds back from addressing the consequences of the renovation on the *Ville Nouvelle*, despite its official recognition under the World Heritage framework. This exclusion raises questions about UNESCO's positioning regarding colonial-era heritage and the political sensitivities surrounding its preservation.

One possibility is that UNESCO, a Paris-based institution, may be navigating through a complex (geo)political landscape. Colonial-era architecture does have a contested nature and openly supporting the protection of elements in the *Ville Nouvelle* could risk showing percep-

tions of *neo-colonial* influence. By limiting its objections to the city walls, a pre-colonial structure with unquestioned historical significance, UNESCO might be (strategically) maintaining a neutral stance in the politically charged discourse surrounding colonial-era architecture.

Alternatively, the inconsistency in UNESCO's attention could reflect the differences in the levels of heritage recognition within the World Heritage Framework itself. While both the *medina* and *Ville Nouvelle* are inscribed under the same title, there may be hierarchies within this classification, prioritizing certain elements over others. UNESCO could also align its approach with the Moroccan national heritage classifications, wherein the city walls are ranked as one of the most protected sites, whereas much of the *Ville Nouvelle* was only recognized later and at a lower level of protection.

This raises a broader question: is the concern genuinely limited to the Almohad city walls? Or does the renovation of the railway station also pose a significant impact on the *Ville Nouvelle*? If so, does UNESCO avoid participating into a colonial debate by only mentioning the Almohad city wall, or is its approach a result from a differentiation in the levels of protection. These questions highlight the ongoing ambiguities in contemporary heritage management and classification.

3.3. Decolonization in Morocco

In various public domains, Morocco has been renegotiating its colonial legacy, ranging from architectural transformations such as the renovation of the Gare de Rabat-Ville to linguistic changes.

The country's gradual linguistic shift from French to English in education is another key example of how decolonization extends beyond architecture. Just as the colonial-era station is being adjusted to fit a new vision, so is Morocco also reshaping its linguistic landscape.

This reflects a shift that moves away from French colonial influence while simultaneously establishing new connections within the globalized context. This shift is also supported by recent online campaigns calling for English to replace French as Morocco's main foreign language, showing that many people want the country to move away from its colonial past (Ayoubi, 2021).

Recent developments in infrastructure also reflect this changing attitude. Morocco's national railway company, ONCF, signed a new deal with the South Korean company Hyundai Rotem (Naim, 2025), moving away from its dependency on French rolling stock. It shows how Morocco is slowly breaking away from its colonial ties and building new international relationships.

Ultimately, Morocco's approach to its colonial past remains complex and often ambiguous. Architectural interventions, such as the renovation of Gare de Rabat-Ville, embody the country's ongoing attempt to navigate its history while constructing a narrative that aligns with contemporary culture and identity.

IV. Colonial-era heritage in Morocco: an ambiguous topic

Morocco's approach to its colonial past is defined by both distancing and integration. On one hand, the country is actively reshaping its linguistic landscape, gradually shifting from French

to English in education and administration as part of a broader decolonization effort. On other hand, as mentioned by Salih & Amrani (2011) the colonial-era architectural and urban design are integral part of Morocco, and cannot be separated from it.

This ambiguity is also reflected in the country's national heritage classification, where the colonial-era buildings from the Ville Nouvelle are listed with a lower preservation value compared to the arabesque/traditional architecture. The inclusion of twenty Ville Nouvelle buildings in 2011, although under the lower '*inscription*' category, demonstrates a growing acknowledgement of their historical value while still positioning them as secondary to traditional Moroccan heritage.

The case of the Gare de Rabat-Ville illustrates this selective approach. The Almohad city walls were prioritized in the redesign, while significant changes were made to the colonial-era railway station. UNESCO's objections focused on the walls, further underscoring the sensitivities surrounding colonial heritage.

V. Conclusion

Morocco's perspective on its colonial-era architecture is complex, ambiguous and reflects a broader tension between its colonial history and cultural identity. From the moment of its establishment during the colonial period, the railway network was used as a tool for territorial control and political strategy. It shaped cities and influenced patterns of urban growth. At the same time, these stations are seen as symbols of the country's urbanization and growth. This *duality* makes the heritage of these railway stations so contested today. Architectural interventions, such as the renovation attempts of the Rabat-Ville railway station, reflect this duality.

Current investments into the colonial-era railway stations show how they continue to be seen as beacons of progress and national growth. Yet, at the same time, the memory of their origins makes their preservation highly sensitive.

While the renovation project aimed to renovate the building and update it for contemporary needs, it also sparked resistance from actors like UNESCO, who opposed the plans, but largely based on the protection of the nearby Almohad city walls rather than the colonial-era station itself. This selective protection reflects broader patterns within Morocco's heritage framework, where 'traditional', pre-colonial heritage is given priority over colonial-era architecture. This hierarchy is telling of how the country negotiates its history by valuing certain narratives over others.

Similar ambiguities appear in other domains too, like language politics, where the gradual shift from French to English similarly reveals a similar will to distance from colonial legacies.

Ultimately, the ways in which Morocco navigates the renovation and heritage status of its colonial-era railway stations reveals much about how it confronts its history. It shows how infrastructures, often seen as purely functional, are deeply symbolic and politically charged.

Future research could further explore how other colonial infrastructures are being dealt with in the Moroccan context, or compare Morocco's contested heritage approach to other post-colonial settings facing similar dilemmas in navigating through colonial legacies. These studies could also look more closely at the definition of the word 'heritage', and how it is understood from a Moroccan point of view.

VI. Reflection

Reflecting on my thesis and progress, I clearly see how my focus evolved over time. At first, I was drawn to the public debate on colonial-era architecture and wanted to compare the two different renovation plans of the railway station Rabat-Ville to find a perspective on colonial-era architecture. However, in the end, this comparison became just a small part of my thesis. Instead, I built my narrative around legal frameworks of heritage preservation, using the railway station as a case study to explore how colonial heritage is treated in Morocco.

Initially, I wanted to compare Rabat-Ville railway station to other train stations to identify a pattern in heritage preservation. However, as my research progressed, I realized this was not essential. Focusing on one case allowed me to explore it in much greater depth, rather than briefly mentioning the examples. The direction of my thesis naturally shifted towards a detailed investigation of the Gare Rabat-Ville, due to the station's entanglement in a complex conflict involving UNESCO.

When I began working on this thesis, I expected to end with a clear pattern or a well-defined stance on how Morocco engages with its colonial heritage. However, at the end I can only conclude and reflect that the approach is based on negotiating, due to ambiguity and complexity of this subject.

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Abbreviations

ONCF	Office National des Chemins de Fer
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
MCJJ	Ministère de la Jeunesse, de la Culture et de la Communication
et al.	'et alia' (= latin) and others
n.d.	no date