

PRESERVING RESISTANCE



*Reclaiming Identity through the Raïs
Palace in the Casbah of Algiers*

I.	ABSTRACT	3
II.	INTRODUCTION	4
III.	LAYERS OF HISTORIES	6
IV.	THE 1981 UNESCO REPORT	11
V.	CHALLENGES IN HERITAGE PRESERVATION	20
VI.	THE SYMBOLISM OF THE PALACE	23
VII.	CONCLUSION	26
VIII	BIBLIOGRAPHY	28
IX.	FIGURES	30

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates how the restoration of heritage sites can contribute to reclaiming national and cultural identity in post-colonial contexts, focusing on the Raïs Palace/Bastion 23 in the Casbah of Algiers. Employing the crossed histories methodology, the research examines multiple overlapping historical narratives that shaped the palace's original 16th-century Ottoman structure through significant transformations under French colonial rule to its extensive post-independence restoration efforts. Central to this analysis is the detailed examination of the 1981 UNESCO report, which outlined technical and ideological challenges in restoring a monument heavily altered by colonial interventions.

The findings highlight that Algeria's restoration initiative, guided by UNESCO's recommendations and executed through international partnerships, was an active attempt to reconstruct a pre-colonial identity. However, the study identifies tensions between international conservation standards and local conceptions of heritage, which demonstrates how global methodologies sometimes overshadow local cultural narratives and decision-making processes. Ultimately, the Raïs Palace symbolizes both the possibilities and limitations of post-colonial heritage restoration: while effectively reclaiming historical narratives, it also exposes persistent issues related to cultural sovereignty and the social integration of heritage sites into contemporary urban life. This thesis aims to contribute valuable insights into broader academic discussions on heritage preservation and urban cultural heritage management by critically engaging with the interactions documented in multiple UNESCO reports and various local experts.

AR1066: Architecture History & Theory - TU Delft

Final Submission: 17/04/2025

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The restoration of historical monuments is more than a technical effort; it is a negotiation of identity, history, and power. In post-colonial contexts, where indigenous traditions and colonial interventions have shaped architecture, restoration can become an act of reclaiming the past while shaping the future.

INTRODUCTION

The Rais Palace/Bastion 23 in Algiers is a striking example of this process. Initially built in 1576 as part of the city's Ottoman fortifications, the palace complex and its surroundings underwent significant modifications under French colonial rule before being restored in independent Algeria. Its latest transformation reflects Algeria's identity recovery as globalization reshapes Algiers, leaving the Casbah and the Palace of Rias as rare remnants of its pre-colonial heritage.

The restoration of the Palace of Rias was deeply influenced by the Algerian government with UNESCO's involvement, which provided expertise and international recognition but also introduced external perspectives that sometimes clashed with local heritage narratives. The UNESCO report (Ravéreau and El Alaily, 1981) outlines the technical and ideological challenges of preserving a site that had undergone significant modifications during the colonial period. Cantini (2011) describes international connections and the dominance of Western conservation frameworks in Algeria, questioning their alignment with the country's vision of heritage management, while Aliouane and Talbi (2022) explore the lasting influence of colonial preservation policies on Algeria's approach to restoration.

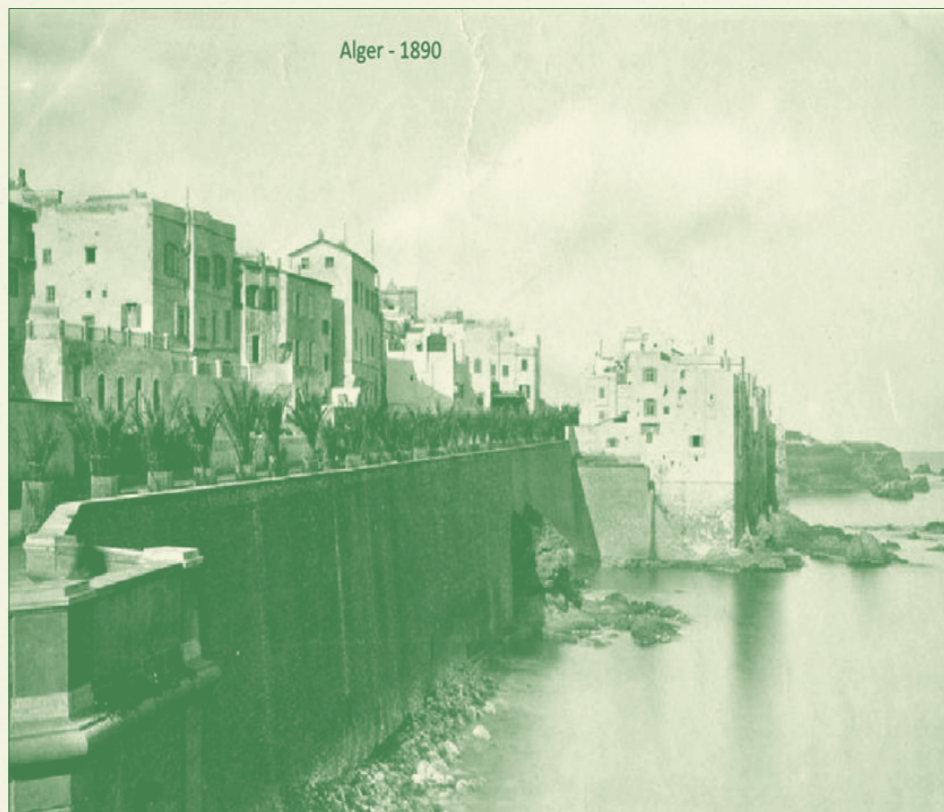


Fig.1: View of the Rais Palace from the shoreline

Source: Wikipedia common



Fig.2: Boulevard Amara Mohammed Rachid in 1890 with the Palace of the Rias on the right

Source: Wikipedia common

The significance of the Rais Palace extends beyond its architectural beauty. After decades of colonial rule, its restoration was part of Algeria's broader effort to reclaim its historical identity. Scholars such as Ben-Hamouche (2018) have studied how colonial urban planning disrupted Algiers' traditional spatial order, making restoration projects a form of cultural reappropriation. Meddahi (2021) warns, however, that restoration projects often prioritize aesthetics over historical accuracy, raising questions about the preservation of architectural elements. These concerns are particularly relevant in the Casbah of Algiers, where, as Lesbet (2013) argues, the balance between preserving authenticity and adapting to contemporary urban life remains a significant challenge.

This study will approach the palace's restoration through the lens of *Histoires Croisées* (crossed histories), which reveals how multiple actors, Ottoman builders, French colonialists, Algerian officials and international heritage experts have shaped its identity over time. Rather than presenting a linear account, this method will uncover the overlapping and sometimes conflicting narratives that have informed the palace's transformation.

The research will explore the palace's early function within Ottoman Algiers, tracing its evolution through the colonial period, when it was absorbed into the French administrative and military framework. It will then examine the site's post-independence reappropriation, investigating how Algeria sought to reclaim and reinterpret its heritage. The role of UNESCO and global conservation efforts will also be assessed, focusing on the tensions between international heritage management and national identity recovery.

This study aims to contribute to broader discussions on post-colonial heritage conservation by following the palace's layered history. Restoring the Rais Palace is not just about preserving an architectural landmark; it is about negotiating the past, shaping the present, and deciding whose history is told.

In 1980, Algiers was a city caught between past and future. Nearly two decades after independence, it struggled with the legacies of French colonial rule, the effects of rapid modernization, and the ongoing search for a cohesive national identity. The scars of colonization and the Algerian War (1954–1962) remained visible not only in the social fabric of the country but also in its architecture and urban spaces (Cazeaux, 2012; UNESCO, 1990). Algiers, once a key Mediterranean stronghold, had undergone profound transformations that disrupted its historic core. The Casbah, once a vibrant urban center, had fallen into decay, while the Raïs Palace stood in a state of severe neglect.

After independence in 1962, Algeria's new government, led initially by Ahmed Ben Bella and later by Houari Boumédiène, prioritized economic development and socialist modernization. The state focused on industrialization, land redistribution, and urban expansion, seeking to redefine Algeria as a self-sufficient nation free from colonial dependency. However, in this push for progress, heritage conservation was largely overlooked. Historic districts like the Casbah, once the heart of Algiers, were left to deteriorate as the government invested in large-scale housing projects and industrial zones (fig. 5). By the late 1970s, the effects of these policies had become evident: rural migration had intensified, informal settlements had expanded, and historical sites had been left in a state of abandonment (Oussila 2023).

LAYERS OF HISTORIES

Fig.3: Map of Algier's lower Casbah and the Raïs Palace

Source: Boublenza, 2019



Fig.4: The Palace of Raïs in alarming condition, 1978.

Source: Lesbet, 2013.



The Raïs Palace, built in 1576 under Ramdan Pasha, was part of Algiers' coastal fortification system and played a vital role in the city's maritime defense and governance (Latifa, 2015; Ben-Hamouche, 2018). The palace, which originally housed high-ranking officials, however, after the French conquest of Algiers in 1830, the palace, like much of the city's historic architecture, was repurposed. Over the years, it became a residence for military engineers, later a pension for young girls, and even the U.S. consulate, before being converted into a municipal library in the early 20th century. These successive transformations reflected France's broader colonial strategy: to erase and repurpose indigenous spaces, „integrating them into a Europeanized urban framework“ (Aliouane & Talbi, 2022).

Under French colonial rule, the Ottoman-era Palace complex was renamed “Bastion 23”, referencing its incorporation into the new fortifications of Algiers. Instead of renaming it after independence, post-colonial Algeria retained this colonial label: today the complex is officially known by both titles, the Raïs Palace and Bastion 23 (Lesbet, 2013). This dual identity symbolically reflects the layered Ottoman and French histories of the site, underscoring the enduring imprint of colonial-era nomenclature on Algiers' post-colonial heritage.

The Casbah Is Caving In, but Restoration Projects Are Facing Many Problems



A typical inner courtyard of a house in the Casbah in Algiers.

By MARVINE HOWE
Special to The New York Times
ALGIERS, Jan. 28 — The Casbah, with its maze of cobbled streets and alleys, windowless homes and flat, connecting roofs, is crumbling. Buildings in this part of the city, once the central business district, tend to collapse with alarming frequency. Wooden poles prop up shaky walls, patched roofs continue to leak and sewer breaks send rivulets down the steep streets where children play.

"We'd like to get out, but there's no place to go," Mohammed Makloufi, a cinema operator, told a visitor at his home. "We got scared when the house next door fell down recently and cracks began to appear around windows."

One of the fine old mansions of the Casbah the Makloufi house, with its tiled, Moorish-style balconies and arches, marble stairs and fountain, was built for one family. Today there are 14 families living in the 14-room house, each family with seven to ten people in a room. There is no kitchen or bathroom to speak of, only three Turkish toilets, but the house is scrupulously clean.

Too Many People
The main problem of the Casbah, in fact of Algiers as a whole, is overcrowding. In precolonial times, prior to 1830, the Casbah was the city of Algiers, with a population of 30,000. Then came the French colonial settlement, the general rush to the cities and a high population growth rate in Algeria of 3.2 percent. Today, between 80,000 and 100,000 people live in the 119-acre Casbah. They represent only a small part of the Algerian population, which has a population of more than two million.

An international effort to rehabilitate the Casbah is under way. "We must displace one-half of the population of the Casbah," said Hiroshi Daifuku, an American consultant with

the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Mr. Daifuku is one of a small group of international experts working with Algerian architects on a project called The Conservation and the Rehabilitation of the Casbah of Algiers.

There have been debates for the last decade over what to do about the Casbah, but until now no serious reconstruction plans were drafted. Some people argued that the Casbah should be emptied and converted into a museum and tourist area. Others thought that it was more urgent to resolve the housing shortage and that the whole place should be razed to make room for decent housing.

A Plan for Restoration
Two years ago, the Algerian Government turned to Unesco for help. Tugrul Akcura, a Turkish professor of town planning who has worked on the restoration of the cities of Fez in Morocco and Mecca in Saudi Arabia, is considered the father of the new plan for the Casbah.

Mr. Akcura and a team of foreign consultants together with young Algerian architects of the Atelier, or Workshop of the Casbah, have carried out detailed studies of the Casbah and drafted a renovation plan. The plan is to be submitted to the Algerian Government next month.

"Our aim is to restore the urban fabric of the Casbah as a whole, physically, socially, economically," Raci Bacemli, another Turkish consultant, told visitors in the Atelier offices, located in the ancient governor's palace, which itself is undergoing restoration. Mr. Bacemli recently completed a study of small workshops in the Casbah, which became a slum area in the 1940's, when the modern, largely French section of the city emerged. There are today about 500 shops — jewelers and clockmakers, tailors and

shoemakers, repairers and carpenters, leather-product makers and weavers — scattered hither and yon.

The upper part of the Casbah is scheduled to be restored as a residential quarter, Mr. Bacemli said, with the workshops shifted to the lower Casbah, which will be zoned as a business district.

"We're trying to reintegrate the Casbah into the life of the city," said Scheherazade Nafia, an Algerian architect, who added that under French rule the area had become a "Moslem ghetto."

The principal need is to establish a mechanism for financing the restoration, according to Mr. Akcura. He said that almost all property in the Casbah was privately owned and that the people did not have the money to pay for restoration.

"The state will have to subsidize the works in part," Mr. Akcura said. He estimated that it would cost \$140,000 to restore a house in the Casbah.

The Housing Problem
Algeria, however, already has a huge housing deficit. The people who lack any housing must be helped before the Government will consider the enormous improvements required in the Casbah, according to Algerians working on the Casbah project.

Algeria's new five-year plan introduced last year emphasizes social needs, particularly housing, and calls for the construction of 100,000 dwelling units a year. Housing units are now going up at a rate of 20,000 a year, a pace that does not keep up with the population increase.

There is also the problem of El Asnam, the city 100 miles southwest of Algiers that was devastated by an earthquake last October. At least 5,000 people were killed and 200,000 were left homeless. The city has become the Al-

gerian Government's top priority, and most international aid has gone to the refugees of El Asnam.

Nevertheless, the people of the Atelier said that it was becoming more urgent to do something about the Casbah. Of a total of 1,700 houses, there are 457 houses in "very bad condition," compared with 100 five years ago, according to Ahmed Koumas, an Algerian architect.

Houses are pronounced dangerous when it is apparent that they could fall down at any time. The families who are forced to evacuate those houses are lodged in "dormitories," dark cellars under the market.

One worry that was expressed by Mr. Akcura was that almost all property in the Casbah was privately owned and that the people did not have the money to pay for restoration.

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L. Matinee length necklace of 1mm amethysts and 14k gold twisted beads. 249.99

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K. 14k gold oval shape amethyst and diamond ring. 179.99

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D. Fresh water pearl earrings with amethyst tops in 14k gold. 59.99

Q. Tear-drop amethyst earrings set in 14k gold. 69.99

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S. Amethyst bracelet with 14k gold oval shaped beads. 44.99

U. Bracelet of amethysts, cultured pearls and 14k gold beads. 54.99

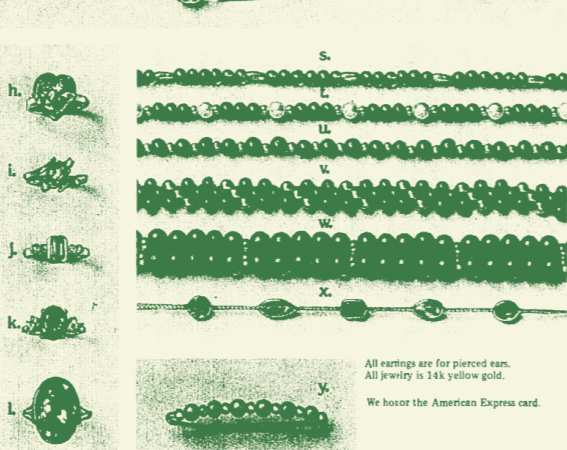
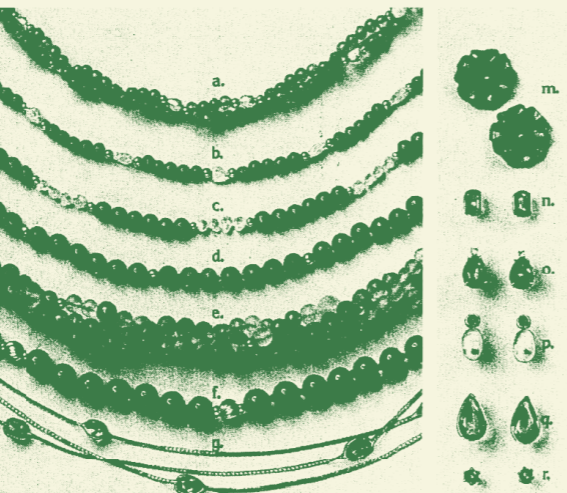
V. Alternating amethyst and 14k gold bead bracelet. 54.99

Z. Woven amethyst and 14k gold bead bracelet. 59.99

W. Two-strand amethyst bead bracelet with 14k gold dividers. 189.99

X. Assorted amethyst stones on 14k gold box chain bracelet. 129.99

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Fortunoff, the source.

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The Bastion 23 is an Ottoman-era architectural complex with multiple houses and palaces forming an interconnected urban patchwork. The complex's hierarchical organization characterizes it, with the palaces positioned near the seafront and smaller houses integrated within the urban fabric. The three main palaces, Palace 17, Palace 18, and Palace 23, are arranged around internal courtyards. The smaller houses, primarily former fishermen's homes, are arranged compactly, with shared walls and narrow passageways that facilitate social interactions and collective living. Each palace follows the traditional Ottoman-Maghrebi architectural style with arcades, carved wooden ceilings, and intricate tilework (BenHamouche, 2018). Architecturally, Bastion 23 is defined by its adaptation to the terrain's slope and its relationship with the Mediterranean Sea. The main palaces are arranged in a cascading manner with terraces that overlook the sea. The multi-level layout allows for a gradual transition between private and public spaces. The most prestigious rooms were located on the upper levels with direct access to balconies and loggias (UNESCO, 1981).

One of the most significant changes imposed under French rule was the construction of a major road that physically separated the Rais Palace from the Casbah (Fig. 3), cutting off its historical connection to the old city and disrupting its role in the urban landscape (Ravereau & El Alaily, 1981). This intervention not only disrupted the palace's urban role but also symbolized the broader colonial effort to restructure Algiers in favor of European settlers, relegating indigenous spaces to marginalization. By the time Algeria gained independence, the palace, like much of the Casbah, had suffered from decades of neglect and alteration (Lesbet, 2006).

Fig.5: Newspaper article from February 1, 1981.

Source: The New York Times

During the second half of the 1970s, local architects, historians, and public organizations like the Atelier Casbah and the Direction des Monuments Historiques, voiced concerns over the increasing neglect of heritage sites, seeing it as a cultural and urban crisis. Intellectuals and preservationists argued that heritage conservation was integral to post-colonial identity-building rather than a secondary concern (Meddahi 2021).

In response, the Algerian Ministry of Culture initiated formal discussions on conservation strategies, recognizing the symbolic and historical weight of sites like the Raïs Palace. Authorities began exploring the possibility of international cooperation to support restoration efforts. These initiatives led to formal requests for assistance, with Algerian officials reaching out to UNESCO. In 1979, the Algerian government invited UNESCO consultants André Ravéreau and Sameh El Alaily to conduct an extensive evaluation of the Bastion 23 and develop a framework for emergency conservation measures for the Palace (Ravéreau & El Alaily, 1981).

While the report itself would come in 1981, the issues it addressed had been accumulating for decades, stemming from colonial interventions, urban planning decisions, and shifting national priorities. It laid the groundwork for the eventual restoration efforts, drawing both national and international attention to the fate of Algiers' historic sites. With this report, the Raïs Palace was no longer just a relic of the past; it became a symbol of Algeria's ongoing struggle to reclaim and preserve its cultural heritage.



Fig.6: Cover page of the UNESCO Report published in 1981 by André Ravéreau and Sameh El Alaily

Source: UNESCO 1981

THE 1981 UNESCO REPORT

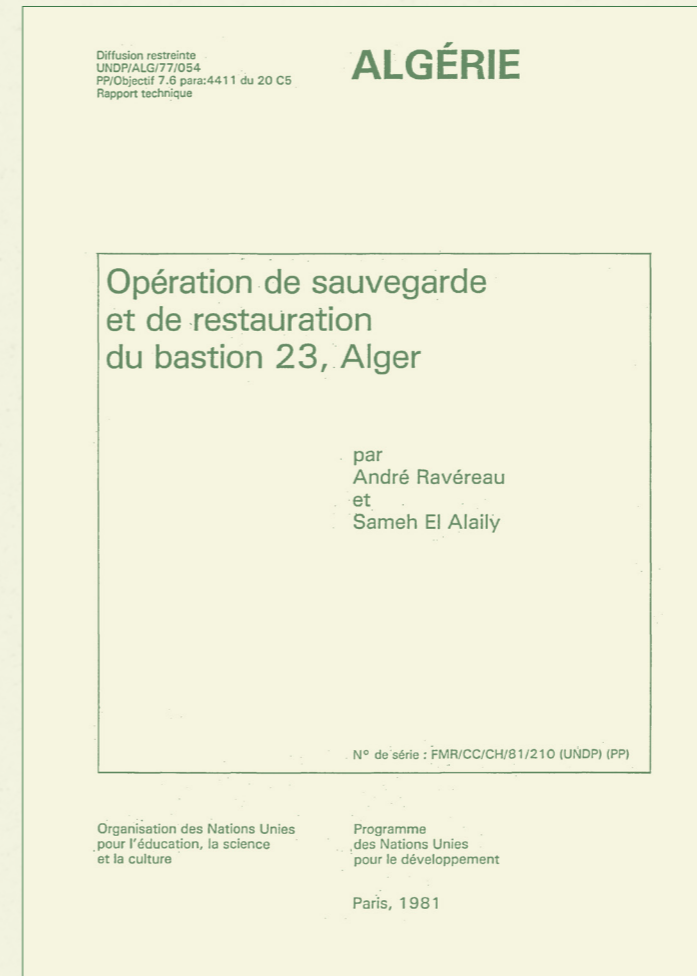


Fig.7: Side facade of the Raïs Palace before the restoration

Source: Archnet.org

Back in 1981, the UNESCO report painted a dire picture of Bastion 23's physical condition. The survey identified severe structural failures, primarily caused by prolonged exposure to water infiltration and poor drainage. Entire sections of buildings had already collapsed, and three houses required immediate demolition. UNESCO experts recommended propping it up just long enough to document it, then carefully demolishing that ruined house to remove the danger while saving traditional materials for later use (UNESCO 1981). Aside from these dramatic failures, every building in Bastion 23 showed alarming instability. No part of the complex was structurally sound; partial or total collapse was imminent (UNESCO, 1981). André Ravéreau and Sameh El Alaily also observed that the cluster was overcrowded with residents far beyond its capacity, further straining the aging structures. The complex was essentially a ruin that was still being used as shelter. The deplorable state of all the buildings led the consultants to urge an immediate safeguarding operation.

One of the report's central concerns is the extent to which the Raïs palace's original Ottoman-Maghrebi architecture had been altered during the 130 years of French colonial rule (1830–1962). These colonial-era transformations disrupted the complex's spatial organization, appearance, and structural integrity. By the 20th century, many palace features no longer reflected their original design, having been modified to suit new uses and European tastes. The UNESCO consultants carefully cataloged these changes, which they often characterized as inappropriate interventions foreign to the building's character. Understanding these modifications was crucial, as the restoration strategy aimed to reverse their effects to recover the ensemble's authenticity (UNESCO, 1981)

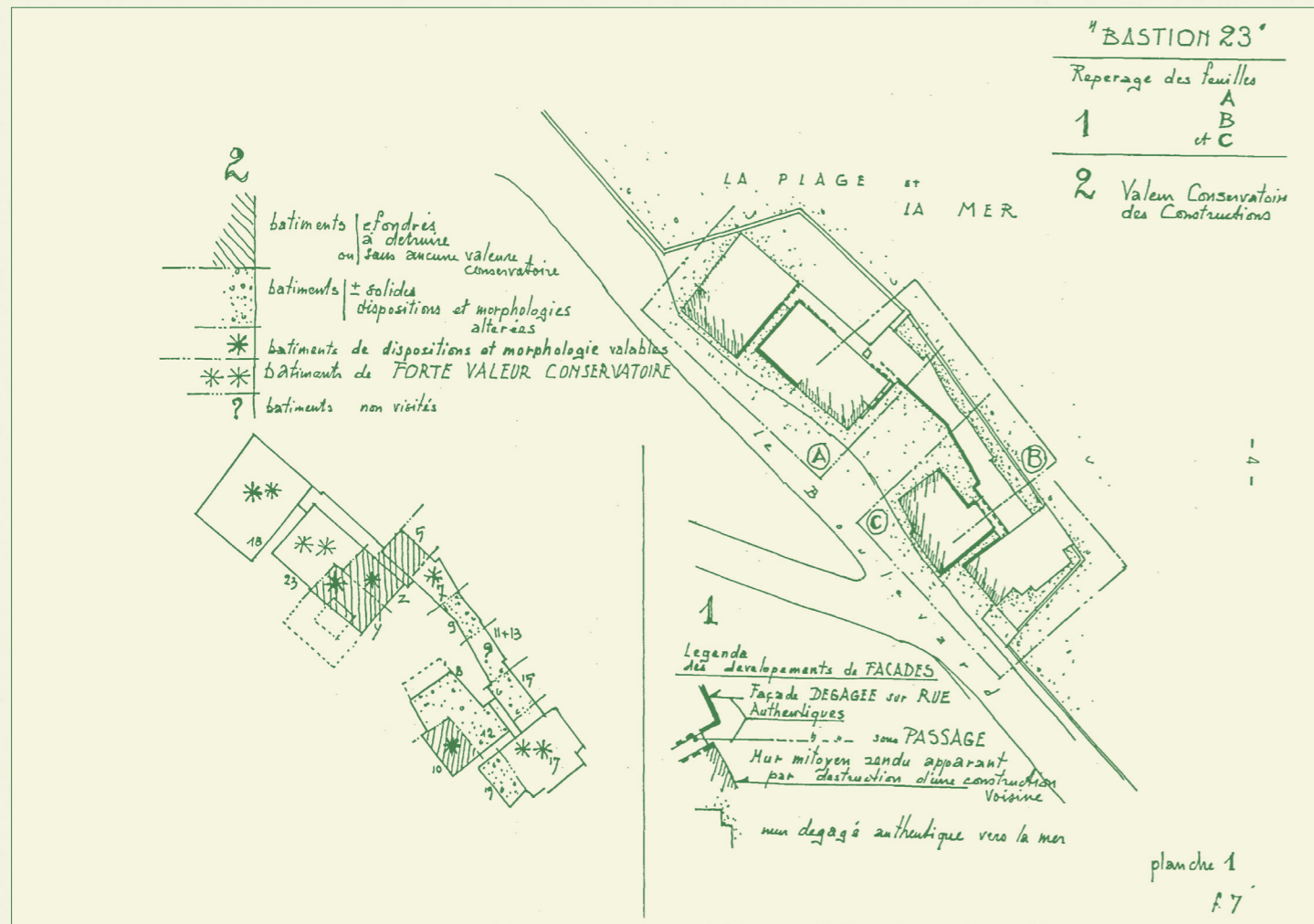


Fig.8: Siteplan of Bastion 23 by André Ravéreau. The plan illustrates the spatial layout of Bastion 23 and classifies the buildings by condition and historical value.

Source: UNESCO 1981

Among the various spaces affected by these transformations, three specific spaces illustrate the site's architectural and functional changes.

Traditionally serving as a transitional space between the exterior and interior, the *Squifas* were replaced by straight corridors. The original entrance was relocated, disrupting the circulation and diminishing its role as an intermediary threshold. In Ottoman architecture, those spaces were designed not only for security but also as a means of social control, regulating access between the public and private spheres. Replacing the original marble flooring with European-style materials further distanced the space from its historical character. The restoration of this space required carefully removing colonial-era additions and reintegrating traditional materials and design features, guided by comparative analysis with similar period structures and historical documentation (UNESCO, 1981).

Historically used for official gatherings, the main reception hall was subdivided into smaller offices under French administration. The original wooden ceiling, adorned with Ottoman carvings, was concealed under plaster, hiding its ornamental and historical significance. Additionally, the supporting columns were removed, which weakened the structural integrity of the space. The report mentions the need for reinforcement before any aesthetic restoration could be attempted. The restoration also focused on uncovering hidden decorative elements, reinstating the hall's proportions, and restoring its central function in the palace (UNESCO, 1981).



Fig.9: Section of the House no.5 with the glass roof addition

Source: UNESCO 1981

The report documents how, under French rule, the interiors of Bastion 23 were heavily altered. Floors were leveled, and the natural slope that channeled rainwater was lost, causing persistent moisture problems. Some structures were partitioned or merged arbitrarily, resulting in a confused and fragmented layout that, by the 1980s, had little resemblance to the original Ottoman plan (UNESCO, 1981). The facades also suffered from colonial interventions. Street-facing sides were modified with European-style windows that clashed with traditional designs. The seaward façades were more severely damaged: original arcades and decorative elements were lost or blocked off by walls built during colonial works. Many party walls became exposed exterior walls, with makeshift openings cut into them to compensate for lost windows. However, the report mentioned that much of the original appearance could be reconstructed with careful research. The upper terrace and defensive walls, which historically functioned as observation points, were structurally compromised by the time of the UNESCO survey. Aggravated by years of neglect, the masonry was unstable. The terraces had been subject to modifications to accommodate additional military personnel during the colonial period (UNESCO, 1981).

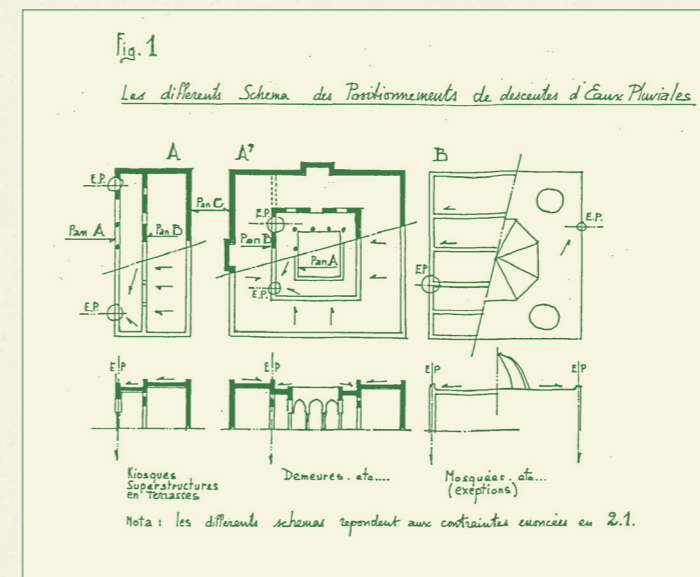


Fig.10: Original rainwater drainage system of Bastion 23

Source: UNESCO 1981

The courtyard, once the heart of the palace, suffered drastic transformations under colonial rule. The installation of a glass roof converted it into an enclosed space and disturbed its function as an open-air gathering area (fig. 9). This intervention affected the environmental and social dynamics of the palace. The glass roof reduced the airflow, increased interior humidity, and diminished the traditional role as a communal and ceremonial space of the *West A Dar*. The modification of the drainage system led to water accumulation, which accelerated the deterioration of surrounding walls and floors. Restoration efforts focused on dismantling the glass covering and reinstating the traditional water management system (Fig. 10), allowing the courtyard to regain its structural integrity and role as a climatic regulator (UNESCO, 1981).



Fig.11: André Ravéreau in Algiers, 2019

Source: HKE Production Algérie

Beyond the physical interventions, the UNESCO report outlined a restoration approach that extended beyond immediate stabilization to achieve long-term cultural conservation. The report established a comprehensive methodology that intertwined technical conservation with cultural-historical considerations (see Fig. 4). The report recognized that saving Bastion 23 required more than repairing walls; it demanded reweaving the site's historic identity into the fabric of Algiers. The proposed approach was thus twofold: first, address urgent material stability and conservation needs; second, ensure that the restoration honors and revives the cultural significance of the ensemble for the community. This balance between historical fidelity and functional adaptation is evident throughout the UNESCO recommendations. On the technical side, the report emphasized an exhaustive analysis and documentation phase to inform any interventions. The team advocated creating a systematic inventory of the site's architectural elements, employing the *Fiches* method (Fig. 12,13,14): typological, morphological, and architectonic index cards recording every space and structural component in detail (UNESCO, 1981). This method pioneered in the Casbah Citadel project, would serve as a scientific reference to guide restoration choices and prevent arbitrary decisions.

Fig.12: typological, morphological, and architectonic Fiches of the UNESCO Report

Source: UNESCO 1981

Annexe 1

- 44 -

Fiches morphologiques et typologiques
Site d'EL DJEZAÏRE

André Ravéreau
consultant UNESCO
mars juin 1980

"Demeures"
Schema "Spatial"
Schema "Structural"
PAN. A. B et C

Planche 16

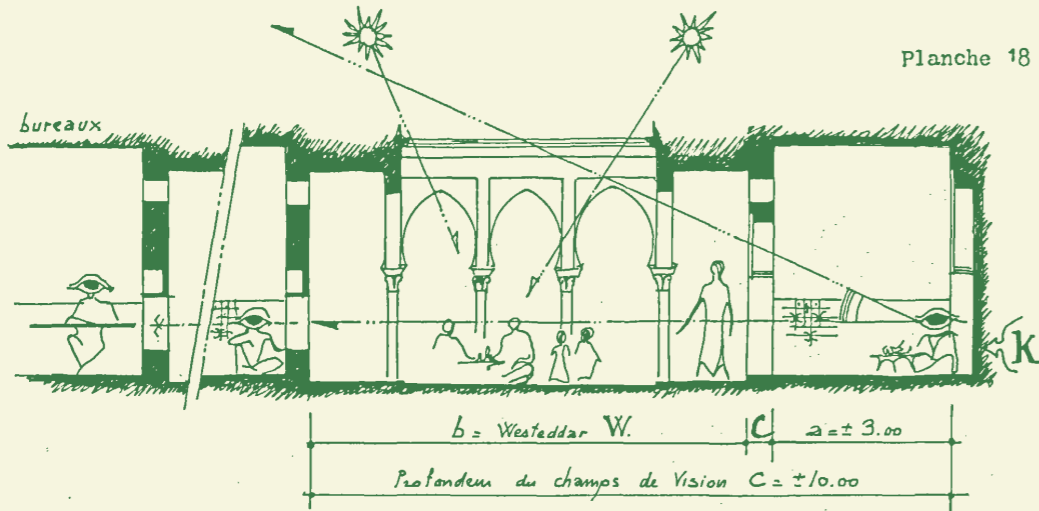
renvois

1. Schema "SPATIAL"

W = Westeddjan (Espace à l'air libre) | im = impluvium à ciel ouvert
L = Espaces "clos" - Programme "élémentaire" des Appartements et des Equipements
L' = Extension des Espaces clos élémentaires : Annexes | Douera | Kbon

2. Schema "STRUCTURAL"

Pan. A = Portique des Arcades des Galeries.
Pan B = Mur de fond de Galeries.
Pan C = Mur d'Enveloppe de la Demeure, indifféremment sur les Espaces Extérieurs ou des "mitoyens"
Pan C' = Translation du pan C sur les Extensions.



K = "Kbou" - lieu privilégié de l'Appartement
Station à usages multiples : conversations, repas etc...

fig 1

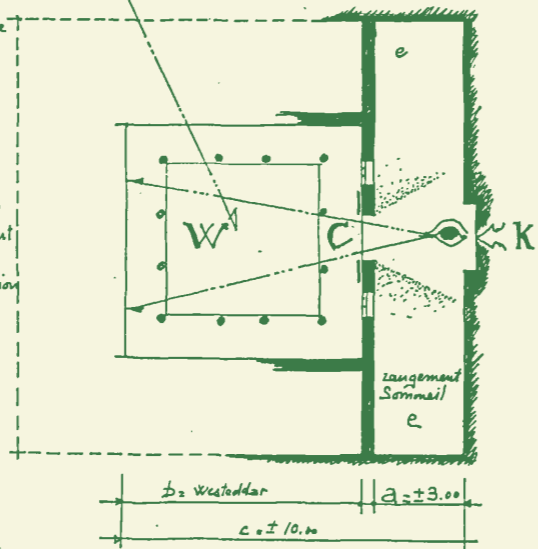
C = Porte - conçue comme une BAIE ouverte en permanence
sauf aux moments de Replis (nuits etc...)
Organe d'INTERRELATIONS et de MESURE (intimités et échanges)

Orientation du REGARD dirigé vers l'Westeddar
profitant de la profondeur de CHAMPS de VISION
C = a + b (longueur de la Piece + Westeddar)
PARTICIPATION à l'ANIMATION
du GROUPE familiale et communautaire
de l'Westeddar

fig 2

Luminosité de l'Westeddar
dont on reçoit confort (éclairage)
et agréments
depuis l'ABRI de fraîcheur
du "Kbou"

W = Westeddar - Prolongement extérieur de l'espace "Abris"
(Appartement Replis)
Travaux domestiques
Espace de l'Echange, de la Communication
la "CENTRE" de la maison.



figures 1 et 2. VECU ORIGINAL DE L'ESPACE
et PROGRAMMES ADAPTES:

Groupe familiale HOMOGENE
Musées = Hébergement d'Etudiants
CLUBS: Maisons d'Animation
Restaurants et Salons de Thé

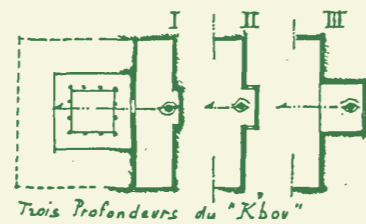


Fig. 13: Typological, morphological, and architectonic Fiches of the UNESCO Report



fig 4

PRESENTATIONS STATIQUES (musées)

la Présentation de l'Appartement - notamment de l'ESPACE DU KBOU souffre de ce que la VISION du "visiteur" s'exerce à l'ENVERS de la vision de la disposition d'USAGE

remarque: la présentation Statique des ESPACES de VIE dans d'autres civilisations (ex. occident) ne soulèvent pas de la même "gêne". Les "ESPACE" n'ont pas de DIRECTIONS DETERMINEES comme il en est pour l'espace du "Kbou"

fig 4

PROGRAMMES INADAPTES

figure 3

hébergements
de familles ETEROGENES
d'HOTES de PASSAGES

D: la Porte - demeure "fermée" et perd avec son rôle d'ECHANGE. le sens de sa conception Morphologique: la Porte prend un sens "privatif" pour lequel elle est inadaptee, tout dans sa position que dans sa construction

fig 3

le CHAMPS de VISION réduit à la dimension (a) n'existe plus
la luminosité de l'Westeddar est "ocultée"

K - l'Espace de STATION du "Kbou" est "DESAFFECTE" de sa VOCATION de LIEU PRIVILEGIE

e - les Equipements (sanitaires, cuisines) absorbent les extrémités des espaces latéraux

la Piece est totalement "détournée" de ses CONCEPTIONS d'ORIGINE

W. l'Westeddar perd son rôle de prolongement de l'espace des Appartements ainsi que le sens de sa CONCEPTION d'ORIGINE d'être le "CENTRE de la MAISON"
le LIEU des RELATIONS COMMUNAUTAIRES FAMILIALES

l'Westeddar, est lui même "DESAFFECTE" il est réduit au rôle de "couloir" de distribution

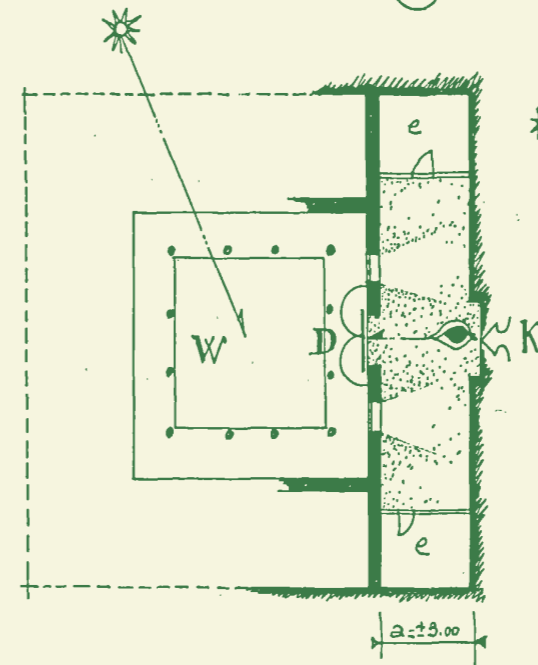


Fig. 14: Typological, morphological, and architectonic Fiches of the UNESCO Report

Equally significant were the report's cultural and contextual strategies. The UNESCO team placed great importance on historical preservation and community involvement as pillars of the project. They recommended the formation of a multidisciplinary Algerian team, not just engineers and architects but also historians, archivists, and even a dedicated photographer, to be embedded in the project. This team would continue researching the site's past, documenting oral histories and archival records (such as old plans, travelogues, or early photographs) to guide authentic restoration (UNESCO, 1981). Furthermore, the UNESCO consultants advised for training and inclusion of local craftsmanship: they urged that an inventory be made of Algerian artisans skilled in traditional arts (zedjel tile setters, plaster carvers, wood inlayers) and that *Ma'alems* (master artisans) from other Islamic countries be invited to collaborate in a training program for young Algerian artisans. The restoration was envisioned as a live educational workshop in heritage techniques; a means of cultural transmission. The experts were purist in their insistence on historical fidelity: they spoke of the need to enrich the scientific reference for each decision, to recognize and preserve the authentic architectural characteristics of the *El Djazair* era (the Ottoman period).

In some cases, however, the line between eras was blurred: should the early 20th-century modifications be retained as part of the building's history or erased? The UNESCO guidance favored returning to the Ottoman image of the buildings, especially since the French layers were seen as compromising the structural integrity. Nevertheless, the consultants were pragmatic about functional adaptation. The report explicitly suggested different adaptive reuse proposals, like the transformation of Bastion 23 into a cultural space or student housing for History and Architecture students. These uses would ensure lively occupancy and could draw support from the National Tourism Office. While the housing idea was ultimately not chosen, the underlying principle was implemented: the restored complex was fitted with new functions (exhibition halls, event spaces, an artisanal shop) to integrate into everyday cultural life. Achieving this meant some reversible modifications (installing modern services like electricity, plumbing, climate control, and fire safety systems) carefully threaded through the old structures with minimal visual impact. The plan anticipated such needs, arguing that the conversion of the historic site for contemporary use must be coherent with conservation goals (UNESCO, 1981).

Fig. 15: The Rais Palace occupied by squatters in 1975

Source: Lesbet 2013



The report was groundbreaking for its thoroughness and its blending of technical and cultural approaches. However, it must also be situated within broader debates on heritage conservation and decolonization. On one hand, the Bastion 23 project exemplified an effort at inclusive, context-sensitive restoration in North Africa. On the other hand, the involvement of a global institution in defining how an Algerian national monument should be preserved highlights the power dynamics in post-colonial heritage practice. It is important to recognize, that the UNESCO team made conscious efforts to counterbalance this dynamic by deeply engaging with Algerian professionals and emphasizing local capacity-building. The insistence on training Algerian architects and craftsmen and on involving local institutions was a step towards what we today might call a decolonial approach to heritage.

The preference for returning to an Ottoman-era purity can be seen as an act of decolonizing the architecture; literally stripping away the layers of colonization. This had clear benefits for structural stability and historical fidelity, but it also reflects a judgment that the colonial layer was of less value, or even a disease to be cured. In practice, the Bastion 23 restoration did retain some features from various periods where they did not conflict with the integrity of the whole, but the overarching narrative it presented to the public was an Ottoman palace complex reborn (Cantini, 2011).

The report also did not fully resolve the question of how to integrate the living community. It focused on training and involving Algerian professionals, but less on the fate of the residents who had been inhabiting the ruins or on how the restored site would relate to the surrounding neighborhood socially. This points to another debate in conservation: the balance between treating historic monuments as static relics versus maintaining them as living parts of the city. In sum, the UNESCO project straddled a line between international and local, historical purism and adaptive reuse. It set a precedent in Algeria for large-scale, research-based restoration, but it also exemplified the complexities of heritage governance in a post-colonial society.

Initial reactions to the UNESCO report within Algeria were mixed, reflecting differing priorities among stakeholders. Preservationists and officials in the Ministry of Culture welcomed the expert guidance. Indeed, the project had been officially entrusted to the local Atelier Casbah under the Historic Monuments Directorate, indicating a measure of government support (UNESCO, 1981). However, not everyone in power shared this preservationist vision. A famous episode in the early 1980s illustrates the clash: as the once-grand palace sat in ruin, overgrown, and partially collapsed, a visiting official motorcade was scandalized by the sight. For the authorities, Bastion 23 was an insult to the city's image, and it was ordered to demolition (Lesbet, 2013). This impulsive directive, coming after the UNESCO study had explicitly advocated restoration, put the site in imminent danger. In response, Algerian civil society and heritage advocates mobilized to save Bastion 23. A group of citizens, including architects and concerned locals, rallied to oppose the destruction (UNESCO, 2003). Their outcry was bolstered by the authority of UNESCO and the growing recognition of the Casbah's historic significance. Thanks to this intervention, the palace was saved in extremis from obliteration. The narrow rescue underscored how contested the future of the site was in this post-colonial period: to some officials, it was just urban blight to be cleared, but to others, it was a precious patrimony to be reclaimed.

It took several years to gather the necessary political will, expertise, and funding to commence the restoration in earnest. A breakthrough came in 1988 when a partnership with the Italian government provided critical financing and technical assistance (Cantini, 2011). The Italian Embassy in Algiers, through ambassadors Badini and Schmidlin, helped the creation of a medium-term credit line to fund an Algerian Ministry of Culture project for the restoration of Bastion 23. Algeria's post-colonial heritage effort gained an international ally, enabling the transition from paper plans to on-site work. Restoration officially began that year, following a phased strategy (Latifa, 2015).

CHALLENGES IN HERITAGE PRESERVATION

Fig. 16: Bastion 23 under reconstruction in 1990

Source: Aga Khan Trust for Culture



Préalablement à toute action de sauvetage du site en question, la partie algérienne doit s'engager à résoudre les problèmes suivants:

1. Evacuer les maisons du Bastion 23 de leurs occupants, il s'agit d'une trentaine de familles environ. Malgré l'épineuse crise de logement dont souffre la ville d'Alger qui rendra le relogement de ces familles extrêmement difficiles, la résolution de ce problème doit impérativement précéder toute action.
2. Débloquer les crédits nécessaires à la réalisation du projet. Le coût des travaux, sans compter les frais d'études ni la surveillance des travaux, s'élèvera au moins à 15 000 000 dinars algériens, soit 4 000 000 dollars des Etats-Unis environ. Ce calcul est fait en fonction des surfaces couvertes à restaurer (environ 6 000 m²) et les prix actuellement pratiqués dans le domaine de la construction en Algérie (Le prix du mètre carré est évalué aux alentours de 2 500 dinars algériens soit 660 dollars des Etats-Unis).

Fig. 17: Estimated costs of the restoration works of Bastion 23

Source: UNESCO 1981

By the mid-1990s, the palace had been rescued and rehabilitated. An Italian-Algerian team led by engineer Massimo Aurili directed this effort, which became a showcase of international cooperation (Cantini, 2011). The UNESCO 1981 report's vision had largely been realized: the historic structure was conserved and put to adaptive reuse, and in the process, a wealth of documentation and experience was gained for Algerian preservation practice. The impact of the UNESCO report on subsequent restoration initiatives in Algiers was profound. First, the 1981 report itself became a foundational reference for preservationists. Although focused on a single site, its analytical approach stays relevant for the Casbah, containing essential elements for a proper conservation policy (Lesbet, 2013).

Indeed, the Bastion 23 project did spawn parallel efforts: in the mid-1980s, even as Bastion planning was underway, the authorities commissioned a study to restore the Palais du Dey; another Ottoman-era landmark that had been squatted after independence. That palace, located at the top of the Casbah,

owed its survival to protest by civil society relayed by UNESCO; a similar dynamic of local activism and international pressure that had saved the Raïs Palace. Emboldened by these examples, Algeria, in the late 1980s, established the Atelier Casbah as a dedicated office for the historic quarter, and by 1992, the entire Casbah was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. In concrete terms, techniques and practices pioneered at Bastion 23 informed other restorations in the 1990s. The site was cited as a flagship example of how to save and showcase Algerian heritage (Lesbet, 2013).

However, not all of these lessons were positive. In a critical review, Djaffar Lesbet observed that Bastion 23's restoration became, in part, a cautionary tale: specific methods used there were replicated uncritically, even when they contradicted local tradition (UNESCO, 2003). For instance, the Italian-led team had opted to expose structural materials (stripping plaster to reveal the original tuf stone columns, beams, and arches) in many places, giving the interiors a romantically ruined look. Local conservation experts pointed out that this aesthetic violated fundamental principles of Algerian historic architecture; traditionally, humble building materials like tuf were permanently plastered and whitewashed for protection (UNESCO, 2003).

Debates sparked among Algerian preservationists: How should post-colonial restoration balance international practices with indigenous knowledge? Who defines authenticity in a reclaimed heritage site: foreign experts or local artisans and historians? These questions, first raised in the Bastion 23 project, remained unresolved and are still pertinent today.

On the other hand, the project's positive influence is undeniable in institutions and public awareness. It led to greater official engagement with heritage: the Algerian government passed new preservation laws (e.g. Law 98-04 of 1998) and formulated a permanent plan for safeguarding and valorizing the Casbah in 2003, aiming to institutionalize the kind of systematic approach that UNESCO had recommended decades earlier (Lesbet, 2013). The 1981 UNESCO report set a chain of events that deeply shaped Algeria's post-colonial preservation landscape. Bastion 23 became both a template and a test case: a template for how to reclaim a piece of colonial-damaged heritage and a test case revealing the challenges that such cultural reappropriation projects would continue to face.



THE SYMBOLISM OF THE PALACE

Since its reopening as a public monument, the Raïs Palace has functioned as a living museum of Algiers' Histories. Its new role as a cultural center anchors the memory of the lost lower Casbah in the consciousness of present and future generations. Visitors today marvel at the courtyards and in doing so, they also reconnect with a part of their collective identity that had long been inaccessible. Since its inauguration as a cultural center, Bastion 23 has hosted art exhibitions, handicraft workshops, academic seminars, and international events, bringing dynamic life to the old palaces. School groups tour its halls to learn about Algerian arts and crafts, often guided by exhibits that celebrate traditional skills; precisely as the UNESCO team envisioned, the site now serves an educational purpose (Lesbet, 2013).

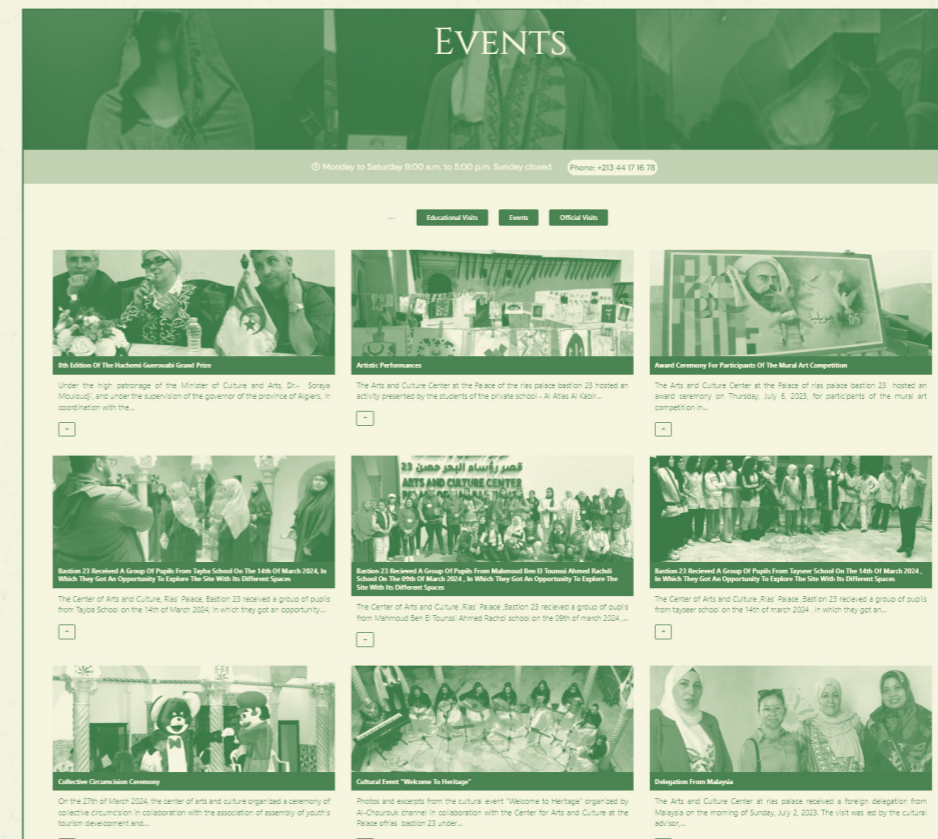
However, not everyone engages with the palace in the same way. The broader Algerian public sees it as a national monument and tourist attraction, sometimes more identified with official ceremonies than everyday life. For the residents of the Casbah, opinions can be ambivalent: the palace is a jewel but its polished restoration contrasts with the surrounding old suburb, which still struggles with poverty and decay. Some Casbah families recall when the Bastion area was a dilapidated zone. Now, it is guarded and ticketed, which, while preserving it, also means it is no longer an ordinary neighborhood space.

Fig.18: Innerstreet of the Art & Culture Center Raïs Palace

Source: Sonia-Fatima Chaoui

Fig.19: Events page of the official website of the Raïs Palace

Source: palaisdesrais-bastion23.dz



Nonetheless, many locals express a sense of collective ownership over the Raïs Palace: part of their heritage has been triumphantly returned to them. The palace's popularity has sparked interest in the lower Casbah's potential revival. Urban planners have proposed projects (some dating back to the time of restoration) to reconnect the palace with the old city and re-opening pedestrian links from the Casbah to the waterfront. Unfortunately, some of these plans have been derailed; a large multi-story parking garage built nearby has further isolated the site (Latifa, 2015). This outcome has prompted public criticism that the authorities value flagship monuments like Bastion 23 but not the holistic rehabilitation of the Casbah's urban environment. Thus, while the public appreciates Bastion 23 as a splendid cultural monument, there remains a large demand that its success be extended to the revitalization of the neighborhood around it so that the palace is not a lone showpiece.

In official discourse, the Raïs Palace is often invoked alongside icons of national identity. For example, it stands in the capital's narrative next to emblematic sites like the Ketchaoua Mosque or the Martyrs' Memorial. In the 2000s, cultural officials frequently used Bastion 23 as a venue for state events, underscoring its status as a prestige project of independent Algeria. Diplomatically, it has also become a symbol of international friendship; the success of the Italo-Algerian restoration is highlighted in both countries as a model of cooperation that "saved and valorized" an important patrimony (Cantini, 2011).

Fig.20: The Art & Culture Center Raïs Palace/Bastion 23

Source: Lesbet 2013



Fig.21: Official visit of the Italian ambassador at the Raïs Palace in 2024

Source: palaisdesrais-bastion23.dz

On the other hand, some intellectuals and community voices offer a more critical perspective. They argue that true cultural re-appropriation is not just about renovating one palace but about empowering local communities and sustaining living traditions. From this viewpoint, Bastion 23's restoration also exposes a disconnect: it was largely driven by external expertise and top-down decision-making, which can be seen as a continuation of outsiders dictating how Algerian heritage is managed. Some conservation experts praise the Bastion 23 project for preventing total loss and setting a precedent for documentation, while others critique it as an example of excessive restoration that risked creating a slightly sanitized, museum-like space disconnected from its social context (UNESCO, 2003).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the restoration undoubtedly saved the Raïs Palace (Bastion 23) from irreversible decay, but the process illustrates the complex challenges of heritage preservation in a postcolonial context. Restoring the monument to its pre-colonial condition allowed Algeria to preserve an emblematic monument of its national identity that colonialism had left in ruins. However, the success of heritage preservation remains ambivalent. It relied on the involvement and decisions of international experts, notably UNESCO and Italian cooperation, whose role, though well-intentioned and methodical, highlights limited local capacities and raises critical questions about cultural sovereignty. This reliance underscores broader tensions regarding the control of cultural narratives and heritage preservation decisions in postcolonial settings.

Algeria managed to protect a meaningful building, but the Casbah continues to deteriorate (Nossiter, 2019). Despite the success at Bastion 23, the surrounding neighborhood's ongoing neglect exemplifies a common issue: isolated monument preservation cannot replace comprehensive urban and social revitalization. In this sense, the project represents both a reclamation and a limitation. While the Raïs Palace has been carefully preserved as a cultural and historical center, its disconnection from everyday urban life risks creating an isolated heritage island, detached from the realities and needs of the local community.

This issue resonates with broader reflections in postcolonial theory and heritage discourse. The psychiatrist and political philosopher Frantz Fanon argues that national culture is not restored through aesthetic gestures or nostalgia but through active collective struggle; reclaiming identity cannot bypass the lived realities and participation of the people themselves (Fanon, 1963). From this viewpoint, the restoration of Bastion 23 is symbolically powerful, yet potentially superficial, if disconnected from broader efforts to address the Casbah's socio-economic conditions and urban fabric. The renovation of a single monument, however iconic, risks marginalizing local communities unless integrated into a wider urban renewal strategy that actively involves the residents.

Homi Bhabha's theory of the *Third Space* offers another important perspective. He explains that postcolonial identity is not fixed but emerges dynamically where different histories, cultures, and influences intersect and interact (Bhabha, 1994). Bastion 23 could embody this *Third Space*, combining local memories, global heritage conservation standards, and its contemporary public role as a museum and cultural venue. However, to fully occupy this hybrid identity, the site must be actively shaped by local voices and meanings rather than primarily reflecting external expertise or tourist expectations.

Ultimately, heritage restoration in postcolonial contexts gains its most profound significance when it contributes to a genuine identity recovery, empowering communities to recognize their histories, narratives, and cultural values in rehabilitated landmarks rather than feeling alienated by externally imposed visions. Regarding the deterioration of the Casbah of Algiers and the strong community calls for involvement and respect in decision-making (Nossiter, 2019), an essential question remains: how should heritage professionals and policymakers prioritize restoration efforts? Should the emphasis be primarily on preserving emblematic architectural landmarks, or should priority be given to broader revitalization efforts to strengthen traditional urban fabrics and actively improve community life?

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FIGURES

- **Figure 1:** Unknown, *Palais des Raïs – Bastion 23*. <https://harba-dz.com/annuaire/listing/palais-des-raïs-bastion-23/>, accessed March 28, 2025.
- **Figure 2:** Unknown, *Alger-1890*. https://fr.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Raïs_palace_algiers.jpg, accessed April 13, 2025.
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- **Figure 4:** Lesbet Djaffar, *Sauvetage de la Casbah depuis l'indépendance. Esquisse de bilan*, p.169. Revue Ikosim, 2013.
- **Figure 5:** Marvine Howe, *The Casbah Is Caving In, but Restoration Projects Are Facing Many Problems*. The New York Times, February 1, 1981.
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- **Figure 7:** Unknown, *Palais des Raïs (Bastion 23)*. <https://www.archnet.org/sites/1180>, accessed April 13, 2025.
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- **Figure 13:** André Ravéreau and Sameh El Alaily, *Opération de sauvegarde et de restauration du bastion 23, Alger*, p.54. UNESCO, 1981.
- **Figure 14:** André Ravéreau and Sameh El Alaily, *Opération de sauvegarde et de restauration du bastion 23, Alger*, p.55. UNESCO, 1981.
- **Figure 15:** Lesbet Djaffar, *Sauvetage de la Casbah depuis l'indépendance. Esquisse de bilan*, p.169. Revue Ikosim, 2013.
- **Figure 16:** Aga Khan Award for Architecture, *Palais des Raïs (Bastion 23)*. <https://www.archnet.org/sites/1180>, accessed April 13, 2025.
- **Figure 17:** André Ravéreau and Sameh El Alaily, *Opération de sauvegarde et de restauration du bastion 23, Alger*, p.59. UNESCO, 1981.
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- **Figure 19:** 'Events', *Palais des Raïs – Bastion 23*. <https://palaisdesraïs-bastion23.dz/en/events/>, accessed April 13, 2025.
- **Figure 20:** Lesbet Djaffar, *Sauvetage de la Casbah depuis l'indépendance. Esquisse de bilan*, p.170. Revue Ikosim, 2013.
- **Figure 21:** Unknown, *Palais des Raïs – Bastion 23*. <https://palaisdesraïs-bastion23.dz/en/events/>, accessed April 13, 2025.