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Improving Urban Living in the City of Constantine, Algeria: Reality and Perspectives

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Abstract:

The issue of urban planning is significant in organising the urban and environmental landscape of Algerian cities, given its crucial importance in defining the residents' daily living patterns and preserving the environment in which they live, as well as its role in achieving sustainable development. Discussions among professionals have varied on the preservation of the old urban form versus the modern approach. In this context, the move towards a modernisation plan for Constantine has emerged as a new strategy to modernise the city and improve the quality of urban life. This initiative has significant dimensions for urban projects, encompassing various areas through large-scale projects. However, despite the importance of this plan and its efforts to modernise the city and make it more in line with global cities, it has not achieved its desired objectives. This research paper aims to explore future perspectives and directions that aim to create a unified and harmonious urban form that works to improve the quality of life of the city in its entirety, ensuring sustainable development and good governance. It aims to achieve a balance between its urban areas by trying to choose a new strategy that includes several future dimensions. In order to achieve this goal, a descriptive-analytical methodology was used, in addition to fieldwork through urban surveys, as well as relying on field statistics derived from data and documents obtained from various departments, administrations and consulting offices, to obtain more precise details that can elucidate the future of urban planning in the city of Constantine.

Keywords: Constantine, urban planning, modernisation plan, improvement, urban living.

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Introduction

The rapid evolution of urban planning challenges the notion of a unified, global city form. This shift is evident in the diverse range of development strategies being implemented globally. The study's approach sparks ongoing debate among researchers regarding the preservation of traditional urban forms versus modern development. This calls for a review of the laws, theoretical approaches and methodological tools that govern the field, and highlights the urgency of rationalising urban governance in relation to housing, health, education and transport.

Urban planning in Algeria holds the key to unlocking the full potential of Algerian cities. By creating livable, sustainable, and culturally rich urban environments, we can enhance the lives of millions of Algerians. It serves as an independent academic field based on multidisciplinary approaches, including social, economic, political, security and legal theories, as well as practical experiences, strategies and policies for conceptualising a unified and coherent urban form that ensures quality urban life and guarantees sustainable development and good governance.

Constantine is undergoing a remarkable transformation. Launched in 2007, the city's modernization plan is revitalizing urban spaces and enhancing the quality of life for its residents. These projects aim to improve Constantine's regional status and align it with global urban standards. From this perspective, the problem of the study can be formulated as follows Can the directions of the Modernisation Plan for the City of Constantine, as a strategy for urban modernisation within the framework of urban planning policy, achieve its defined objectives, particularly in terms of improving the quality of urban life? What possible reforms could improve the prospects for improving the urban quality of life in the city in the future?

Constantine, a major urban center in Algeria, provides a valuable case study for examining the impact of state housing policies. Its strategic location and socioeconomic significance make it a particularly relevant context.

This research aims to explore future horizons and directions that aim to create and establish a unified and coherent urban form, capable of improving the quality of life of the entire urban area and ensuring sustainable development and effective governance. Ultimately, this will achieve a balance between its urban sectors by attempting to select a new strategy that encompasses several future dimensions. To reach the study objectives, a descriptive-analytical methodology was adopted combining fieldwork observations with data from government agencies and research institutions to understand Constantine's urban planning future.

1. Geographical context of the city of Constantine

The city of Constantine has benefited from major projects as part of its modernisation plan, given its significant position within the eastern region. Before examining key urban development projects, it's essential to consider the geographical factors that have shaped Constantine's prominence.

1.1 The position of the city of Constantine within the urban network

Algerian cities are interconnected through economic, social, cultural, and service-based relationships. These interconnections create urban attractions and influence zones. These relationships are hierarchical, with larger cities dominating the urban landscape and smaller centers forming a supporting network. As a result, Algeria has formed an organised urban network structured as a multi-nuclear system (Poly-nucléaire), which includes three secondary urban networks: the west, the centre and the east, each characterised by its own characteristics (Nadira Bouguebs, 2016, p. 37).

The eastern secondary urban network is the most organised and hierarchical, consisting of a group of secondary cities such as Sétif, Batna, Jijel and Tébessa, all surrounding and connected

to the central city of Constantine (Marc Cote, 2005, p. 111). With over 2000 years of history, Constantine has been a significant urban center in eastern Algeria. Its rich past has solidified its position as a regional hub and economic powerhouse.

1.2 Geographical location of the city of Constantine within the northeast region

Constantine is centrally located in the north-eastern region of Algeria, between the coastal network of cities overlooking the Mediterranean Sea and the inland network extending to the Sahara. It serves as a link between the north-eastern cities on the one hand and the south-eastern cities on the other. This connection is facilitated by a dense network of national and provincial roads that converge in the city in a star-shaped pattern, such as National Road No. 03, which connects Constantine with the province of Skikda to the north and the province of Batna to the south. In addition, the East-West Highway has further facilitated traffic towards the city, making it a major transit hub and communication centre for all cities and provinces in eastern Algeria.

Constantine is enriched by a strategic geographical location that has qualified it to be the capital and a major urban centre in the eastern region of Algeria. Historically, it has served as a political metaphor and the capital of eastern Algeria, acting as a crossroads for exchanges between the north-eastern and south-eastern regions. Constantine's status as a regional metropolis has drawn migrants from neighbouring provinces, particularly in recent decades, contributing to significant population growth, from independence to the present (2023).

The state of the Modernisation Plan as a new strategy for the modernisation of Constantine

Despite the significant spatial changes that Constantine has undergone in recent years due to the implementation of major projects initiated in 2007 as part of a new urban strategy represented by the city's Modernisation Plan, these projects aimed to modernise the urban landscape of Constantine. Among these projects are

1.3 Transport and communication projects

Constantine's Modernization Plan prioritizes transportation projects to improve daily mobility. Key projects include:

1.1.3 The Rhumel Gorge Cable Car Project

The importance of this mode of transport lies in its aim to reduce traffic congestion within the city to help residents of the old town or visitors to avoid using cars for transit, while also promoting Constantine as a tourist destination.

With a length of 1,700 meters, the cable car project offers a unique transportation experience, (Transportation Directorate of Constantine, 2022) connecting the ancient city with its western side and crossing the **Rhumel river**. It was inaugurated in 2008. After ten years of operation, the cable car was suspended for maintenance in 2018. Despite initial plans for a 16-month closure, it remains inactive as of 2023.

1.2.3 Tramway Project

The tramway project is considered one of the most important transport projects in Constantine. This 8-kilometer line transforms Constantine's urban landscape. It provides efficient

and sustainable transportation between the historic heart of the city and the dynamic Ali Mendjeli district (Transport Directorate of the Province of Constantine, 2022) and connects the city centre with the southern area, in particular the urban area of “Zouaghi”. It was inaugurated in 2013.

As part of a larger urban development plan, the tramway line will eventually extend 18 kilometers, linking the city center to Ali Mendjeli to the University of Abd al-Hamid Mehri (Constantine 2 University) slated for completion in 2021, will revolutionize urban mobility in Constantine

1.3.3 Salah Bay Giant Bridge Project

This project is the largest bridge in the city and is designed to alleviate traffic congestion in Constantine. It connects the western part of the city with the eastern part, crossing the Wadi Rhumel with a length of 4,300 metres (Directorate of Public Works, 2022). It was inaugurated in 2014.

1.4.3 East-West motorway project

This is a major national transport project stretching over 1,216 kilometres (Directorate of Public Works, 2022) from the extreme east of Algeria to the extreme west. It facilitates the movement of people, especially since Constantine has benefited from a section that extends from the commune of Ain Sémarà to the commune of Zighoud Youcef, which came into operation in 2016.

The strategic importance of this project is evident on several levels: economically, by bringing urban areas closer to the mother city of Constantine; socially, by facilitating movement and work between neighbouring towns; and from a safety point of view, by reducing traffic congestion and encouraging the use of public transport.

2. Higher education projects

These projects are mainly represented in the University Pole located in the new city of “Ali Mendjeli”, also known as the University City. This regional facility was completed as part of the modernisation plan of the city of Constantine and includes several faculties, institutes, residences, administrative structures, and related facilities (see Figure 1). Courses started in the academic year 2013-2014.

Figure 01: University campus in the new city of Ali Mendjeli



Source: Google Earth 2023

2.1 Projects to improve the environment and the overall appearance of the city

The Modernisation Plan for the City of Constantine included significant and substantial projects, including extensive demolitions of certain informal (solid) and dilapidated neighbourhoods that affected the aesthetic appearance of the city. These operations include

2.1.1 Slum demolition

As part of its Modernization Plan, Constantine has embarked on a large-scale demolition of slums to reshape the city's urban landscape. By 2015, 33 out of 63 slum clusters had been demolished and 6,247 people resettled (Directorate of Construction and Urban Planning of the Province of Constantine, 2022) within housing projects specifically programmed for these community groups, most of which were in the new city of “Ali Mendjeli”. Among these slum areas was the Boudiaf cluster, located on the right bank of the Rhumel river, bordering to the Pine neighbourhood (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 03: Boudiaf Gathering, 2011



Figure 02: Boudiaf Gathering, 2008



Source: Nadira BOUGUEBS, 2016, p.331

2.1.2 Demolition of certain informal settlements (solid): As part of the modernisation plan for the city of Constantine, three solid informal neighbourhoods were removed, namely: Bardou, Roumania and China garden. See figures (04) to (09). The residents were relocated to specially designed housing in the new city of “Ali Mendjli”. The relocation process occurred between 2008 and 2011 (Cherrad S.E., 2007, p. 116) as part of the city's restoration efforts.

Figure 05: Roumania neighbourhood, 2011



Figure 04: Roumania neighbourhood, 2008



Figure 07: Bardou neighbourhood, 2011



Figure 06: Bardou neighbourhood, 2008



Significant material and human resources were mobilised for the projects under the Modernisation Plan for the City of Constantine, with substantial financial resources being a key component. In addition, scientific, technical and artistic studies have been dedicated to the plan, involving high-level expertise from university professors to use their scientific knowledge, as well as international experts to draw on global experience.



Figure 09: Tchina Garden neighbourhood, 2011



Figure 08: Tchina Garden neighbourhood, 2008

Source: Nadira BOUGUEBS, 2016, p. 332

The shift towards the Modernisation Plan for the City of Constantine represents a new strategy aimed at modernising the city and improving the quality of urban life. This plan has crucial dimensions that advance urban development and covers numerous areas through large-scale projects. However, despite the importance of this plan and its efforts to modernise the city and bring it closer to global urban centres, it has not been able to achieve its objectives for various ambiguous and unclear reasons.

3. Proposals for Enhancing Urban Living in Constantine

In order to improve the urban living in the city and to achieve a balance between its urban areas, some reforms are proposed to frame all future projects planned for Constantine within the context of “Modernising and Updating the City”. This includes re-evaluating these projects according to all necessary conditions, such as the principle of community participation in planning and consultation, which is considered one of the most important prerequisites for their establishment. The proposals are as follows

3.1 Activating the role of local communities in urban planning

The aim of activating the role of local communities in urban planning, particularly in the case study of Constantine, is to involve local authorities, especially municipal ones, in finding and implementing appropriate solutions to the various deficiencies present in the urban area of the city. This can be achieved by granting more autonomy and flexibility to local elected bodies, especially municipal ones, in the organisation and management of the city at all levels.

Furthermore, the municipality's role activation aims to achieve sustainable urban development and urban governance in Constantine. The main aspects of this review can be summarised in the following elements:

3.1.1 Streamlining Public Services for Urban Development

Public service refers to any function guaranteed and supervised by the public authorities. It includes all types of services that can only be used within a collective framework, which are provided on a mandatory basis according to the principle of equality established by law (Rafika Boukhalfa, 2021, p. 546). The aim of rationalising the public services provided by the municipality in urban planning is to increase the quality of these services and improve their performance, in addition to satisfying citizens and meeting their needs in line with contemporary requirements. Therefore, it has become essential for the municipality to adopt rational strategies for providing these services and improving their quality, which can be summarised as follows:

- Granting greater powers to the municipality in urban planning: Ensuring the independence of the municipality by moving towards greater decentralisation and reducing interference from central authorities. The aim is to give the municipality the freedom to exercise its powers without pressure, as local communities are closest to the ground.

- Modernisation of administrative bodies: By providing electronic equipment related to urban planning to keep pace with developed countries and various experiences related to the current urban form. This includes adopting modern methods of urban planning, management and monitoring, such as the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS), which rely primarily on computers to collect, process and display geographic data and information. GIS is “a system that creates, manages, analyses and plans all types of data. It links geographic data to maps and integrates location data with all kinds of descriptive information” (Akram Abdel-Latif Salem Awad Allah, 2022, p. 711). This modern technological technique makes it possible to improve urban planning services at the municipal level in terms of quality, speed, transparency and legitimacy.

- Involving citizens and civil society: Through legal organisations, such as associations, in decision-making and in laying the foundations of good governance at the municipal level, by creating a transparent administration committed to the principles of rationality and capable of responding to citizens' needs.

- Focusing on the dynamic interactive relationship: between the role of the municipality as a primary community space in organising and connecting citizens to urban planning and the quality of services provided to them socially, culturally, economically and safely.

3.1.2 Enhancing Urban Planning Expertise in the Municipality

A significant challenge facing the municipality is the limited technical expertise and inadequate human resources required for conducting comprehensive urban planning studies.

In this context, the law has defined responsibilities and established mechanisms that allow the municipality to contribute effectively to both prior and subsequent supervision. It states that the municipality may ‘consult any local personality, expert or representative of a legally recognised local association who, by virtue of his or her qualifications or the nature of his or her activities, can make a useful contribution to the work of the council or its committees’ (Official Journal of the Algerian Republic, 2011, Article 13, p. 8). It is clear that the law grants the municipality the right to seek the assistance of local experts, such as community researchers in the necessary specialities, such as urban planning, or to engage accredited local associations in the necessary fields, such as architects, to carry out impartial assessments.

In addition, the Municipal Code allows for cooperation between two or more neighbouring municipalities for the joint planning or development of their territories or for the management or provision of public facilities in the neighbourhood, in accordance with the laws and regulations. This cooperation allows the pooling of resources and the creation of joint public facilities (Official Journal of the Algerian Republic, 2011, Article 215, p. 28). For example, the five municipalities of the Constantine urban area (Constantine, El Khroub, Ain Smara, Hamma Bouziane and Didouche Mourad) could create a public service institution or a common benefit organisation for studies and urban projects in the form of an urban development agency. This approach is more in line with reality and the interests of citizens.

In addition to legal mechanisms In order to address the deficiencies in technical capacities and skills related to human resources and technical structures of the municipality, we propose the following:

- Improve technical capacities and skills: Improve the technical capacities and skills of the human resources working in the municipality by providing training opportunities in partnership with universities in the required specialities, particularly in urban and architectural engineering, to promote them to higher positions.

- Job opportunities in the technical offices: Open job opportunities in the technical offices of the municipality for university graduates, especially in the fields of urban planning and architecture, focusing on qualitative and specialised expertise.

- Appointment of specialised members: Appointing members that combine elected officials and appointed specialists in urban planning and development within the municipal councils to ensure that the municipality has control over the approval of urban planning tools and plans.

3.1.3 Enhancing Transparency in Municipal Finance

Transparency, oversight and accountability are mechanisms for activating good governance and sustainable development. Transparency in the management of urban planning should involve the participation of governmental and non-governmental actors in achieving sustainable development goals and creating a vision for the future city of Algeria in general and Constantine in particular. These mechanisms, which involve and activate the social partners, will be highlighted by the enhanced role of civil society, as discussed in the next section.

3.2 Activating the role of civil society in urban planning

The concept of civil society originated in Western thought, introduced by the philosopher and thinker Aristotle, who first used the term to advocate the formation of a political community that achieves justice (Amira Adel Akhmed, 2021, p. 158). The concept of civil society has been associated with freedom and rights since the seventeenth century, coinciding with the rise of the bourgeoisie in Europe. The concept has continued to evolve with global conditions and the liberal transformations that have characterised many areas.

Definitions of civil society have varied since its inception. Some define it as “a form of social organisation concerned with the relationships between individuals, not as citizens or members of a nation, but as producers of their material lives, beliefs, ideas and symbols” (Kalthoum Za’tout, 2018, p. 41).

It is also described as “a group formed by individuals who freely and independently choose to create categories and committees separate from the state. These can manifest themselves as types such as parties, clubs, associations, cultural institutions and non-governmental organisations, to serve the interests and aspirations of their members” (Hayat Medane, 2015, p. 202). Here, the defining factor of this definition is its independence from official bodies and its voluntary nature, meaning that it operates without financial compensation.

Furthermore, civil society is defined as “a society in which relations are organised based on democracy, that is, a society in which governance is practised based on majority rule by political

parties and respect for the political, social, civil, and cultural rights of citizens. It is a society in which institutions function in the modern sense, including an independent judiciary, parliament, political parties, trade unions and associations” (Ben Yahia Fatima, 2015, p. 203).

In general terms, civil society can be said to be the sum of the organisations and institutions that emerge from society, which differ in their specialisation and are characterised by their voluntary nature. Its primary objective is to achieve the interests of the community, but it is fundamentally defined by its informal nature.

Legally, an association is defined as a grouping of natural or legal persons based on a contractual agreement for a definite or indefinite period, according to Law 12-06. These persons come together to voluntarily share their knowledge and resources for non-profit purposes, intending to promote and encourage activities, particularly in the professional, social, scientific, religious, educational, cultural, sporting, environmental, charitable and humanitarian fields (Official Journal of the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria, 2012, p. 34). Thus, an association is characterised by its specific field according to the voluntary approach of its members, regardless of its scope or founding objectives.

Following the openness that Algeria experienced in various fields after 1990, which was linked to a multi-party and political approach in political, trade union and media activities, Law 90/31 on Associations was enacted on 04/09/1990. This law encouraged the work of associations and reaffirmed their constitutional freedom. It was subsequently replaced by Law 12/06 on the creation of associations in Algeria, which repealed the previous Law 90-31. The new provisions were more favourable and allowed for the proliferation of numerous associations. As a result, Algerian citizens have a legal protection that guarantees their freedom of expression and participation in the decision-making processes that affect their environment, enabling them to bring their concerns to the attention of the State through these associations.

However, all of the above remains a theoretical assumption, as the practical aspect in reality proves otherwise, given the significant gap between legislation and practice on the ground. There is a clear exclusion and total absence of the opinion of civil society, especially of associations, including neighbourhood associations, from the important decisions made by the State through its various institutions. This includes the programming, study and implementation of various development projects related to urban planning, whether they are large regional projects or even local ones, such as housing projects and the creation of various facilities for the urban environment of citizens.

From the above, it can be concluded that despite the official and unofficial attention paid to civil society, including associations, since the 1990s by recognising their rights of expression and participation, and considering them as an important foundation for building democracy in theory, in practice they cannot be considered as a real intermediary between society and the State with its various institutions. On this basis, we propose that Law 12/06 on Associations be amended to:

- Activating the role of civil society: especially neighbourhood associations, especially those concerned with the environment, by involving them in important decision-making processes

carried out by the state through its various institutions, especially those related to urban planning projects, whether they are large-scale regional projects or local initiatives that affect the intricate details of the urban environment in which citizens live.

- Improving cooperation between different associations: Whether they are concerned with the environment, neighbourhoods, schools or culture, in order to achieve the goals of environmental protection.

- Establishing effective monitoring mechanisms: both prior and subsequent, strictly within the legal framework for the activities of neighbourhood associations and the results of their work by the State, aimed at ensuring their qualitative and quantitative aspects, achieved through the integration of governmental and non-governmental roles.

- Protect the freedom of action of neighbourhood associations: Within a legal framework that protects them from abuse.

Conclusion

The city of Constantine boasts a strategic geographical location that qualifies it as a capital and an important urban centre in eastern Algeria. Politically, it serves as the capital of eastern Algeria and has historically been a hub of communication and exchange between the north-east and the south. As an economic, commercial, cultural and social centre, it has become a metropolis that attracts inhabitants from its region, especially from the neighbouring provinces, since independence and until today, including the year 2021.

The shift towards the Modernisation Plan for the City of Constantine represents a new strategy aimed at modernising the city centre and improving the quality of urban life. This initiative has significant implications for the advancement of urban projects, encompassing various sectors through large-scale projects. However, despite the importance of this plan and its aim to modernise the city and bring it more in line with global cities, it has not been able to achieve its intended goals.

In order to improve the quality of urban life in the city and to achieve a balance between its urban areas, several reforms have been proposed to frame all future projects planned in Constantine within the framework of (Modernisation and Urbanisation). This includes re-evaluating them according to all the necessary conditions, especially the principle of public participation in planning and consultation, which is considered one of the essential conditions for their success.

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Dr. Nadira Bouguebs

Improving Urban Living in the City of Constantine, Algeria: Reality and Perspectives

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