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Nostalgia and Belonging in Art and Architecture from the MENA Region

Essay Collection

Research project conceptualized and edited by Laura Hindelang and Nadia Radwan

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Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts,
Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region

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Social Housing and Belonging

Fernand Pouillon's Climat de France in Algiers



Figure 6: Climat de France. Fernand Pouillon. 1954-57. Algiers, Algeria. © 2017 Carlo Zampieri. Photograph by Carlo Gaetano Zampieri.

"Est-ce une réussite ou un échec ? Je ne saurais le dire [...].
Pourtant j'ai la certitude que cette architecture
est sans mépris" (Pouillon 208).

At the center of the modern social housing complex Climat de France in Algiers, built from 1954 to 1957 in the middle of the Algerian War of Independence by French architect Fernand Pouillon (1912–1986), lies the edifice 200 colonnes. The fortress-like building, with its Arab carpet influenced façade, is five stories high and includes a vast agora with similar proportions to the Palais Royal in Paris. Pouillon's inspiration for the building was the Ottoman architecture that the Turks built during

their occupation of Algiers (Pouillon 205). So far, the monumentality of 200 colonnes has no equivalent in Algeria.

The immense stones used in the construction of the two hundred pillars surrounding the courtyard of 200 colonnes, as well as in Pouillon's two other housing projects in Algiers, all came from a quarry in France. This quarry in Fontvielle was owned by the pied-noir Georges Blachette, a parliamentarian and press owner in Algiers through whose influence French-born Jacques Chevallier became mayor of Algiers in 1953 (Pouillon 178; Chevallier 178). Blachette also had an important influence on Chevallier's choice of Pouillon becoming Algiers' first chief architect (Pouillon 176–177). The construction of a huge number of social housing developments was part of the mayor's social welfare program, the aim of which was to pacify the discontented Algerian population in order to ensure France's control over Algeria (O'Leary 20).

The monumental external appearance of 200 colonnes, however, would not suggest that in reality the six thousand apartments on the upper floors are extremely small, have a ceiling height of only two meters, and offer very little comfort (Çelik, *Urban Forms* 156). This contrast can only be understood if one knows for whom the housing was intended. The apartments of the Climat de France represent the *type évolutif* and were built exclusively for Algerians who had recently moved from rural areas to the city of Algiers (Çelik, *Urban Forms* 148). Spatially separated from the Algerian population, most of the Europeans lived downtown near the waterside in modern houses of a higher standard. The inequality of the two communities was expressed in architecture, as the Algerians were accommodated in a type of housing with less comfort.

In fact, it was important to the French to show that the Algerians did not belong to the civilized French community. Architectural historian Regina Göckede mentions that the infrastructure in the Casbah was deliberately not renewed because this part of the city was supposed to serve as an underdeveloped contrast to the modern residential areas of the French, thus justifying the colonial system (89–90).

The differentiation between colonized and colonizers was established by the French from the very beginning of the appropriation of northern African territories by Napoleon's troops in 1830. The colonizers called themselves *citoyens* (citizens) and gave the local Algerians the inferior status of *sujets* (subjects). Whereas the French benefitted from full political rights, the Algerians were excluded from belonging to the political community. Political scientist Dominique Gros argues that the Algerians were actually "*non-citoyens*": in the case of a trial, for example, their legal situation was particularly precarious, as judgments were rendered without judicial investigation and the defense was organized without a lawyer (Gros 45). Only from 1944 onwards did the status of the local population undergo a gradual reformation. However, as the architectural concept of the development of the Climat de France shows, little changed in terms of the perception of the Algerian population. The French still held to the notion that Algerians were less civilized.

The aim of the Climat de France was to "acclimatize" the rural population to the French lifestyle and to French values (O'Leary 20). Architectural theorist Zeynep Çelik argues that the French "social housing" project was actually a re-education program whose goal was to westernize Algerians:

It was hoped that European-style apartments would endow the residents with a new spirit and collectivity and, once recovered from the rupture with traditional ways, the Muslim families would appreciate the advantages of modern comforts, the running water and electricity. New needs would generate 'a new conception of work, a new organization of the family cell, a new mentality. (Çelik, *Urban Forms* 121)

Çelik also points out that the destruction of social and architectural structures was a significant means of maintaining political power (*Urban Forms* 88). The concept of a massive public courtyard, for example, was the total opposite of the private courtyard typical of "traditional" Algerian houses. Two hundred shops and education and medical centers are located around the monumental central public space of 200 colonnes in order to ensure the autonomy of the neighborhood but also to make it easy for the French to control lived Algerian spaces. During the French occupation in particular, traditional courtyards were important refuges from the colonial exterior, as they were exclusively under the control of Algerian families (Çelik, "A Lingered Obsession"135).

As sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis points out, existing hegemonic political powers not only have to maintain the boundaries of the community of belonging, they also have to defend them against contestations by groups who do not feel represented by the authorities (205). As is the case in Algiers, the local population no longer accepted the social inequalities and wanted to escape from their precarious living conditions. Chevallier's attempt to calm the local population by constructing a large amount of social housing failed, and the initial riots finally turned into the Algerian War of Independence. In relation to the Climat de France, cultural scientist Alan O'Leary argues that "The irony is that it was precisely from within a housing project intended to acculturate and pacify the Algerians that the nationalist protests of December 1960 emerged. The Algerians may have lived inside the buildings of the Climat de France, but they rejected the designs that its architecture had upon them" (20).

Not only did modern social housing separate the two communities, it also introduced a new form of mass housing in Algeria and therefore initiated a new way of protesting. Architects Brittany Utting and Daniel Jacobs argue that "The cloistered interiority of the 200 Colonne project, combined with its overtly fortified exterior, its exclusively Muslim population, and its centrality in the massive Climat de France masterplan, generated a condition ideal for both French Protectorate surveillance and also revolution" (14).

Although the Climat de France represented a modern and more comfortable housing project than the informal settlements outside Algiers, the development was not able to make people feel at home nor to give them a sense of emotional belonging. On the contrary, the intended pacifying purpose of the Climat de France was transformed into a space of protest and violence during the Algerian War of Independence. Both sides were willing to sacrifice their lives in order to maintain or improve the conditions of their communities. Yuval-Davis argues that the execution of such a violent duty is the ultimate enactment of citizenship and therefore of belonging to a political community (208).

The development, which was initially built for thirty thousand inhabitants, now accommodates fifty thousand people. Several informal settlements have been established around the development, including one habitation on the rooftop of 200 Colonne. After the colonial era, the French name of the development was no longer used—in the course of the reappropriation of the territory it has been renamed Oued Koriche. Today, the suburb still represents a space of unrest and rebellion. It is the center of drug trafficking in Algiers ("Climat de France").

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