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# The place of the Great Mosque of Tlemcen: the paradox between patrimonialisation and appropriation

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## Abstract

The Great Mosque of Tlemcen is a unique case, as it is one of the few mosques dating back to the Almoravid period that is almost intact. It has evolved in a constantly changing space and now has a conjoined public square, following an occidental configuration, which is quite rare. The size of this square suggests that it could be put to use as an additional vector for the valorisation of the mosque, but the current situation is different. This added space, introduced by occidental culture, creates a dual architectural language with several other buildings that mark all the layers of evolution in the urban fabric. Apart from its religious function, this mosque used to play the role of a covered public square, a role that has eroded over time. The aim of this research is to analyse the relationship between the building and its surroundings, as well as the population's perception of this relationship. Additionally, the research is intended to highlight changes in the perception of the Great Mosque of Tlemcen's public square over time, depending on historical, political, and social contexts.

This research relies on an approach that combines different methods, including a thorough analysis of historical, cartographic, and legislative documents. Through this approach, we were able to conduct a comparative analysis with other similar cases. Finally, field research allowed us to understand the relationship between space and society. Despite the legal recognition of the surroundings as a historical monument, this status is not widely perceived and integrated into the population's sense of heritage space. This is reflected in private and even public actions, despite the instrumentalisation of this heritage status, with appropriations of protected space that occur outside of regulations and become part of the landscape expression of the building in its environment.

**Keywords** the Great Mosque of Tlemcen, surroundings of monuments, heritage, appropriation, regulation, public space

## 1 Introduction

Architecture is one of the most meaningful expressions of humanity. Beyond its artistic and cultural dimensions, it breathes life into a building according to a specific need, a need that has defined a living space in an environment that is constantly evolving. Every heritage building has

been subject to the laws of urban, historical, and socio-cultural evolution throughout history, dictated by various events such as expansion, repurposing, redevelopment, and demolition. These events can potentially resituate the building for intentions that are different from its original purpose. As an illustration, we can consider the ancient city of Rome, with its numerous inert elements that are now diluted in the urban landscape of the present city and represent an open-air museum for the most part.

On the other hand, each building is part of an environment with which it is inseparable, a space that can be simple or complex, clear or ambiguous, and it contributes

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fully to its functioning and identity. The esplanade of the Louvre Palace in Paris is a perfect illustration of this, with an architectural language that contrasts two distant periods in service of the museum's activities. This space, known as the surrounding, has been defined and revised since the advent of the concept of heritage, starting with the Athens Charter of 1931, which recognised heritage buildings in their environment. A more precise definition was achieved with the "property and place" linkage in the Burra Charter of 1999. The identification of the immediate environment as a factor in the building's uniqueness through the relationship of the surroundings with the building was discussed at the 2005 ICOMOS conference, and the inscription of a building in the social, cultural, and urban landscape was discussed at the 2013 UNESCO conference (Touil 2016).

Algeria, like other occupied countries, has adhered to and adopted its orientations in its cultural heritage management policy through the texts of French law (Chibi, Chekouri, and Benbouziane 2019). This law was continued after independence and revised in 1998 through Law 98–04 on the protection of heritage, which is still in force. However, Algerian regulations are far from clear in their texts, which define the approach to a heritage building as a protected zone that itself is part of an area with a visual perimeter of 200 m. Nevertheless, this delimitation is difficult to implement because of its ambiguity. Thus, considering that this space is an integral part of the heritage building, its recognition and integration are essential when considering the future of the heritage site, as well as any possible intervention. In addition, the intervention or occupation<sup>1</sup> of this space inevitably generates a positive or negative impact, of greater or lesser magnitude, on the building, directly or indirectly.

Religious architecture is a particular case where the notion of environment takes on multiple meanings. First, the building is part of an urban landscape furnished with several elements that make up the fabric in which it is built. In addition, there is the cultural and identity dimension expressed by its architecture and the practice of religion, and thus, the building serves as a sociocultural vector because the relationship between society and the divine is made through and thanks to architecture. Finally, this environment also takes on a social meaning because it represents an essential place of convergence and meeting in ancient cultures, whether inside or outside the religious building in question. Ultimately, the relationship between these buildings and their

surroundings takes on all its meaning and complexity from their religious characteristics and all that it conveys as value.

Medinas are structured and articulated around the mosque, which is the central element. It plays a fundamental role not only in terms of functionality and social dynamics but also in terms of the city's landscape, as it serves as the ultimate landmark. The city centre of Tlemcen was also designed according to this pattern and houses a large mosque from the Almoravid period that is still functional today.

However, it seems that the impact of the mosque on the city and society has been diluted over time, and the balance of power between this building and its surroundings has been reversed, despite the presence of legislation intended to maintain its multiple layers of historical significance on a daily basis. This observation leads us to reflect on the real causes of this phenomenon and to posit the following hypotheses: the legislation has a gap in terms of defining and addressing the surroundings of the monument; the recognition, perception, and legitimacy of built heritage sites stop at its physical boundaries in the eyes of various stakeholders; urban and sociocultural changes anchored in time have significantly altered the image of the space, as well as practices and appropriations.

The objective of this work is, of course, to better understand and comprehend the problem posed above by analysing the evolution of the sociocultural context of the city centre of Tlemcen, as well as the legislative framework and its application. Furthermore, this specific case is compared to other similar cases to highlight the peculiarities. Finally, we decipher the perception of the grand mosque and the two public squares through the prism of the users and occupants of this space.

## 2 Literature review: the mosque and the square

Tlemcen was created and organised according to the "classic" pattern of the medieval Islamic city with numerous morphological and topographical specificities that make it unique (Redjem and Mazouz 2022). Thus, the organisation of the medina is centred on the mosque, which occupies a prime location in social and cultural significance but remains somewhat geographically off-centre towards the south. Furthermore, the urban fabric of the medina was structured by the vernacular language of winding streets and alleys, ancestral construction techniques, the presence of caravanserais near the commercial district and the main market, and finally the presence of public squares and small outdoor spaces scattered throughout the various neighbourhoods. In reality, the main public square of a medina is the main mosque, which, in addition to being a place of worship, is a space

<sup>1</sup> "The Western Wall and its surroundings are completely inseparable from the many believers who occupy the space and their practice of Judaism."

for gathering, meeting, and sharing; the public area of the mosque is a place of power.

This meeting space in the main mosque has always been part of the functional scheme of the medina, as perfectly illustrated in many observable cases, such as the mosque of Kairouan. The mosque surrounds one of the oldest public squares in the city and is used for religious celebrations and public events (Boussora and Mazouz 2004). Additionally, the Great Mosque of Damascus, with its large courtyard, has undergone several transformations. This space had crucial importance as a place of meeting and socialising and continues to be an important place for social and cultural events, as well as religious practices (Al-Baldawi and Thabit 2023). Another example that illustrates these points is the Koutoubia Mosque, whose role, besides transitioning from the outside to the inside, was offering essential support for community gathering, relaxation with its gardens and fountains, and commerce. In summary, it was a structuring space on the urban and social levels (Skounti 2010).

The mosque was also a space for the exchange and dissemination of knowledge, as exemplified by the mosque of Al Azhar, which was designed as a centre for Islamic learning, where students could study religious sciences, law, grammar, and literature. It also played an important role in the dissemination of Islamic culture. The mosque hosted conferences, debates, and seminars on a wide range of topics, including theology, philosophy, natural sciences, and arts. These events attracted scholars and intellectuals from around the world and helped make Al Azhar a centre of cultural radiance in the Muslim world (Fattah and Eddy U 2016).

From its construction, the mosque, like other religious buildings, had a significant influence on the public space and urbanism of the city. Beyond its cultural function, it played other roles in everyday life, making it both a structuring and meaningful element of the city and society (Purnama and Clarissa 2018).

In Aleppo, where the Great Mosque was designed to reflect the political and religious ideals of the time, it was an important centre of Islam in Syria. The mosque was frequented by many great scholars and learned individuals, serving as a place of prayer and Islamic education. Similarly, the Madrasa Al Halawiyya, built in the 13th century, was a significant educational and religious building in the region. The Madrasa Al Halawiyya was a school of Islamic law and became an important centre for Islamic education and research, producing numerous distinguished jurists and scholars.

Both the Great Mosque and the Madrasa Al Halawiyya were also crucial centres of culture and art. They housed various Islamic art pieces, including mosaics, calligraphy, and paintings. These artworks bear witness to the history

and culture of Aleppo. While the city's Islamic roots were built upon Roman foundations, the influence of these buildings on the sociocultural space in Aleppo during the early Islamic period contributed to shaping the city's identity as an essential cultural and religious centre in the region (Alafandi and Rahim 2014).

This example appears interesting to us due to the similarity with our case study, where the mosque and the madrasa share a close proximity in the urban configuration of the medina, communicating their significance through a public space. Unfortunately, the recent war in Syria has altered many parameters, making it challenging to envision the potential role of this now-ruined mosque in today's context.

Some mosques have experienced changes and evolved within urban fabrics undergoing radical transformations, both structurally and socioculturally. Accordingly, their status adapts to this new situation. As an example, we mention the case of the Great Mosque in the medina of Mahdia, Tunisia. This city has a historical depth comparable to our case study, as the medina was founded on Phoenician and Roman foundations. The Great Mosque, featuring a large courtyard, was built by a Fatimid Caliph.

From its construction, the mosque played a crucial role as a symbol of power. It served as the primary place of worship and prayer for the community, and it was a renowned intellectual centre, housing a university where teachings on Islamic and secular sciences were delivered. Consequently, it played a major role in disseminating knowledge and Islamic culture in the region (Djelloul 2003). More recently, the Great Mosque has adapted to an unprecedented situation during the years spent as a French protectorate, which led to a slight restructuring of the old urban core with the creation of new axes. One particular detail is the presence of a public garden square to the west, which adds significant interest to our research. This relatively recent intervention aims to integrate the Great Mosque and other historical buildings into a tourist and cultural route. It has been carried out through several specific projects, including the restoration of the Laboratory House, the rehabilitation of the façades of Slimane Hamza Street, and the restoration of the abandoned church (Youssef and Kharrat 2018).

Another comparable example to the Great Mosque of Tlemcen is the Great Mosque of the Casbah in Marrakech, which holds a more centralised position than the Koutoubia Mosque and occupies a central place in the city's history and architectural landscape. Founded under the Almohad dynasty, the building played a significant role in the religious and political arena of the region (Legorburu 2020). As a centre of worship, it served as a place for daily prayers, religious celebrations, and Friday sermons for the Muslim community. Symbolising

the political and religious power of the Almohads, the mosque strengthened their authority and legitimacy as Muslim leaders. Furthermore, the mosque served as a community centre where believers gathered to discuss local affairs and participate in social and cultural activities, consolidating its central role in medieval society (John 2014, 467–473). Today, in addition to being a place of worship, the Great Mosque of the Casbah is open to tourists who flock to visit the city, while its political function is no longer exercised. In this case, too, there has been a slight urban restructuring with the creation of new pathways and a change in the building's status in contemporary life.

The previous examples are comparable to our case study because they share similar characteristics in the context of creation, geographical position, historical depth over several dynasties, construction period, constructive and architectural culture, and political and sociocultural upheaval. This analysis points us towards a trend that has developed, altering the role and status of the Great Mosque over time. Despite some divergent aspects, such as the proximity to the sea in the city of Mahdia and its green spaces or the fortified kasbah in the case of the Mosque of Al Mansur, these examples highlight the changes in the role and status of these mosques through history.

Indeed, the French protectorate in Morocco and Tunisia aimed at economic and military control of the occupied countries, but on an urban level, the identity of the places did not undergo major reforms, and the historical centres were well preserved with slight restructuring. However, in Algeria, the mode of occupation of historical centres was different, with profound restructuring, particularly in Tlemcen and the surroundings of its Great Mosque. The transformation that the space of this building and its immediate environment has undergone remains unexplored in the scientific literature, as it represents a very rare, if not unique, case. For several decades, it has been confronted with a foreign culture.

Considering the previously mentioned examples, these are ancient mosques whose crucial role in the foundation of their historical nucleus is proven, as they played, among other things, the role of a public space with a large patio or open space nearby. This space was part of its environment from the outset, and the two architectural spaces are integrated into the same landscape with the place of worship as the main protagonist, unlike our case study.

Urban development, closely linked to political and cultural changes, results in various outcomes, despite the obvious similarities between these many examples and the Great Mosque of Tlemcen. However, a point of divergence makes it a unique case, which is the creation

of a "westernised" public square in continuity with the mosque. This particular case is worthy of study to understand the mechanisms of perceptual change, a change that has occurred even at the level of the legal framework, which is supposed to be conservative.

### 3 Research methods

This research focuses on a comparative analysis of two similar cases, namely, the Great Mosque of Tlemcen and its adjoining square and the Mosque of the Fishery in Algiers and the Martyrs square in its surroundings. These two squares have evolved in a space that underwent heavy restructuring during the French occupation in 1830 and a profound sociocultural mutation since then. Finally, the two mosques are protected by the same heritage management policy and experience similar scenarios despite their many points of divergence.

This research is based on a deep analysis of historical textual and cartographic support that will allow us to trace the key events that have a direct or indirect impact on the current urban configuration. It is also important to consider the legislative aspect of the Great Mosque and its surroundings by critically reading the laws that govern the area. This involves deciphering the texts, understanding their application and interpretation, and identifying any possible legal gaps or limits. This critical analysis of the laws will be complemented by fieldwork to observe how these laws are put into practice and to identify any potential challenges related to their implementation. Overall, this combined approach of documentary analysis and fieldwork will provide a more complete understanding of the relationship between the Great Mosque and its urban environment. This paper will continue by proposing solutions to improve this ambiguous relationship.

On the other hand, it is important to conduct a thorough on-site investigation to gather accurate data on the phenomenon observed around the Great Mosque and its immediate environment. Direct observation is a useful method for collecting objective data on the ground, while interviews with stakeholders can provide valuable information on their experiences and perspectives. It is advisable to divide the stakeholders into two categories, namely, a fixed group consisting of vendors, employees, and residents and a mobile group comprising customers, passersby, and worshippers. Interrogating these various actors will allow us to obtain a comprehensive image of the underlying mechanisms in the relationship between the mosque and the square.

After dividing the actors into two groups, we approached these individuals and conducted interviews at various times of the day over a one-month period. The first group consists of 350 people, and the size of this sample was determined after reaching data saturation,



**Table 1** Passerby survey interview model

Questions	Answers		
Do you live in Tlemcen?	Yes	No	
Do you live in Tlemcen's downtown?	Yes	No	
Do you often frequent this space?	Yes	No	
At what time of the day?	Morning	Evening	
What is the purpose of your visits?	Leisure	Rest/meeting	
Are you familiar with the history of this space?	Yes	No	
Do you often frequent the mosque?	Often	Sometimes	Never
What does the grand mosque represent for you? *	The most frequently given answers are <b>religious symbol, monument, landmark, place of worship</b>		
What does the square represent for you? *	The most frequently given answers are <b>relaxation area—meeting place—leisure—rest—commerce—place of activity</b>		
What is your connection or link to this space? *	The most frequently given answers are <b>event—culture – tradition</b>		
What does the museum, formerly the city hall, represent to you? *	The most frequently given answers are <b>Not much—I'm not familiar with this museum—one of the French buildings on the square—nothing</b>		
How do you define the activities in the space? *	The most frequently given answers are <b>commerce—crowd movement—focal point – centrality</b>		
In your opinion, is the activity in the space in line with the cultural dimension of the monument?	Yes	No	
What do you recommend for the preservation of the monument's authenticity? *	The most frequently given answers are <b>maintenance, lighting</b>		

\* Questions with open answers

while the second group consists of 184 people working around the grand square (traders, police officers, bankers, imams). After careful observation, we established a semistructured interview model comprising general questions (place of residence, frequency, and reason for visits) and targeted questions regarding their perception of the mosque and its surroundings. These data will also be useful for identifying the factors contributing to these dynamics and for formulating recommendations to improve the practices between the mosque and the square Tables 1 and 2.

#### 4 The Great Mosque of Tlemcen: a report on a heritage building and its surroundings

The Great Mosque of Tlemcen is a unique building in more than one way. Built during the Almoravid reign in the region in 1136 (Almagro 2015), its construction process underwent several stages with the realisation of its minaret during the reign of the Zianides from 1236 (Ghomari 2007), when the city was the capital. Originally, the mosque was inscribed in a nearly square shape of 20.40 m × 19.80 m with a patio to the north and a true internal space exposed to the outdoors, a characteristic element of traditional architecture at the time (Redjem and Mazouz 2022) (Fig. 1). The minaret was located to the north of the patio and was off-axis from it as well as from the prayer hall. The main entrances were facing

east and opened onto a narrow alleyway called "the alleyway of the seven arches", corresponding to the number of arches that ornamented this passage. The western part was attached to an old palace that was abandoned during the Zianide<sup>2</sup> reign and then demolished during French occupation in 1842 (Marçais 1903).

At that time, the mosque was located in an area that included other important buildings, such as Al Qasr Al Qadim, the former residence of the Emir, Al Madrasa Tashfinya, a building dedicated to sharing and spreading knowledge, and Al Qisaria, the commercial district and the true centre of gravity of the ancient city (Ageron 1967). To the west of Al Madrasa was a caravanserai for passing merchants to sell their goods in the city, which communicated directly with the mosque named Sidi Bel Hassen. This was a smaller mosque reserved for the noble classes in society. To the east was another area dedicated to Fûnduq, buildings used for accommodation (Fig. 2). This area played the role of an access hall to the medieval city, in which its major functions were concentrated. This urban composition underwent a radical restructuring with numerous interventions during the French occupation in 1842 (Kassab 2007).

<sup>2</sup> They built a brand-new palace which became the Al Mashuar Palace, befitting a royal capital.

**Table 2** Worker survey interview model

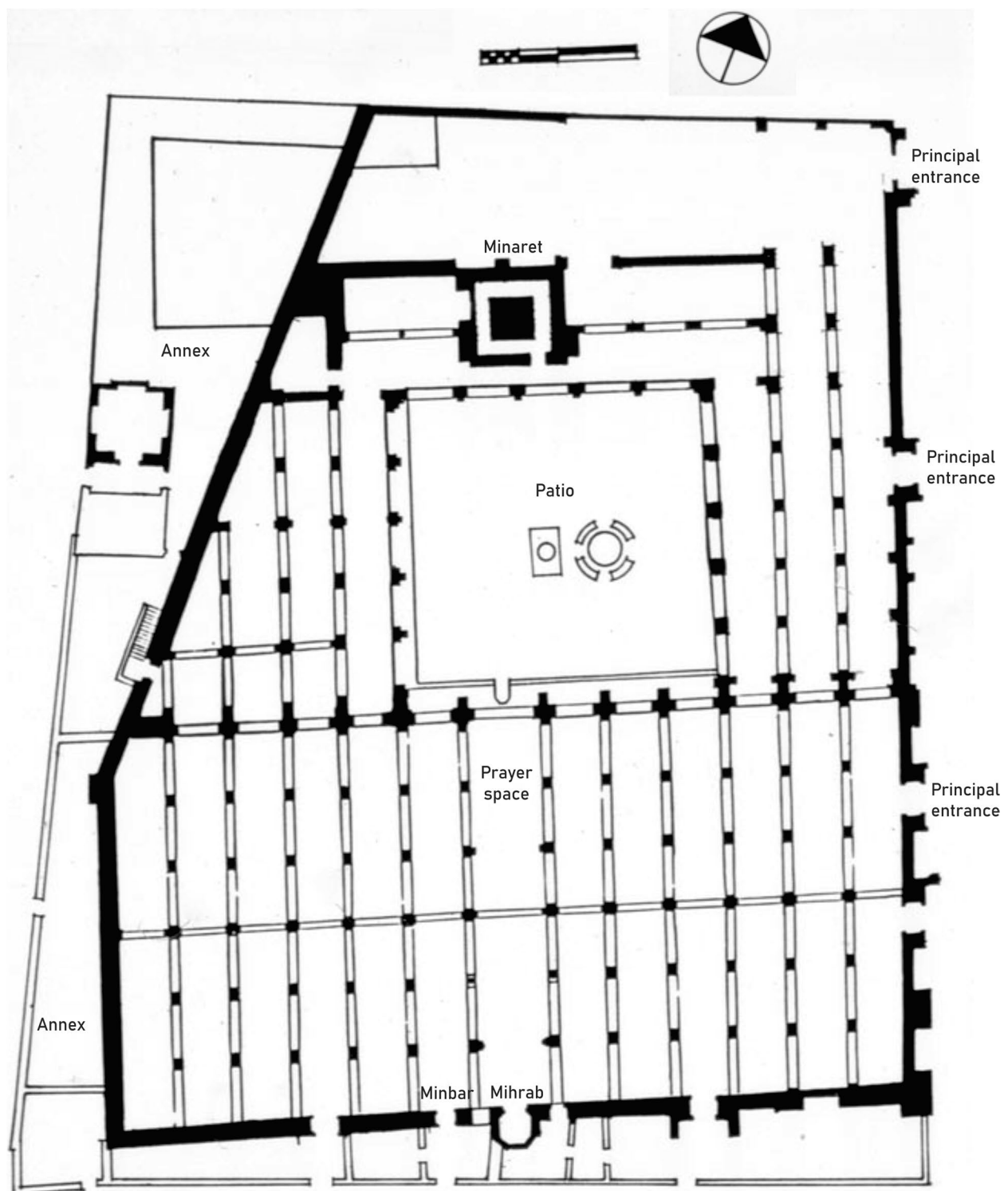
Questions	Answers
Do you live in Tlemcen?	Yes No
Do you live in Tlemcen's downtown?	Yes No
Since when have you been working here?	+ 5 years + 10 years + 15 years
Do you visit this space out of your work hours?	Yes No
Do you often frequent the mosque?	Yes No
Are you familiar with the history of this space?	Yes No
What does the grand mosque represent for you? *	The most frequently given answers are <b>religious symbol, monument, landmark, place of worship</b>
What does the square represent for you? *	The most frequently given answers are <b>workplace—meeting place—commerce—place of activity</b>
Besides work, what does this space mean to you? *	The most frequently given answers are <b>celebration—event – culture</b>
What does the museum, formerly the city hall, represent to you? *	The most frequently given answers are <b>Not much—I'm not familiar with this museum—one of the French buildings on the square – never been there</b>
How do you define the activities in the space? *	The most frequently given answers are <b>crowd movement—focal point – centrality</b>
In your opinion, is the activity in the space in line with the cultural dimension of the monument?	Yes No
What is the impact of the working spaces of the shops in the area? *	The most frequently given answers are <b>Necessary—embellishment of the space—promotion of commercial activity</b>
What do you recommend for the preservation of the monument's authenticity? *	The most frequently given answers are <b>maintenance – embellishment – enhancement</b>

\* Questions with open answers

Thus, the French, concerned with controlling every movement of the crowd, imposed a Western urban layout, which they carried out through mass demolitions and excavations to integrate the existing structures into the mould of a grid-like urban structure (McLaren 2021). According to the map of the French alignment plan, this restructuring was applied throughout the existing core, with an extension planned for the northwest, including individual housing and two churches (Lorcin 1999). Finally, a large square was built on the southern outskirts of the mosque, given the strategic importance of the location. This square is the first clear sign of the physical stigmatisation of the building because the construction of the square resulted in partial demolition to the south to fit it into the alignment plan. This same alignment plan was responsible for the demolition of Al Madrasa Tashfinya and the old royal palace that was attached to the western façade of the mosque. Finally, the commercial district was demolished, and the current covered market was built in its place (Ghomari 2007). This intervention represents the first change in the appropriation of the surroundings of the mosque, and due to its destructive nature, it was perceived as antagonistic to its valorisation at that time.

It marked the beginning of a long series of such interventions, perpetuated until today (Fig. 3).

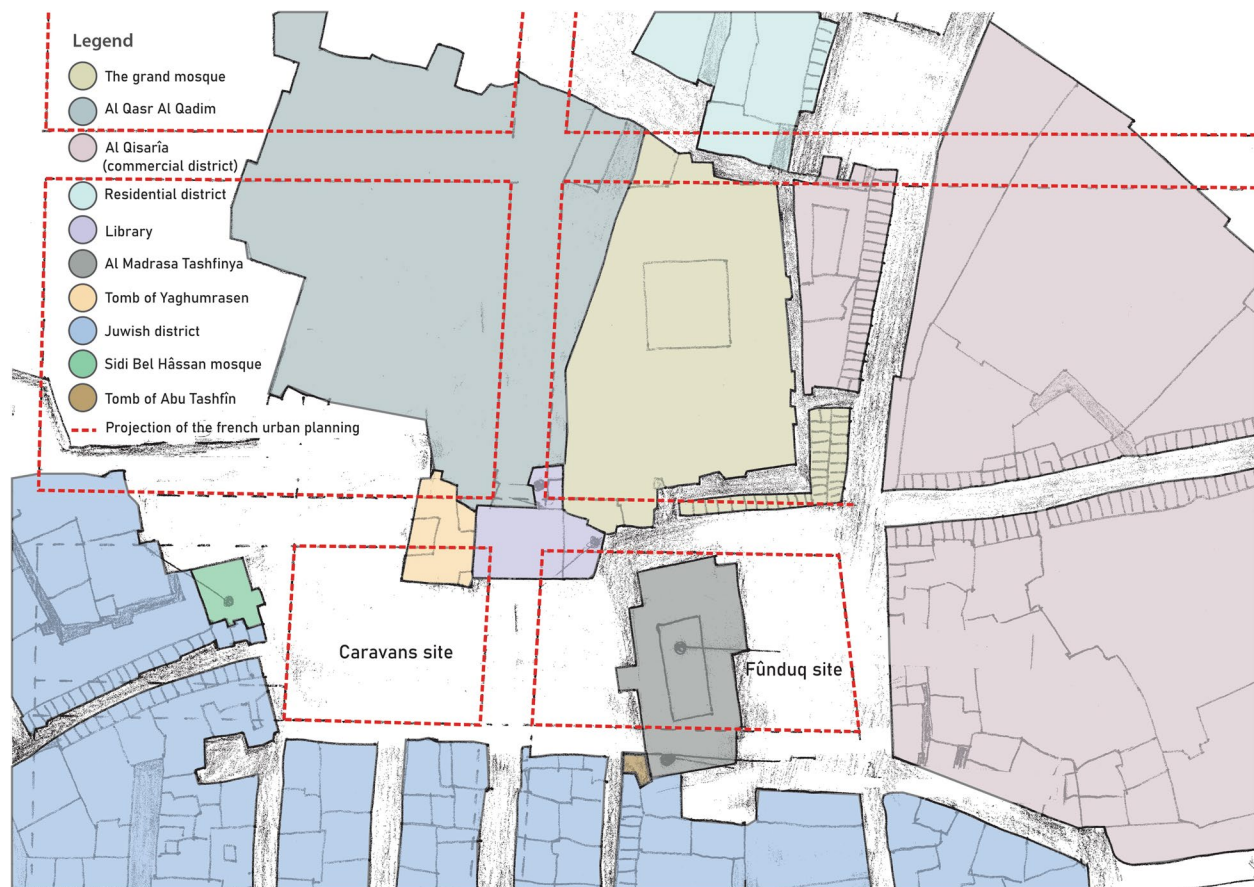
In terms of structure, the aforementioned square is divided into two parts by the rue de France, renamed "Independence Street" after the departure of the French. Two similar squares emerge, namely, the "Emir Abdelkader" square and the "Mohamed Khemisti" square, initially the town hall square (facing the French town hall) and the square of Algiers, respectively. However, their collective name remained "Elblass" without distinction, a word derived from the French word for "square". The two squares extend over an area of approximately 3200 square metres, not including the mechanical lanes that border them. The "Mohamed Khemisti" square is located within a rectangle of 40×28 m; it is paved with yellow and garnet interlocking tiles and contains three newspaper kiosks and a fountain adjoined to a long wall to the west that conceals access to underground restrooms that are now closed. It also contains urban furniture composed of 4 Victorian-style streetlamps and 6 public benches in two different models, and trees, including 15 plane trees, 11 of which are distributed around the perimeter of the square, and 2 rows of two trees each in the central space.



**Fig. 1** Plan of the Great Mosque of Tlemcen (Source: Antoni Almagro)

To the east, on the other side of Independence Street, is the "Emir Abdelkader" square, which covers slightly more ground than the first square, as it is a rectangle of

55×28 m. It is paved with the same paving stones, and its composition elements are similar, including 4 kiosks, 9 lamp posts of the same style, and 9 public benches.



**Fig. 2** The medieval urban plan of the zone before the French intervention (Source: Tlemcen's City Hall archive)

The plane trees, numbering 20, are aligned with those in the first square and offer plenty of shade on sunny days. Additionally, this area includes a bus shelter and three large but unattended planters.

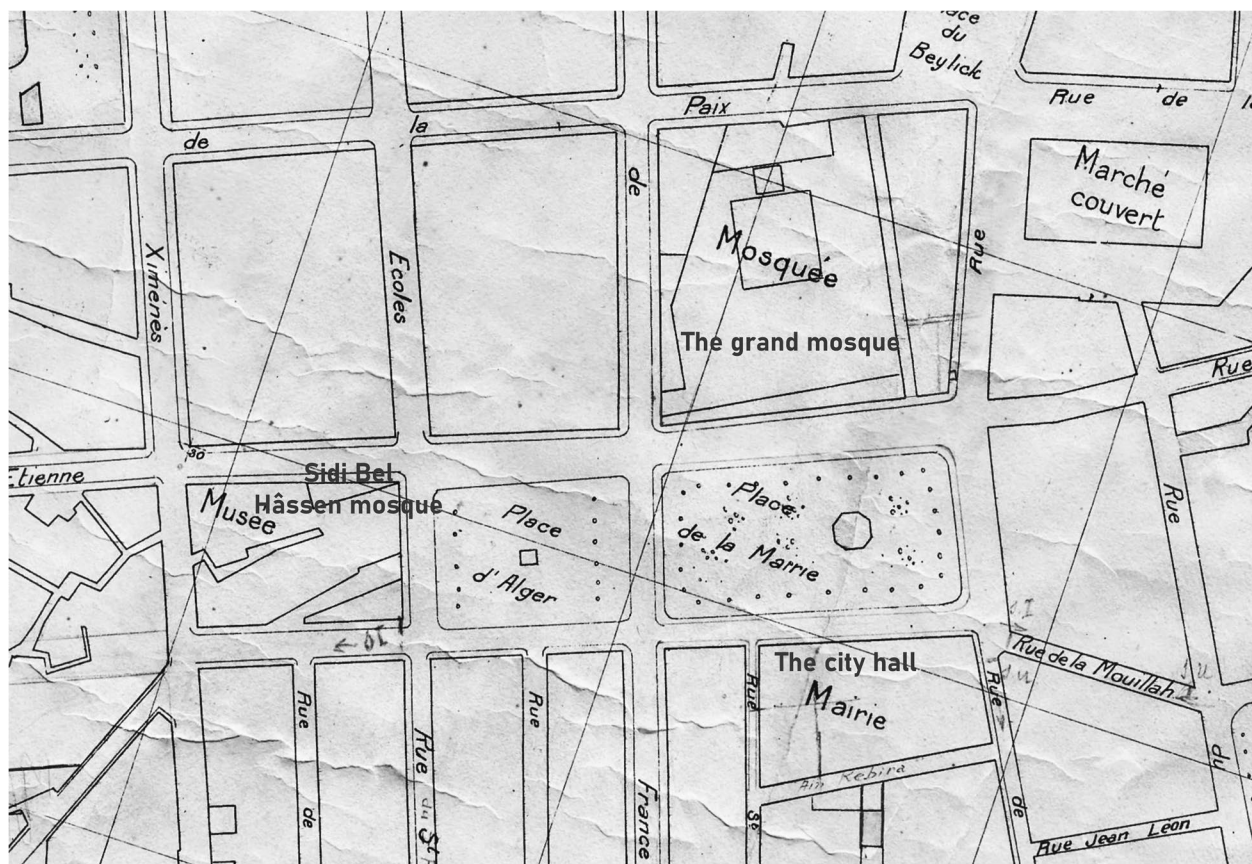
The square bears the marks of the history of the place, as its walls are composed of buildings from different periods: the first phase of Almoravid construction with the Great Mosque, the Almohad period with some dwellings, the Zianide period with the Sidi Bel Hassen Mosque, the French period with its three architectural styles (neoclassical, neo-Moorish, and modern) that evolved successively, and the postindependence period characterised by a new construction in the southwest corner and interventions on some façades and storefronts, which proves to be a determining element of our analysis (Alcaraz 2010).

These buildings, representing various construction and architectural cultures, have succeeded each other on the square and testify to a slow process of physical construction and cultural maturation, which is still evolving to this day. The dimensions also vary from one building to another: while the east and west façades,

which are in contact with the vernacular fabric, do not exceed a height of two stories, the north and south façades on the side of the "Mohamed Khemisti" square are composed of buildings with 2 to 6 floors, as shown in Fig. 4.

Functionally, the area is strongly influenced by commerce in all its forms, as well as the presence of two banks, two museums (the city museum located in the former town hall and Islamic calligraphy at the Sidi Bel Hassen mosque), the offices of a political party, and the main mosque with its religious function. Finally, housing is present but has no impact on the animation of the area or the use of the square. Thus, commerce has dominated the functional debate since the creation of this space, and even today, the ground floors of the buildings on the square are occupied by shops selling various products. In addition, the tobacco and newspaper kiosks present in both squares contribute fully to this domination. Finally, it is important to note the presence of "informal" commerce in fruits and vegetables, dried fruits, and sweets, which generate significant interest among the population.





**Fig. 3** The urban plan of the zone after creation of the square (Source: Tlemcen's City Hall archive)

Our on-site observation allowed us to analyse the different modes of use of the space, and we identified two: one is static, where users sit on public benches and green space borders, gather around newsstands, meet in the central part, or in front of the mosque just before or after prayer. In the second mode, users tend to wander, crossing the square from one side to the other or browsing the shops on site. Additionally, a space in the northeast corner dedicated to numerous taxis is significant for generating a certain amount of crowd movement, whether departing or arriving. Finally, on the south and west sides of both squares, there is a space for unregulated vehicle parking, an anarchic organisation orchestrated by self-proclaimed agents who make a living from it.

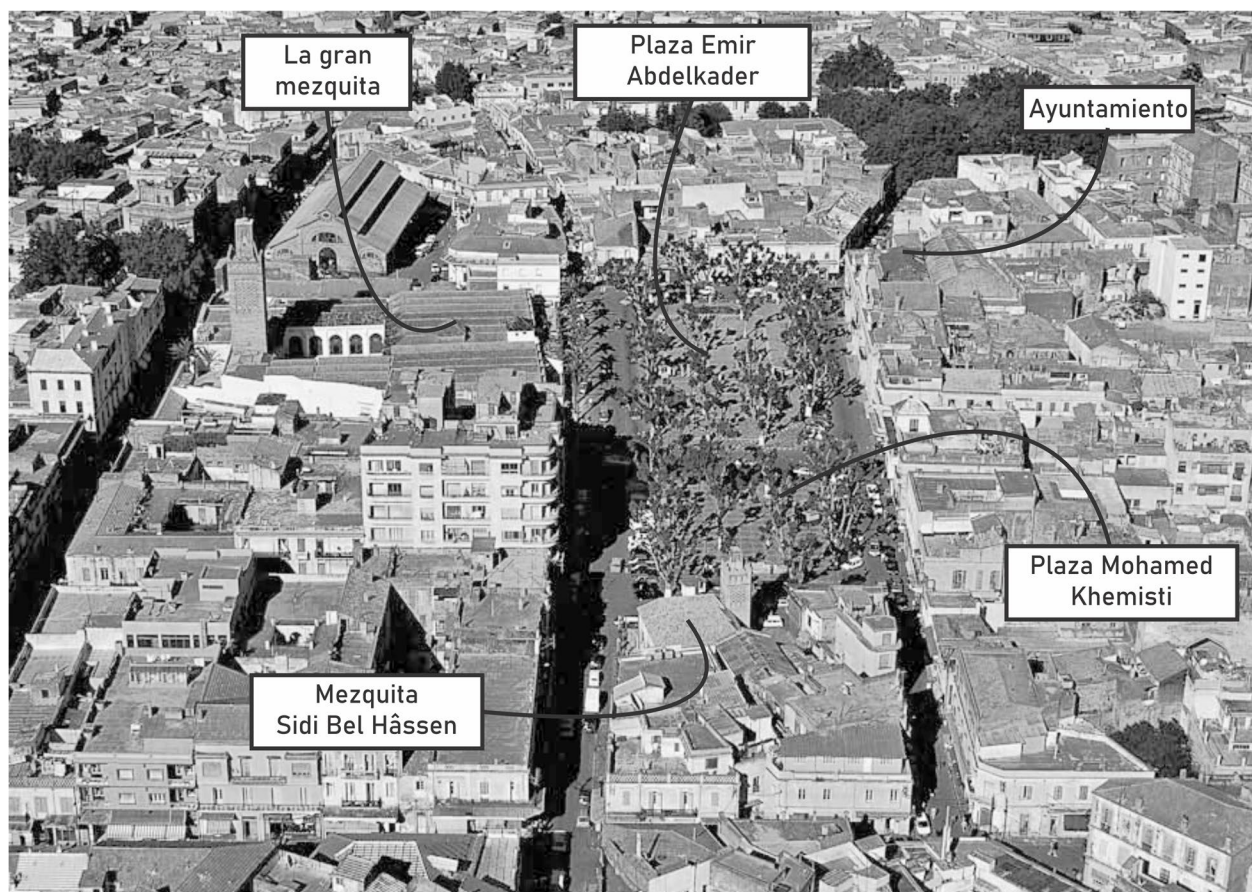
The grand square of Tlemcen is a true nerve centre of the city centre, constituting a central point with certain nuances. Currently, the historic centre of the city is in a context of impoverishment, and its primary vocation is commerce. In fact, commerce experienced significant growth before the French occupation and has continued to have a prominent role in this urban fragment to the present day (Daher 2018). However, the advent of

collective housing (a true new model of living) introduced by the French, and a little later, individual housing following the Western model relegated traditional housing to a secondary role. It should also be noted that customs have evolved over time, and dwellings that house several households under the same roof have become obsolete. Subsequently, time has done the rest, applying its implacable law of ageing to these living spaces whose owners do not see the interest in staying and maintaining them. We contacted some owners of traditional housing,<sup>3</sup> and it appears that they consider them out of step with a gradually "Westernised" way of life and no longer meet updated standards of comfort and safety.

On the other hand, the French collective housing buildings suffered a similar fate because the gradual impoverishment of the city centre had a snowball effect, and soon, the occupants of these dwellings moved outside the walls to a social environment that suited them better, leaving a less wealthy population to settle in these

<sup>3</sup> There are 30 traditional houses within 20 m of the two squares.





**Fig. 4** Aerial view of the Great Mosque and its surroundings (Source: Yann Arthus Bertrand)

apartments, which tended to deteriorate without maintenance due to a lack of means (Margolis et al. 2015). Our on-site observations indicate that commerce is the main driver of activity in the city centre and therefore around the grand square. However, this activity tends to fade and shutters drop at sunset, and beyond that, there is only the call to prayer from the numerous mosques in the area or a few rare cafes still open. Similar to the ebb and flow of the tides, the crowd retreats from the city centre and, by extension, from the square in the evening. This trend is confirmed during the evenings of the month of Ramadan when the population flocks to businesses in the evening, and the panorama in the city centre and at the two squares changes considerably during this period.

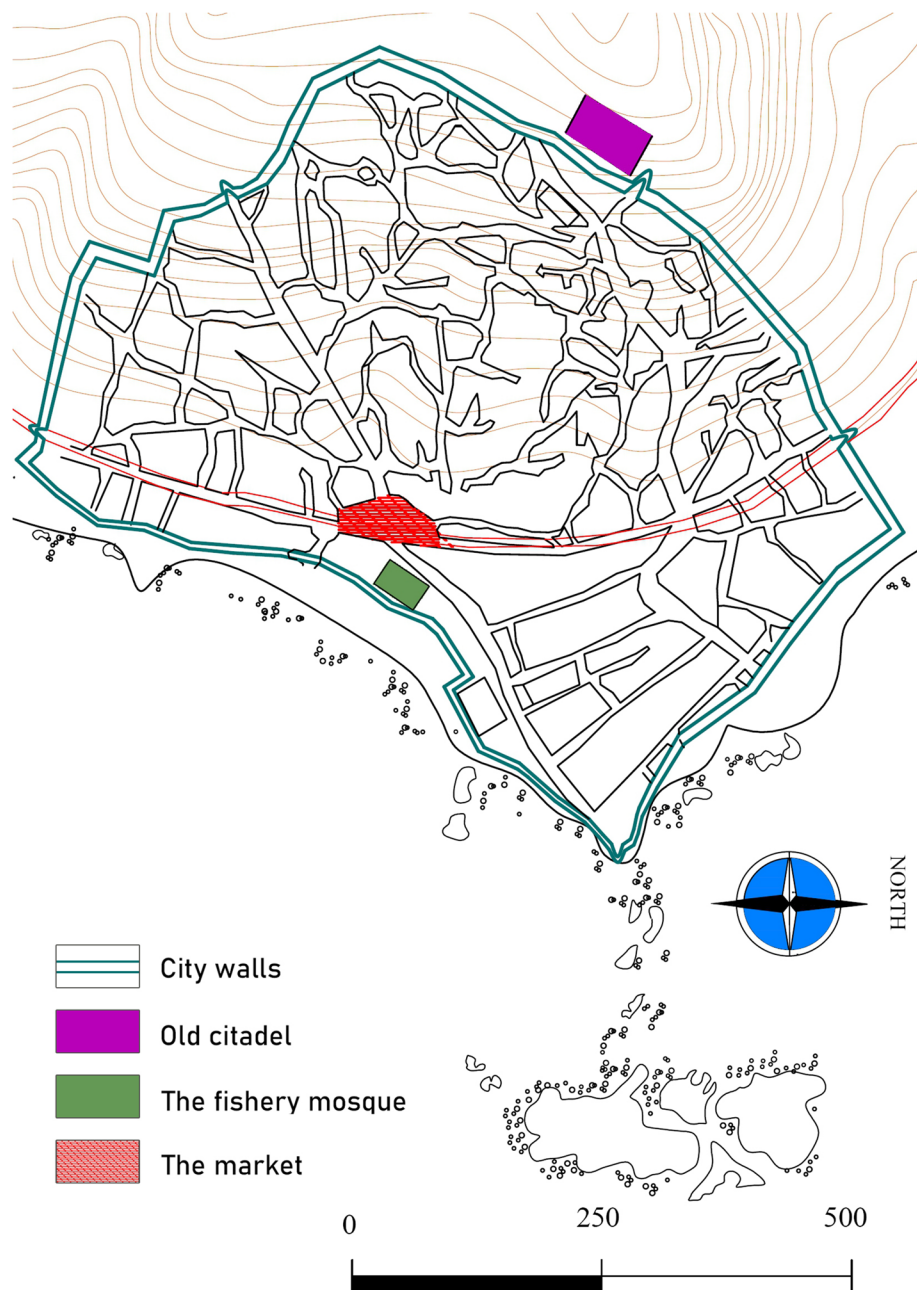
## 5 Algiers, the other place that replaces the emblem

Tlemcen and Algiers have a similar evolution following events that occurred centuries apart. Like the former Zianide capital, Algiers was designated as the Ottoman

capital, where they built a real city and a social space in their image that struggles to survive today<sup>4</sup>. Despite the presence of the Great Mosque of Algiers, which dates back to the Almoravid period, the Ottomans considered it necessary to build other mosques such as the Ali Bitchin Mosque or the Al Jamâa Jdid Mosque (the new mosque), now nicknamed the Fishery Mosque (Sebih 2019) (Fig. 5).

Similar to Tlemcen, power was transferred from this space to the citadel of Algiers located at the high casbah. Finally, Algiers saw the birth of a new square during the French occupation as part of the space restructuring programme, to the detriment of an entire commercial district and over 400 traditional dwellings as well as the Jamâa Sâiyda mosque (Kassab 2010). This new square, called the government square and

<sup>4</sup> Today, there is a paradox between protection and the state of conservation which is perfectly illustrated in this case, because the majority of the traditional houses of the Kasbah are in a poor state.



**Fig. 5** Algiers plan for the Ottoman period (Source: Algiers City Hall archive)

then renamed Martyrs' Square after the departure of the French, is in an antagonistic relationship with the Fishery Mosque because it inherited a completely new space on its western side in a traditional spatial configuration (Sessions 2015) (Figs. 6 & 7).

On the other hand, it differs from medieval mosques, especially in the absence of a patio, and its plan resembles that of a cathedral. We can easily recognise from an aerial view the shape of a crucifix with a central nave

and a vaulted transept<sup>5</sup> (Mustafa and Hassan 2013). In this case, too, there was a complete reconstruction of the walls of the square with the establishment of brand-new buildings in a neoclassical style with an imposing height, one of whose objectives was probably to hide the casbah,

<sup>5</sup> It should not be forgotten that the Ottomans also imported a new building culture despite the rapprochement induced by the same religion.





**Fig. 6** Algiers plan at the beginning of the French occupation (Source: Algiers City Hall archive)

and a music pavilion to further mark their cultural presence and identity.

Our investigations on site allow us to have a clear and unambiguous overview of the functional plan. The square is surrounded by residential buildings containing businesses on the ground floor, as well as government offices. In the second line to the east, there are other administrative buildings as well as a multilevel car park, which is difficult to access during peak hours, causing some problems in the area.<sup>6</sup> Here too, commerce in all its forms represents the major centre of interest in the area and attracts a significant number of people who move around the area and occupy the space according to the two modes defined above.

The Casbah of Algiers was inscribed as a national heritage site in 1991, then a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1992, and finally entered into a concrete protection

regime in 2003 with the approval of its safeguarded sector, which includes the Fishery Mosque, the Place des Martyrs, and all the surrounding colonial buildings. In 2008, the Ministry of Culture, in collaboration with INRAP,<sup>7</sup> undertook an archaeological survey at the Place des Martyrs as a first step. The objective of this operation was to search for the presence of buried archaeological remains to allow for the realisation of the Algiers Metro project, whose route passes through this area and includes a station (Fig. 8).

An archaeological diagnostic survey was carried out to determine the extent of any existing remains and to identify areas presenting a risk during the metro line works (Souq and Stiti 2011). The metro station was finally completed and became operational in 2018, while the discovered remains are now exhibited under a permanent cover mounted on a metal structure.

<sup>6</sup> Built in the 1970s, the garage has always been questioned because it is considered inappropriate in the urban and architectural landscape in front of the historical and strongly cultural character of the area.

<sup>7</sup> The National Institute for Research in Preventive Archaeology, Paris.





**Fig. 7** View of the Fishery Mosque and its surroundings during French occupation (Source: Algiers City Hall archive)



**Fig. 8** Archaeological excavation in Martyrs' Square (Source: National Institute of Archaeological Research of Paris)

Currently, the Place des Martyrs is an important hub of the city, as it is home to a concentration of commerce activities that are the main source of activity in the area. Additionally, thanks to the metro, the area is easily accessible. This metro project radically changed the image of the square and the surrounding area, which is undergoing a certain degree of gentrification and, as a result, an improvement in the perception of this once abandoned space where there was a great deal of insecurity. This square also represents one of the access points to the Casbah and a transitional space between this historic neighbourhood and the north and south extensions.

However, the situation is hardly different in the lower Casbah, which represents a true centre of gravity for the area. It enjoys a great deal of activity during the day thanks to the presence of numerous shops that attract an increasing number of people.<sup>8</sup> However, this phenomenon tends to reverse in the evening, with citizens and residents deserting the streets when commercial activity ceases; the Place des Martyrs is only connected to the two mosques and the metro station and thus empties quickly. This comparative analysis between the two examples highlights a certain trend that has spread in two sites with some similarities (deep urban restructuring, presence of a new square at the exit of an old mosque, common legislation, similar sociocultural composition). Despite the existence of divergences, their urban context is comparable in terms of the modes of occupation of space (mosque and public square), where the mosque is frequented only at prayer times, while the square is occupied by the surrounding shops and activity ceases with the end of the business day.

This comparative analysis between the two cases allows us to identify similarities (deep urban restructuring, presence of a new square at the exit of an old mosque, common legislation, similar sociocultural composition) and differences (historical context). A clear trend emerges with the modes of occupation of space (mosque and public square), which are comparable in their urban context. Indeed, the mosque is mainly frequented at prayer times, while the square is animated by the surrounding businesses, but this activity decreases at the end of the business day.

## 6 Interventions in the mosque and its surroundings

Importantly, the traditional urban space, both in Tlemcen and Algiers, inscribed its symbolic buildings within a whole landscape that one discovers gradually as one

progresses along a given route, and the rare "nonbuilt" spaces were intended for a specific function (parking/loading, transit), while the meeting space was inside the mosques (Rabbat 2021). It is useful to recall that this is an introverted architecture and that the openings, decoration, and artistic expression are almost exclusively found inside, except for the marking of the entrances; thus, the contemplation space was inside the building (Avitabile 2005). On the other hand, the Western conception was quite different, as it advocates for the staging of the building symbolically by imposing a basic physical space of remove which has an aim to create a visual relationship. The event and contemplation take place outside. Thus, the building is planted in a setting complemented by a public square with multiple functions. One of the most representative examples of this design is St. Peter's Square in Rome, which participates in scenography materialising a cultural and religious communion at certain moments.

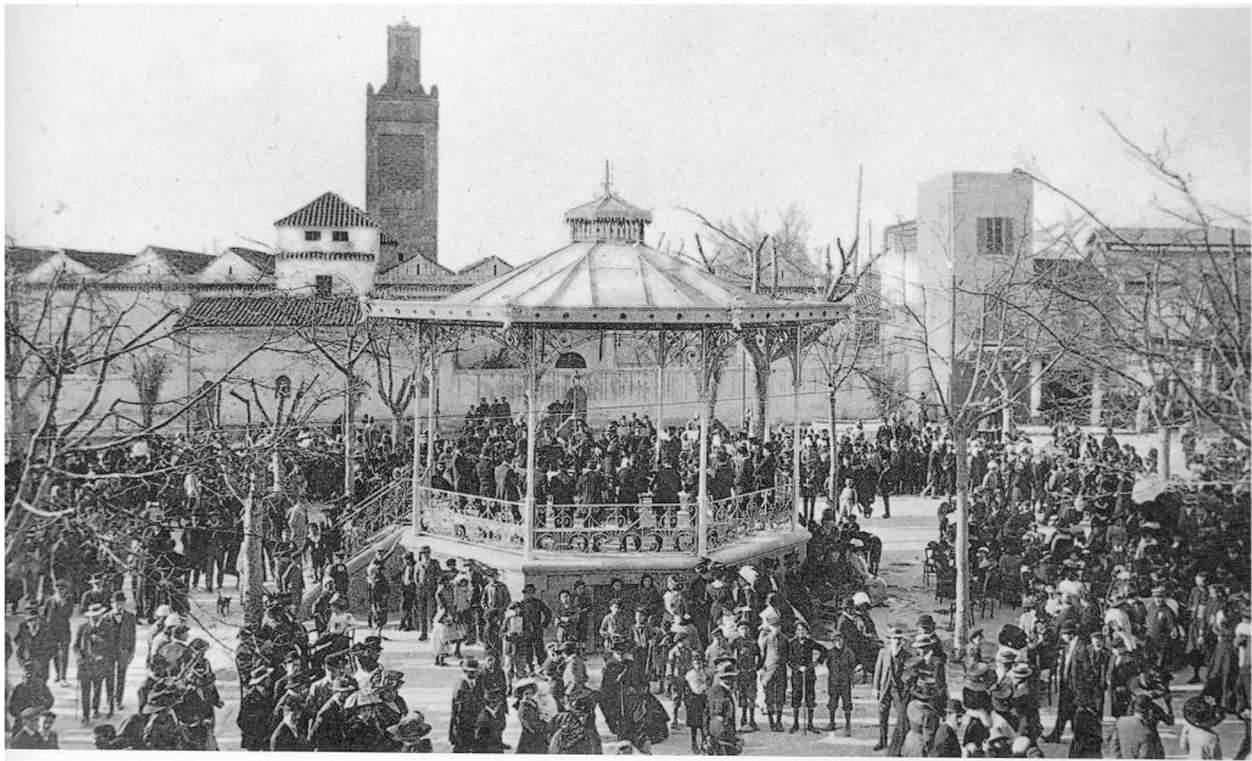
Thus, by intervening in this area, the French touched on what was symbolic in these buildings. They anchored a new symbol in front of the old one with the development of a square to stage it in a dualistic language between two opposing cultures. This space offered a new perspective on the mosque and its surroundings and gradually took on great importance in daily life, as well as a greater prominence than the mosque, which formerly occupied a central place. Objective achieved, more than 60 years after the departure of the French, the square is increasingly attracting interest from users. The historical and cartographic archives of the historic core reveal the realisation of kiosks implanted by the French. Those intended for commerce were placed at the corners while a music pavilion faced the mosque, another strong sign of the desire to implant an imported cultural dimension. This structure, destroyed currently, participated in the animation of the square by broadcasting music, as was the case in other squares and gardens in the country (Fig. 9).

In fact, some of these installations survived the transition of power and culture in 1962, the date of independence, as is the case in Blida and Oran. The streets and boulevard were paved with stone, the edges of the roadway were also in stone, and the surface of the square was based on rectangular stone slabs of grey colour, laid with cement mortar. There has been no intervention in this space since the beginning of the 21st century. It is true that the French intervention on the site considerably modified its image, but this remains a historical fact that is as important as its creation. It is part of its history and fully participates in its cultural richness and diversity.

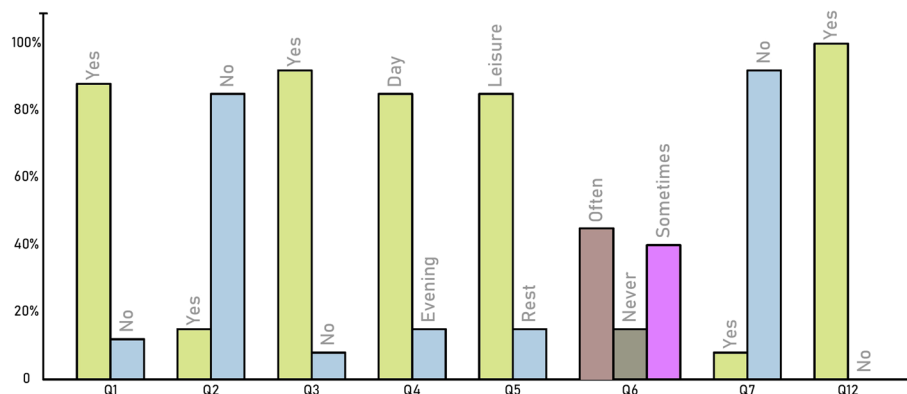
The postindependence period was initially marked by adjustments related to the reclamation of space,

<sup>8</sup> The Algiers metro has changed the relationship between parts of the city that were formerly difficult to access, and the Casbah is now more quickly and massively accessible.





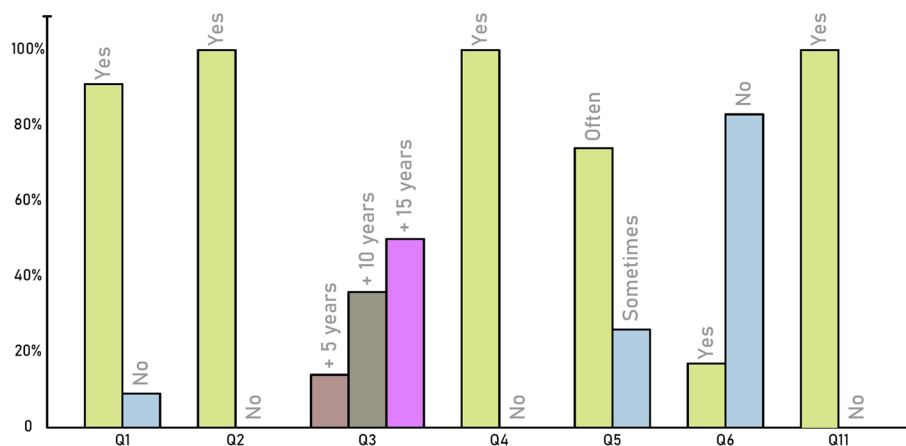
**Fig. 9** The bandstand in front of the Great Mosque of Tlemcen (Source: Tlemcen's City Hall archive)



**Fig. 10** Collected data from the passerby survey, December 2022 (Source: the author)

particularly with the demolition of the bandstand. However, over time, various actions emerged around the mosque and throughout the square, especially among the different businesses that adjusted to current trends and products (clothing, food, and fast food). In 2010, a necessary renewal of the area's image was orchestrated by the authorities in anticipation of hosting an international cultural event one year later. First, the town hall, which had been disused for some time, was converted to house the city museum. This space is dedicated to an exhibition that

traces the evolution of the former Zianide capital since its creation and has been renovated with interventions that encompassed interior design for a museum tour, the installation of lighting and air conditioning networks, and all the equipment dedicated to scenography. However, the measured impact on the population of the area is minor because of its monofunctional characteristic. It currently attracts a public consisting mainly of foreign delegations, a few local tourists, or the rare curious resident interested in the history of the place, and therefore,



**Fig. 11** Collected data from the worker survey, December 2022 (Source: the author)

it rarely contributes to the animation of the area.<sup>9</sup> Our survey among the different people interviewed demonstrates that this activity lacks visibility despite its prime location and advertising signs. The collected responses reveal that the population shows little interest in it or is even unaware of the presence of museum activity inside (Figs. 10 & 11).

## 7 Discussion of the results

We conducted an interview with the Chief of the Technical Service Department of the Directorate of Culture,<sup>10</sup> responsible for the embellishment work in the square, involving a change in pavement and urban furniture. He confirmed that the choice was made to use coloured interlocking pavers (red, yellow, and blue) instead of the original concrete flooring to facilitate potential future archaeological excavations.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, some high-ranking officials believed that the deformed stone sidewalk borders were unsightly and replaced them with new concrete pieces. Furthermore, as part of the same effort, new lamp posts and public benches were installed to rejuvenate the area (Fig. 12).

### 7.1 The link of society with the two squares

The role of the square has also evolved over time. It was initially designed as a space for controlling the area, given that the spatial configuration created by the French

disregarded the visibility of the surroundings and was not conducive to establishing a new authoritarian military regime during the invasion of the city. After stabilising their power, the social component evolved with the integration of settlers into the sociocultural and urban landscape. The need to adapt the urban fabric to the context became imperative, leading to the construction of new buildings and the development of the square, including the construction of a bandstand. From then on, the square changed its purpose, becoming a public space for new occupants and no longer a control zone. As a result, the consumption and use of this space changed its image in the urban landscape. The French recognised it as the square for the town hall, while the indigenous people saw it as the square for the mosque (a concept that had not previously existed), which they considered to be only a place of passage. In reality, the mosque played the role of a public space between prayers, but the French quickly



**Fig. 12** Paving and street furniture installed in 2010, December 2022 (Source: the author)

<sup>9</sup> This museum closes its doors at 5 pm and it remains closed during the weekend and holidays.

<sup>10</sup> See the detailed interview results in Annex 1.

<sup>11</sup> This is one of the directions of the safeguard plan for the medina of Tlemcen, which has not yet officially come into effect; it advocates for the protection of the underground area of the square, including the foundations of Al Madrasa Tashfiniya.

banned these “undercover gatherings” to have total control over the inhabitants. Forced to give in, indigenous residents abandoned this ancestral practice and stopped occupying the mosque between prayer times. The main square of the city has always been the stage for the assertion of power or movements of contestation against it (Kahraman and Türkoğlu 2022), and the mosque became just a place of worship.

At independence, the square was stormed by the liberated population to celebrate the event, and it became one of the anchor points commemorating this space with society, creating a link that has only continued to strengthen. Over time, these anchor points multiplied, and this space became an important part of the lives of the city’s inhabitants, not just those in the neighbourhood. Any event affecting the population was linked to it, whether it was a celebration or a tragedy. The city’s residents shared major events there, such as the passage of an Algerian army convoy exhibiting the body of a notorious terrorist from the region as a trophy, the HIRAK<sup>12</sup> protests whose start and finish were organised there, or the public vaccination campaign against COVID-19 in the summer of 2021, with temporary tents set up in every corner of the square.

The consolidation of this link has redistributed the cards between the role of the square in the eyes of society and the role of the mosque, which has gone from being a place of gathering, consultation, and legitimisation of power to a simple place of worship. This change also resulted from the presence of several mosques in the area, as well as the numerous urban extensions and the construction of new mosques. People whose mode of occupying the square is static emphasise the importance of the mosque’s presence in the landscape, but on the other hand, they admit to spending much more time outside than inside. This importance is primarily linked to the sacred nature of the function and secondarily to the age of the building. However, the mosque’s lack of attractiveness is almost exclusively linked to religious activity, similar to any other mosque during prayer times.

The large square in the city centre even takes over for the mosque during the almost daily funerals held within the mosque, which continue during the procession to the cemetery, where the starting and gathering point is the outdoor space. The mosque thus goes from being a point of absolute convergence on the social, cultural, and urban level to a heritage element furnishing centrality.

## 8 Regulatory approach to the study area

The Great Mosque and its surroundings are part of the PPSDVSS (Permanent plan of safeguarding and development of the safeguarded sectors)<sup>13</sup> of the historic centre of Tlemcen, governed by current law. Currently, this safeguard plan includes a delimitation in its first phase, while guidelines for the management of urban space and heritage properties are pending approval. In the meantime, the management of the area is based on the land use plan designated in the zone, which includes national heritage buildings, such as the Great Mosque and its surroundings, and therefore falls under the protection of Law 98–04 on heritage conservation.

Upon careful examination of these legal texts, we can see that although the surrounding area is defined, it lacks clear guidelines for its management and maintenance. The regulatory provisions are unclear and fail to fill a void that is rapidly filled by common abuses. During our field observation, we quickly realised the glaring gap between the regulation and its practical implementation by the authorities. The promised protection of the surrounding area can be interpreted broadly due to the lack of clarity, leading to growing subjectivity in interventions. The religious factor plays a dominant role in how society views the concept of heritage (Mansouri and Debache 2017), and this use value reinforces their symbolic and physical ownership. However, this assimilation does not include the notion of the surrounding area or make a clear and informed representation of what is included.

In the beginning, the law states, “Historical monuments are defined as any isolated or grouped architectural creation that bears witness to a specific civilisation, a significant evolution, and a historical event. Subsequently, it provides an approach to its surroundings, stating that it is ‘a protection zone that consists of a visibility relationship between the historical monument and its inseparable surroundings. The visibility zone, with a minimum distance set at two hundred (200) metres, can be extended to avoid the destruction of monumental perspectives within this area; its extension is left to the discretion of the Minister of Culture upon the proposal of the National Commission for Cultural Heritage’<sup>14</sup>

Considering this definition, we can highlight the general and basic nature of this approach, which clearly ignores other evaluation criteria (monument size, type, function, urban context, etc.) that we find necessary. The sole criterion of a 200 m zone of retreat is not sufficient

<sup>12</sup> The popular movement that rose against the political regime under the presidency of A. Bouteflika was organised around weekly demonstrations throughout the country, and this went on for several months.

<sup>13</sup> Its delimitation is decreed but its orientation has not entered into force yet.

<sup>14</sup> Article 17, Law No. 98–04 of Safar 20, 1419 correspondent of June 15, 1998 on the protection of cultural heritage. Official Journal of the State. No. 44 of 17 June 1998. P5.





**Fig. 13** The square occupation orchestrated by the public authorities, June 2018 (Source: the author)

to understand and encompass the complexity and subtlety of the situation, which is evident in our case study. The religious factor plays a predominant role in society's perception of heritage (Mansouri and Debache 2017), and this use value reinforces its symbolic and physical appropriation. However, this assimilation refuses to integrate the notion of a physical approach or to provide a clear and informed representation of the protected space.

The law includes provisions and coercive measures (fines ranging from 2000 to 10000 Algerian dinars, a modest sum) regarding the occupation and use of protected cultural properties,<sup>15</sup> but it never extended this consideration to their surroundings. The legal vacuum generally allows some freedom of action, and as the Great Mosque of Tlemcen evolves in its immediate environment, especially the two squares 'Emir Abdelkader' and 'Mohamed Khemisti', the appropriation of the surroundings leads users and occupants to consider their use (setting up makeshift sales tables) or at least their occupation (gatherings & demonstrations). Important considerations also include the production and diversion of the space, their markings, their enhancements, or inversely their stigmatisation (Veschambre 2015) (Fig. 13).

As we have already mentioned, commerce is the main vector of activity in the area, and these events require an update of the square's image to maintain its attractiveness. From a regulatory perspective, all works must be subject to authorisation within the protection

zone,<sup>16</sup> and our investigation reveals that many merchants have carried out modifications authorised by the relevant technical services (confirmed by the chief of the department), aiming, among other things, to modernise their image conveyed primarily by their storefronts. This results in diverse, personalised, and subjective implementations. The absence of clear norms or guidelines on this point in the law has left the field of interpretation open to merchants, whether in terms of morphology (creating various different-sized entrance awnings or coverings), texture (using various types of exterior wall and sidewalk surface coverings), or colour (utilising a wide range of colours according to each merchant's taste) (Fig. 14).

According to the guidelines for the land use zoned for the area, any element that protrudes into the public space is considered part of the public domain, and therefore, these numerous storefronts represent an encroachment on the public thoroughfare and thus a violation of regulations. These exterior forms of cladding are even authorised by the technical services of the prefecture, which is the same organisation responsible for enforcing the regulations in question, as evidenced by a building undergoing façade rehabilitation work with a valid building permit. There is a clear demonstrated flexibility in the application of the regulations that govern public space, as well as in their interpretation, that is rooted even at the level of the authorities.

However, the interviewed merchants emphasise the need for this permanent marking of space, as it allows commercial activity to survive and thrive and, in turn, perpetuates social life in the area. It would be difficult to conceive of the flourishing of these businesses without updates to their built environment. This demonstrates that on the one hand, individualism has taken precedence over civil and state heritage, while on the other hand, the updating and renewal of the image of the place has excluded not only the mosque from the equation but also other strata of history that are widely represented.

This reveals the real perception of the heritage value in the eyes of the users of this space. This voluntary or unconscious lack of integration is also manifested in interventions ordered and executed by state organisations, using brightly coloured and disparate paving stones for the two squares, the choice of Victorian streetlamps that reflect a Western culture, or even the abusive replacement of unique and "old and deformed" stone kerbs over the years, solely on the pretext of giving a new look to the square. This lack of consideration actually shows that the definition of the surroundings of the monument is out of step with regulatory texts. Their

<sup>15</sup> Article 98, Law No. 98-04 of Safar 20, 1419 correspondent of June 15, 1998 on the protection of cultural heritage. Official Journal of the State. No. 44 of 17 June 1998. P13.

<sup>16</sup> Article 21 & 23, Law No. 98-04 of Safar 20, 1419 correspondent of June 15, 1998 on the protection of cultural heritage. Official Journal of the State. No. 44 of 17 June 1998. P4-5.



**Fig. 14** Heterogeneous storefront treatments around the square, December 2022. **A** Difference in texture and applied colour on the shops. **B** Various types of protruding shop awnings, east elevation. **C** Heterogeneity in shapes and colours, as well as the products sold, north elevation. **D** Difference in the treatment of shop façades, south elevation (Source: the author)

implementation remains subject to interpretation or is the result of a certain pressure exerted by current needs, without accounting for the impact of this interpretation and even without having a perspective from which to evaluate a complex situation for an organisation in perpetual change.

## 9 Conclusion

The Great Mosque of Tlemcen continues to evolve in a complex urban context where its surroundings undergo various types of occupations and appropriations, motivated and justified by immediate needs, despite regulations intended to ensure the preservation of the built heritage and its surroundings. The objective of this work is to examine the relationship between the building and its environment, as well as how this relationship is perceived by the population. It relies on the historical analysis of the space through several reference documents combined with a field survey of the users of this space to better understand their perception of the situation.

The relationship between the mosque as a public centre or subsidiary and the function of public space has evolved over time following several parameters, including colonisation, economic growth, and rapid urbanisation, which significantly modify the

perception of the mosque and the spaces that surround it. Urban development coupled with modernisation brings about a change in lifestyles, with a reduction in time allotted for worship to the benefit of new needs, and the spaces surrounding the mosque are turned towards commerce and tourism instead of being purely meeting spaces.

These transformations have had a significant impact on how the mosque is perceived and used by the local population, as it has lost its central role as a space for meeting and sociability and has become a more formal and less interactive space. These changes are also at the origin of the evolution of relationships between public spaces, religion, and society in the city. This has created tensions and conflicts between different uses and perceptions of public spaces and has also raised questions about the balance between the needs of urban development and the preservation of the cultural and religious heritage of the city.

By their desire to implant a new culture or to alter the one that was present, the French, through their various interventions, succeeded in introducing, or rather modifying, the culture of the public square, as confirmed by numerous spaces designed and built in postindependence extensions. Moreover, in the two cases in Tlemcen and Algiers, the French succeeded in defining a space



that ended up taking precedence over the mosque in social and functional terms, with a greater protagonism.

The integration of new interventions into the landscape where the heritage building is situated is a key criterion for alterations because if the heritage building no longer expresses the uniqueness of the whole and reinforces the visual link with its environment, it is because the environment has undergone major changes that considerably alter the authenticity of the place. Despite being instrumentalised by a renewed and revised law, the notion of protected "surroundings" is still rarely accepted by society, which recognises the heritage values of a building by its "sacred value", without mentally and semantically placing it in its environment.

The appropriation of a building or space makes it possible to establish a connection with society through uses and practices, as well as to measure the individual's interest in the object in question. To ensure the transmission of cultural heritage with its values, it is essential to establish a collective recognition of it because in the case of the Great Mosque of Tlemcen and the two squares that border it, instrumentalised heritage preservation remains insufficient. This heritage must be recognised by the community through a concrete desire to safeguard it, which must be clearly reflected in practice.

Our investigation of the users of the place reveals several important points that have contributed to the dissociation of the mosque and its surroundings in terms of heritage recognition, explaining the current state of affairs. First, there is a glaring and growing lack of knowledge and information about the place among users and citizens in general. The memory of the place extends over only a few decades, which does not allow the average citizen to have the necessary temporal perspective for an accurate transmission of its history. This short memory (starting from the 20th century) has already established a conflicting relationship between the place and the Great Mosque, which is now relegated to a status as just another mosque.

The connection that has linked the mosque to the users since that time is primarily religious and spiritual, a strong bond that is expressed punctually in daily practice and allows the mosque to maintain its heritage as legitimised by its religious function. On the other hand, the connection of the place to users is stronger and more varied, thanks to the different events that have taken place there, as well as the nature of the functions and activities that have been happening for generations. As a symbol of activity, the place logically diverts the general interest of occupants to its advantage. The true centre of gravity today is the surroundings and not the mosque itself, and this should be an asset to strengthen and exploit for the valorisation of different heritage buildings.

Furthermore, due to its nature, the religious function offers little variation in terms of the appropriation of space inside the mosque, whereas for the surroundings, there is a variety of ways in which users occupy the space, and this diversity reinforces its attractiveness. This appropriation is expressed through markings that are in defiance of "ethics" and regulations. On the one hand, this demonstrates that there are individualistic considerations that take precedence over the general interest, a growing subjectivity responding to a need opposed to the preservation of the authenticity and harmony of the place. On the other hand, this illustrates the limitations of regulations that are outdated, poorly understood by their enforcers, and easily and effortlessly circumvented without consequences.

Regulations express the importance of preserving heritage buildings but do not establish any control measures or coercive measures over the interventions in their surroundings, while authorities organise and authorise operations and actions that oppose intervention. The current law stops at general guidelines and does not provide any practical system on the ground for managing public space and the surroundings of protected monuments, whether it is for interventions, appropriation, or exploitation. This has a direct consequence on the image of the surroundings. The widespread adoption of a roadmap in this regard for all heritage buildings and their surroundings is a sign of the system's impotence, which is now surpassed in relevance by social and urban changes.

### 9.1 Recommendations

Certainly, the religious role of the mosque remains clear and undisputed in the eyes of all. However, sensitising all stakeholders is necessary to show them the symbolism and cultural and identity values conveyed by these numerous buildings. Beyond the link with the divine, the connection with the building itself must be restored through educational programs, public conferences, or new technologies to introduce the history of the place to a wide audience, using the structure of the city museum just across the street. This awareness is not only the cornerstone for strengthening the heritage value of the mosque but also an affirmation of the heritage value of the surroundings. This would enable a citizen-level understanding and involvement when the government is intervening, issuing authorisations, or enforcing the law in this matter. The objective is to help assimilate the value of the space, giving more legitimacy to the interests of all citizens than to personal interests, which has led to several abuses thus far.

The regulatory aspect plays a predominant role today in the safeguarding and conservation of built heritage and its surroundings. In our case, the current law

was enacted 25 years ago, with no possibility of reform or adaptation to perpetual urban and sociocultural changes. Tools should be put in place to define the surroundings of a monument on a case-by-case basis, incorporating both material and immaterial aspects. These spaces must evolve and prosper while respecting the authenticity of the place and responding to the current needs. This long period should serve as a basis for a new legal approach, prescribing measures tailored to each case, as well as control mechanisms. It is essential to establish strong and deterrent coercive measures to maintain the general public interest and to have specialised units with agents trained for this purpose to ensure effective control. Additionally, it is important to have joint collaboration between urban planning and heritage management services to find a proper balance and ensure the sustainability and authenticity of the sites.

The reconquest of the city centre and its built environment is crucial since the Great Mosque and the different historical buildings evolve in the same ensemble. A plan for urban rehabilitation involving multidisciplinary teams must be put in place. Comfort and safety standards should be updated for the numerous traditional dwellings that are either abandoned or home to squatters, as well as for the deteriorated collective housing from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This action should be followed by an improvement in the quality of the outdoor space, establishing clear norms to ensure interventions that integrate into a coherent and harmonious whole. Improving the quality of life and spaces in the city centre will encourage more citizens to occupy it. Finally, organising regular cultural events in and around the city centre will further enhance the activities at all times.

## 9.2 Limitations of the research

Methodologically, our research encountered resistance from some residents in the area around the two squares and the mosque, who did not respond to our inquiries or requests to visit their deteriorated homes. Including this minority group of actors would have provided additional insights. Furthermore, we would have preferred to conduct in-depth engineering surveys of the walls of the two squares using 3D scanning, but this possibility was rejected by the authorities due to the presence of the offices of a political party and two banks. These results would have allowed us to delve further into the architectural language surrounding the two squares.

### Abbreviation

PPSDSS Permanent plan of safeguard and development of the safeguarded sectors

## Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s43238-023-00109-w>.

### Additional file 1.

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Authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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## Declarations

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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