

Cultural references and aesthetics in the contemporary self-built housing in Tunis

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Formal contemporary architectural production represents only 35 % of the Tunisian built environment (Ammar, 2011) and more than half of the housing is fabricated outside the formal paths of architectural and urban production. The absence of official urban planning and the government incapacity to provide housing for the urban poor since the early twentieth century, have naturally given way for the emergence of the informal settlements (Chabbi, 1986). The former shanty towns (named *gourbivilles* in Tunisia because of the rural *gourbis*, poor inhabitations made of dry land and bough) evolved into permanent dwellings made of concrete and bricks, further to the progressive improvement of the living conditions and the State's later supply of basic services and sanitary infrastructures (Sethom, 1995).

The inhabitants-builders thus constructed progressively their individual houses, decorating the domestic space as well as the façades and its surroundings. In (Deboulet, 1994) Deboulet defended the idea that the inhabitants of informal areas in Cairo had the capacity to build their own frame of life, by considering it as a town planning of popular emanation. In Cairo as well as in Tunis and in other cities of the global south, it led to new aesthetics based on an original writing of the traditional and international registers that break with the formal learned culture and the canons of architecture. Based on my personal experience in Tunis, the informal settlements' appearance is criticised by the professional architects and the urban planners - as well as the upper social classes - denouncing the dislocation of the aesthetical look of the urban landscape and considering it as illegitimate. In the absence of official and normative prescriptions of private housing aesthetics, the inhabitants compose, add and rewrite the arrangements of the façades and the intermediate spaces. Cheap consumer markets located inside or near these districts provide the necessary products to make such arrangements.

The capacities of action of the inhabitants in the manufacturing of their own aesthetics has improved these last decades, due to the increasing of the educational levels, urban mobility and the circulation of architectural images in the medias. The limits separating on one side the legitimate learned aesthetics and the illegitimate vernacular aesthetics on the other, is becoming increasingly blurred. The learned aesthetics is the one that has been legitimized by time; coming from a formal architectural process of production, or a former traditional vernacular production that has been analysed and listed in the treaties of Arab-Muslim art and architecture (Revault, 1967 ; Revault, 1971 ; Marçais, 1926 ; Saladin,

1908). The illegitimate aesthetics refers to the ones of the informal districts. It could be qualified as popular aesthetics, even if the outlines of this term remain insufficiently defined by the scientific literature.

The fact that the inhabitants settled in urban areas aspire to signify their belonging to the city is translated by the appropriation and the manipulation of signs of decoration on the urban facades. It is an expression of urbanity, indicated as a "way of being in the city and of the city" (Belguidoum et al., 2015) that is made through dynamic relations between the representations and the practices that allow them "to build themselves as city-dwellers and to act in and on the city" (Navez-Bouchanine, 1997). The sets of actions operated by the inhabitants in the construction of an urban identity constitute as many skills to make their built environment, most of the time with limited resources.

Number of modifications arose in the housing environment in Tunis since the decolonization, particularly in the building forms. As an example, terraces and balconies overlooking the street, which did not exist about sixty years ago, are today perceived as indicators of social rise, thus bringing a new way to relate with the public space. Also the use of tiles, arcs and columns to decorate the openings are some signs of the facades' urbanization that contributed to create a new stylistic language made of recoveries and imitations.

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