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Zeynep Celik. *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations: Algiers Under French Rule*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. xiv + 236 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-20457-7.

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Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations

In her study of French colonial urbanism, Gwendolyn Wright states that much can be learned “about the European response to imperialism by focusing on French colonial cities. The widespread endorsement of colonialism had as much to do with culture and imagery as it did with economic advantage and political strength.”[1] Zeynep Celik has taken up the challenge of this hypothesis by concentrating her attention on Algiers under French rule. The result is a detailed examination of the way in which the architecture and urban forms of the capital city of France’s longest-standing and most important colony contributed to imposing and perpetrating a colonial identity on Algeria.

Cultural imperialism, practically an uncharted territory two decades ago, is now a bustling division of historical activity. Colonial urbanism is just one of its subdivisions. Celik’s contribution to this literature is to focus on one particular colonial city. Using the case of urban design, the book reiterates many of the well-worn themes found in any analysis of cultural imperialism: the use of colonial projects to establish and express power and control over local populations; the importance of ethnography in the colonial enterprise; the ways and means, intentional or inadvertent, of marginalizing local populations; the promotion of the concept of “the Other” (in this case the indigenous population).

Its originality lies in the narrowness of its subject, namely Algiers. Algiers was not just any colonial city, it was the leading city of what France considered to be its Southern Mediterranean “*departements*.” Whatever the

local population may have thought, from 1848 onwards the city was considered to be “French”, with the added bonus of an exotic ambience. The urban transformation of the city therefore had a dimension which other French cities did not have.

While the French architect Joseph Marrast could, in 1920, claim that his respect and use of Moroccan-style architecture in Casablanca would “conquer the fears of the natives and win their affection” (Wright p. 1), as far as Algeria was concerned any consideration of the sensibilities of the local population, in the 19th century at least, was more from anxiety about possible unrest than from a desire to win its affection. Hence, Celik tells us that the architect (identified merely as Luvini) who put forward the first proposal for the *place du Gouvernement* shortly after conquest in 1830 felt little compunction at suggesting the demolition of the al-Jadid and al-Sayyida mosques to clear the area for construction. Eventually the latter was torn down and the former, left standing to appease the religious sentiments of the Arab population. This was at the insistence of one Colonel Lemercier (about whom we are told nothing and whose role in Algiers is left entirely to the reader’s imagination).

By 1855 major alterations of the city were under way. Among the new thoroughfares was the rue de la Lyre. “Its architectural qualities made it especially significant to the French as a reminder of the Rue de Rivoli, a cherished fragment from Paris now implanted in Algiers” (p. 37). A corner of France was being constructed in Algeria. The one area of the city which remained relatively intact,

was the casbah. Not only were “interventions in the casbah relatively few”, but it was considered to be exotically enchanting and historically interesting. In short, it was in the interests of French administrators to preserve the casbah as a tourist attraction and this they did.

Celik’s monograph is, therefore, a presentation of these parallel endeavours, namely the creation of a French urban environment and the preservation of the “mythical” casbah. Inevitably the former eventually encroached upon the latter and this too features in the account. In the first two chapters Celik situates her material and blocks out the background of French urbanism in Algeria, drawing attention to its close ties with developments in the metropolis. In the following three chapters she examines in detail the question of “indigenous” housing policies and design and the altering shape of the city at different stages of its development. The epilogue is a discussion of the predominant trends in urbanism and housing since independence.

Celik’s goal is to “gain a better understanding of architectural and urban forms by situating them in their historical, political and cultural contexts” and she sets out to achieve this through the use of inter-disciplinary source material, “particularly ethnography” (p. 6). The monograph has a good selection of illustrations and plans. The select bibliography is amplified by material in the footnotes.

One of the most interesting aspects of the book is the discussion of the way spatial and architectural forms were used to segregate Algerians from Europeans. Be it the belief that horizontal housing was more suited to the Muslim population and vertical to the European, or that the Algerian accustomed to the interior courts and inward looking spaces of his traditional house would find European lay-outs awkward, urban planning effectively cordoned off the Muslims. Whether this was in the form of respect for Muslim sensibilities, as was initially the case, or in the form of policies which ignored such sensibilities, was irrelevant. The result was the same: the Muslims were short-changed in their housing. The endeavour to accommodate cultural difference or maintain the “exotic” dimension of Arab living quarters nearly always translated into inadequate sanitation, small kitchens, and cramped living quarters.

The myth of the casbah, the heart of Muslim Algiers, is another noteworthy point. In this context Celik also discusses gendering as a colonial tool. “The gendering of Algerian society,” she states, “became blatantly referential to power structure” (p. 22). As all that was feminized

had to do with the colonized, what was construed as feminine carried with it not only the connotation of difference to the inferred masculinity of the colonizer but also of subordination. The casbah exemplified this subordination. “It was colonialism that framed the casbah with certain concepts (gender, mystery and difference), which in turn shaped colonial policies regarding the casbah” (p. 21). In explaining these three concepts Celik is least convincing with regard to gender.

In the first place, Celik’s choice of sources to illustrate her argument is unsatisfactory. She relies on the travelogues of Dr. Marius Bernard, and the works of the architect Edouard Le Corbusier and the novelist Lucienne Favre. Of these only Favre’s is specifically about the casbah; Bernard’s and Le Corbusier’s are about the city of Algiers (although one quotation from the latter does include the casbah). Furthermore, all quotes come from works published between 1893 and 1950.[2] The point is that the encircling of the casbah by Parisian-style boulevards, of which the rue de Lyre was but the most nostalgic example, started in the 1840s (p. 37). The gendering of the casbah was one of the conceptual tools shaping colonial urban policies which differentiated between the Muslim and European districts in urban planning, according to Cecik. It is misleading to imply that this gendering was merely of the Muslim casbah, and was therefore a way of psychologically diminishing the urban space of the colonized when the quotations provided by the author to support her argument concern Algiers *as a whole*. Moreover, the quotations are taken from works written at the end of the 19th or in the 20th century, when Algiers was no longer merely a “Muslim” city, but a markedly French one. To confuse the issue further, the author’s analysis of the gendering of the casbah comes at the beginning of her book when she is discussing developments after conquest (1830).

Secondly, the gendering of cities is a common literary device. From biblical times to the present, the city has been portrayed as a woman, often in overtly sexual terms.[3] The casbah as an example of gendering as a colonial tool is therefore deceptive. A more rounded picture of the gendering of cities in general would have put a different perspective on that of Algiers, to say nothing of the casbah. Casbah means citadel in Arabic. It might have been more fruitful to explore this aspect of its imagery, as a citadel of resistance, in the colonized/colonizer urban relationship than the more ubiquitous one of gendering.

Far more successful, in this domain, are the author’s

arguments concerning the gendering of private space in connection to colonial urban policy. The “interiority,” as Celik puts it (p. 104), of the traditional Muslim home, as described above, and the French desire to perpetrate this tradition was tied to the image of the enclaved Muslim woman who was simultaneously mysterious and unliberated. Even when Algerian women’s active participation in the war of independence called this image into question, French architects, urban planners and policy makers refused to acknowledge the change (p. 178). To be sure, the circumstances of war were hardly conducive to a radical reassessment of such positions, but it is still a measure of how entrenched certain colonial tropes had become.

In her discussions on Algerian ethnography and its connections to the construction of colonial policy on the indigenous habitat, especially in the rural setting, Celik would have done better to go directly to the primary sources rather than rely on Philippe Lucas and Jean-Claude Vatin’s *L’Algerie des anthropologues*, a compilation of annotated extracts which reflect the authors’ unnuanced view of the links between colonialism and anthropology.[4] Celik starts with Emile Masquery’s classic on the Kabyles (or the sedentary people of the mountains of Kabylia), but his work was preceded by others which are also relevant to her subject and to her discussion of the links between the rural and urban indigenous habitat as viewed by the French.[5]

Ernest Carette’s two-volume work on Kabylia (1848) predates Masquery’s by 38 years and contains discussions of public and private buildings and links the art of building to the notion of progress in civilization.[6] Other early ethnographers such as Eugene Dumas, Henri Aucapitaine, and Charles Richard also broached the question of indigenous habitats. To be sure, these ethnographers were military men, but their work was important both officially and unofficially in the creation of colonial discourses on the indigenous population. The most significant being the antithesis between the sedentary Kabyle and the nomadic Arab and the suggestion that the former was a better candidate for assimilation than the latter.

Indeed, one of the many reasons why the Kabyles were considered more assimilable was the “advanced” nature of their rural dwellings, constructed in stone, in contrast to those of the rural Arabs whose nomadic lifestyle favored the tent. In the 19th century comparisons of Arab and Kabyle an especially interesting omission is that of the urban Arab, who was as sedentary as

the Kabyle and whose dwellings were certainly as sophisticated. What, if anything, was it about the urban space which precluded such a comparison? A look at some of these earlier documents might have produced some rewarding material.

As far as urban policies go, Celik divides French rule into three periods, 1830-1930, 1930-1945 and 1945-1962. Her discussion of the urban projects and plans devised for the city during each period is comprehensive. What is not always clear is which projects were shelved and which were implemented, for example, in the section on urban housing in chapter four. Indecision and inconsistency were features of many aspects of colonial policy in Algeria. Perhaps the same was true of urban policy. Knowledge of which plans actually reached fruition would have helped to clarify the extent to which colonial urbanization followed this pattern of indecision and inconsistency.

Celik’s monograph is a useful contribution to the study of colonial urban history and to the ever-growing literature on cultural imperialism. Its value lies in the way she demonstrates just how subtle this type of imperialism could be and the way in which it intersected at all levels of a given field. Her detailed discussions of the urban planning of Algiers also sheds light on an unexplored area of colonial policy. It is a welcome addition to the growing literature in English on colonial Algeria.

Notes

[1]. Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Urban colonialism* (Chicago, 1991), p. 303.

[2]. Marius Bernard, *Autour de la Mediterranee*: vol. I *de Tripoli a Tunis*; vol. II *de Tunis a Alger*; vol. III *d’Alger a Tanger* [from which Celik quotes] (Paris, 1893); Lucienne Favre, *Tout l’inconnue de la casbah d’Alger* (Algiers, 1933); Le Corbusier, *La ville radieuse* (Paris, 1933); *Poesie sur Alger* (Paris, 1950).

[3]. Some examples: Babylon, the mother of harlots, and Jerusalem, a bride adorned: (*The Book of Revelations*); Venice, a maiden...bright and free: (William Wordsworth); Paris, _jeune veuve batarde et interlopee (Mourad Bourboune). Even the realist Emile Zola used his courtesan Nana to symbolize Paris of the Second Empire in his novel of the same name.

[4]. Philippe Lucas and Jean-Claude Vatin, *L’Algerie des anthropologues* (Paris, 1975).

[5]. Emile Masquery, *La Formation des cites chez*

les populations sedentaires de l'Algerie (Kabyles du Djurdjura, Chaouia de l'Aures, Beni-M'zab) (Paris, 1886). The Kabyles were Berbers from the mountains of Kabylia, which include the Djurdjura, the Biban and the Guergour ranges.

[6]. Antoine Ernest Hippolyte Carette, *Etudes sur la*

Kabilie (sic) Proprement Dite, 2 vols. (Paris, 1848), I, p. 217.

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