

Commentary**European Diaspora in Moroccan Medinas: Riads & Spas and the formation of New Hybrid Heritage****Magda Sibley***

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The rapid restructuring of space and time in the last three decades brought about by technological advances in telecommunications, transportation, and ‘information’ have led to the popular conception of the “Global Village” in a shrinking world. In such a highly connected world with rapid data transfer and easy and affordable air travel, the few hours air access of Europeans to the Southern countries of the Mediterranean has never been easier. While strong migratory movements from the South Mediterranean shores to Europe continue to claim the lives of young unemployed adults who cross illegally the Mediterranean in search of better living conditions, another migratory movement in the opposite direction has been taking place since the 1990’s. Millions of Europeans have been crossing the Mediterranean Sea to enjoy the warmer Southern Mediterranean climate and the higher affordability of more comfortable retirement lifestyles. These ‘lifestyle’ or ‘wellbeing’ migrants, mostly from Europe and the United States, have reversed the South to North migration pattern. As capital has freed itself from spatial constraints, many retired Europeans have been attracted to the Moroccan UNESCO world heritage cities to purchase derelict courtyards houses (occupied by low-income families who are paid to leave the places) in order to turn them into their orientalist dream of” a little palace with servants.” Known today as Riad, meaning garden in Arabic and originally referring to the large houses with a large inner courtyard garden with citrus trees, the word has been used to encompass all courtyard houses whether small or large with or without an internal garden, all of which have been transformed into private residences or guest houses by their expatriate owners. The riad phenomenon took its roots in the early 1990s in cities such as Essaouira and

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Marrakech and expanded few years later to other Moroccan heritage cities such as Fez, (Esher and Peterman, 2001).

This was the second wave of major changes in the social composition of the Moroccan medinas since the end of the French Protectorate in 1956 when wealthy Moroccans left their courtyards houses in the old cities and moved to apartments and villas in the residential quarters of the French colonial cities of Morocco.

A major migration of wealthy families moving from the medinas of Fez and Marrakech to Rabat and Casablanca (the respectively political and economic capitals of Morocco) took place in the late 1950's and 1960's, leading to a progressive change in the social composition of the Moroccan walled heritage cities. These latter were then occupied by poor families migrating from the rural areas, in search of employment, education for their children and better living conditions. This resulted in a progressive increase in the medinas' population densities and a rapid process of deterioration and decay of their urban fabric. The medina courtyard houses, vacated by their original owners, provided an opportunity of cheap accommodation for poor rural families, renting a room or two and sharing the courtyard house with other families. The adaptive transformations of the houses into single family units led to an accelerated degradation the majority of the urban fabric of the medina (Sibley 2011). The 1980's witnessed a crisis of highly dense occupation of the medinas with an advanced state of decay and poverty.

The social makeup up of the medinas had therefore changed dramatically in the three decades that followed the end of the French Protectorate (1950's- 1980's). Furthermore, the complicated legal status of many of the heritage courtyard houses due to multi-family ownership inheritance, combined with the abandonment, in many cases, of the original owners who never showed an interest in their decaying medina houses. Despite the inscription of Fez in 1981, and Marrakech in 1985 onto the UNESCO World heritage list, the number of buildings in threat of collapse continued to increase and the transformation of the medinas' heritage buildings was well underway. ADER-Fes, a government agency under the Moroccan Ministry of Internal Affairs, was set up in 1989 to address the emerging challenges related to the rehabilitation of the medina of Fez and reduce the population density. Major projects of rehabilitation were focusing on large monuments such as mosques, madrassas, fandouks and public fountains while

what forms most of the urban fabric, i.e., the courtyard houses, did not benefit from any programmes of rehabilitation until whole clusters of houses were in a situation of imminent collapse. In 1999, the World Bank signed an agreement with ADER-Fes to work on a large-scale intervention in the historic area of Fez. Preliminary studies and proposals acknowledged that the reason for the decay of the area was due to the *"impoverishment of the resident population, flight of the middle-class and of investors, long-term abandonment of the housing stock and related low real estate values, degraded public spaces and services."* (The World Bank 2006, 2)

In 2017, twenty-seven key monuments had been restored, with funding from the World Bank and other supporters. By the end of 2018, 3,370 buildings, some in danger of collapse, had been made safe. The scale of decay was apparent to the tourist eye as most of the houses were left with scaffolding shoring them up and preventing their collapse. In an interview conducted by the author with a local resident in Fez in 2008, the medina was described *"as an old lady with a stick"*. ADER -Fez played an important role in the implementation of various rehabilitation projects funded by the World bank and others. Furthermore, the instigation in 1994 of the yearly Fez International Sacred Music Festival and the connection of the extended Fez Airport to major international airports in Europe through low budget airlines played a key role in putting Fez on the map of International tourism and accelerated the riad phenomenon. Indeed, the Festival event advertises a selection of 49 riads as illustrated on the following website <https://www.fez-riads.com/>. However, the number of riads scattered in different parts of the designated world heritage medina of Fez had exceeded the 150 boutique hotels in 2012 (Sutton, 2012, p.33)

In Marrakech, in contrast, no governmental institution like ADER- Fez was created as the city had already embarked onto a real estate foreign market that was prospering with no restrictions on the restoration of the heritage courtyard houses. Unlike Fez, Marrakech medina has a flat topography with easier access to its historic core and attracts a much larger influx of tourists and foreign funds. It was estimated that by September 1999 that more than 150 riads in Marrakech were occupied by western foreigners. Most of these riads were initially located within the inner periphery of the walled medina because of ease for car accessibility from the famous Jemaa el-Fna square, the main cultural space of the city since its foundation in the eleventh century

and inscribed into the UNESCO world heritage list for its intangible heritage in 2008. Kalaska estimated that by 2008 there were approximately 450 guesthouses in the Medina of Marrakech, 70 percent of which were owned by foreigners of European origin (Kalaska, 2015, p.6).

Tourism in Morocco is considered as an engine for economic growth. In 2011, it accounted for 8.9 percent of the country's GDP and directly contributed to 7.8 percent of total employment (Bouzahzah and El Menyari, 2013). Foreign investment was seen as desirable because it created jobs and offered an opportunity for cultural tourism based on the rehabilitation/ transformation of the historic courtyard houses of Marrakech and Essaouira, where local authorities simplified legal processes for foreigners seeking the ownership of the Riad in the century old medina (Lee, 2008).

A "gentrification by capital" process accelerated through cultural tourism has allowed investment into previously un-gentrified areas of existing local communities and introduced globalising forces that will eventually alter the characteristics of both tangible intangible Moroccan medina heritage. As argued by Borghi and Minca in 2009, "*The rehabilitation of riads include the modification of urban cultures, spatial fragmentation and residential segregation, rising housing prices, lack of regulation in renovation, and the sexual behavior of tourists*" (Borghi and Minca, 2009). Field work observations conducted in Marrakech in February of each of 2016, 2017 and 2018, allowed the author to follow some of transformations that were taking place in Marrakech over a period of three years. Major changes have been recorded in the way the original heritage of the medina's residential quarters with their inward-looking courtyard houses and associated public baths (hammams) were transformed into a new hybrid heritage shaped by local and global forces in the name of cultural tourism. As described by Escher, "*The Medina in Morocco is not the city anymore whose only purpose is to give the material framework for an everyday life within a Moroccan social order, but it is a city that serves numerous Europeans as a stage for post-modern life fulfilment.*" (Escher, 2006.p.350)

The traditional Moroccan hammam, which in the past allowed tourists to mingle with the locals and experience a genuine Moroccan way of community life, has been transformed into a "the spa", a gentrified space of well-being that automatically

excludes those who cannot afford it and is based on a solitary experience rather than on a community one. In such a process, the century old heritage hammam is transformed into an orientalist dream space of luxury and opulence, the opposite of its original minimalist vernacular architecture. At the same time, the originally highly decorated courtyard houses with their multicoloured patterns of ceramic tiles and Zellidje are transformed with minimalist luxurious interior design. Such transformations led by a taste for interior design that is mainly European are also reflected in the type of goods produced by local craftsman and which one can observe while walking in the souk of Marrakech or Fez. The proliferation of “modern versions “of Moroccan potteries, rugs, fabrics, lighting accessories and decorations that have replaced the original local authentic traditional has been taking place in parallel with the riad phenomenon. These hybrid design goods have also found their way into the shops of European cities as well as inspiring designers of IKEA products. The manifestation of global and local (Glocal) forces is evident in the formation of a new hybrid heritage.

The Moroccan medinas continue today to witness an unprecedented socio-spatial restructuring with an advanced level of gentrification and exclusion brought about by the microprocesses of the riad phenomenon, located at the intersection of capitalist urban development and cultural heritage preservation. There are no more Fassi or Marrakchi roots to life in the Medina. As heritage moves from being associated with a community's history and identity, to becoming a consumable product, the approach to the preservation and conservation of the built fabric and historic areas is changing (Orbasli 2000 p.10). How to engage heritage in economic development without endangering its non-economic value remains a question that is difficult to answer.

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