

II The Casbah of Algiers: An Urgent Problem of Conservation

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The Casbah of Algiers dates to the seventeenth century, and was originally structured along two streets which led to the Higher and Lower Casbah and to the *sūq*. Major transformations to the compact structure of the madina occurred primarily between 1830 and 1870, when the *sūq* was expanded into an arcaded boulevard, and around 1940 a large portion of the Lower Casbah was destroyed when apartment blocks replaced the traditional patio houses.

The Casbah suffers from the structural isolation imposed by the presence of new roads cutting across old lots. Entry into the madina is now made through undefined and largely ruined spaces which constitute a veritable slum. The destruction of many buildings has weakened the horizontal linkage of the town, leaving empty holes in the urban fabric. Filling these holes would intensify the already serious density problem created by the influx of newly urbanized rural masses.

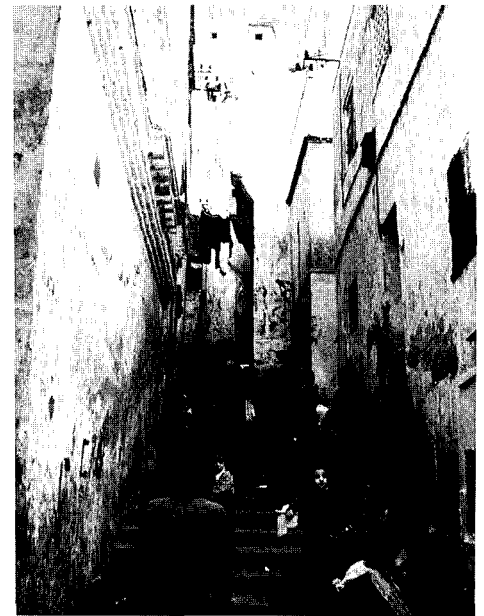
Ideally, these holes should be filled by new community structures and public institutions which are badly needed. Of 130 mosques in the city a century ago, there remain only ten. From the same number of public baths, only half a dozen are left. A comparable decimation has reduced the numbers of shrines, fountains and other meaningful architectural elements. In other words, a total urban structure which fulfilled all the cultural and social needs of its community has all but disappeared.

The residential areas have also suffered. The single cluster of traditional houses preserved as a remembrance of the old city yields an opportunity to compare the old with the new. The new residential units, some forty percent of the buildings in the Casbah, decay more quickly than the old patio houses. They alter the street scale and therefore the human scale, but their contiguity with the remaining older houses makes it impossible to remove them without compromising the entire quality of the street.

Formerly, the typical Lower Casbah house was large, with two-story rooms. Some of these are well maintained—two have been

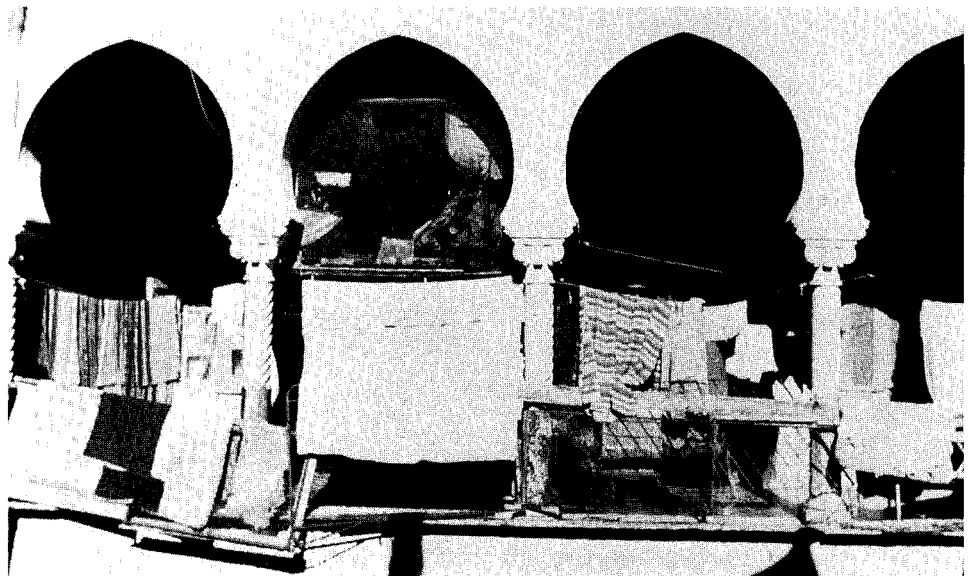
converted into museums—while others, such as an old palace, are now overpopulated with as many as twenty families. The Higher Casbah was always characterized by smaller houses, and now by an enormous population density problem.

Certain steps ought to be taken to make the rehabilitation of the Casbah operational. The first step would be a survey and inventory of the existing buildings; next is a selection of what is to be preserved. A typological analysis of houses and other monuments should be used as a major source for future design. Finally, an open and participatory approach to reuse should be employed. Present inhabitants or newcomers should be encouraged to take over the care of their houses and to make changes in them within the minimal framework suggested by the professionals. The Casbah is the sole heritage of the pre-colonial history of Algiers, but it has become a slum like so many old urban centres. It demands and it deserves our concerted efforts.



Algiers, Algeria: stairway in the Casbah

Photo: N. Faghih



Algiers, Algeria: upper level of a courtyard house in the Casbah

Photo: N. Faghih