

The Impasse, Social Impact And Significance In The Arab-Muslim city, case of The Medina Of Constantine



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Abstract

Throughout urban history, the spatial configuration of cities has obeyed criteria that have shaped it according to the societies that have inhabited them. The dead end; this space with various connotations showed attributes that can be found at different times, revealed remarkable socio-spatial qualities. Through the quality of social receptacle that the impasse ensured the experiences lived by the inhabitants of the medina of Constantine, with whom we carried out a survey which highlighted the role and place of the impasse where relations of sociability, solidarity and mutual aid were essential.

Keywords

Dead-end ;
Social impact;
Medina;
Threshold.

الكلمات المفتاحية

طريق غير نافذ ؛
التأثير الاجتماعي،
المدينة ؛
عتبة.

الطريق الغير نافذ، الأثر الاجتماعي والمعاني في المدينة العربية الإسلامية: حالة مدينة قسنطينة

ملخص

على مدار التاريخ الحضري، خضع التكوين المكاني للمدن للمعايير التي شكلتها وفقاً للمجتمعات التي سكنتها. الطريق الغير نافذ؛ أظهر هذا الفضاء ذو الدلالات المختلفة سمات يمكن العثور عليها في أوقات مختلفة، وكشفت عن صفات اجتماعية مكانية رائعة. من خلال نوعية الوعاء الاجتماعي الذي ضمن الطريق الغير نافذ التجارب التي عاشها سكان مدينة قسنطينة، الذين أجرينا معهم دراسة استقصائية سلطت الضوء على دور ومكان الطريق الغير نافذ حيث كانت علاقات التواصل الاجتماعي والتضامن والمساعدة المتبادلة معمول بها.

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I. Introduction:

The morphological character of a city is determined by the interplay of contrasting elements such as fullness and emptiness, constructed and undeveloped areas, openness and enclosure, covered and exposed spaces, as well as density and spaciousness. A community or civilization creates and arranges a physical area based on its ideas, traditions, and customs, resulting in a living environment with breaks, gaps, and changes. The dead end, as a physical component of the city, presents several issues due to its diverse formal, bioclimatic, semiotic, and sociological qualities, which contribute to spatial division. Each perspective we use when approaching the dead end provides us with valuable insights on its unique characteristics.

Regarding its formal and physical attributes, the dead end commonly found in Arab-Muslim cities has sometimes been regarded as illogical and attributed to disorder or even an urban irregularity. Nevertheless, its status as the final point of the road network is unequivocal. The connection to the residential sections is a logical one, following the notion of road and space hierarchy, progressing from the most public to the most private. According to Moreau, P., a road is a dead end that serves the goal of communication between two distinct and contrasting areas or spaces, namely the public and the private¹. It is in this intermediary area that the sacred and the profane come into contact, forming a threshold that serves a wide range of tasks, from the simplest to the most complicated. This convergence of functions encompasses various specificities. The dead end is deliberately incorporated into the urban structure of our cities, not as an abnormal element but rather as a controlling component that plays a significant role in the overall design of the urban fabric. Ultimately, we encounter the same obstacle again, but this time in the realm of social interactions, which brings numerous benefits to neighborhood relations. It provides a unique spatial characteristic of seclusion, even exclusivity, allowing residents to freely engage in exchanges and fully appreciate this inward focus. The significance of dead ends in the urban structure of cities changes throughout different civilizations. For each civilization, dead ends are considered an essential aspect whose importance is unquestionable, transitioning from being useful to becoming necessary. To enhance our understanding of the social significance of dead ends and to explore the social processes and symbolic implications associated with them, we propose the following research inquiries:

1. Is there a factual basis for the characteristics ascribed to dead ends in literature and the collective imagination? What would be their inherent characteristics?
2. Does the dead end, situated between permeability and withdrawal, still function as a site of sociability in the urban fabric?

In order to address these inquiries, we will establish the subsequent hypothesis:

In addition to its cultural and communal significance, the dead end possesses socio-spatial and semiotic attributes that make it a filter and catalyst for social and perceptual relationships in functioning cities. To explore this, we conducted an urban historiography to examine the various forms of dead ends in different civilizations. This analysis revealed the different aspects that shape the physical (urban) characteristics and the communal life within these spaces. These aspects encompass a wide range of activities, from simple children's games to the social connections maintained by the residents.

I.1 The Dead End In Urban Historiography

The dead end, this recurrent element (phenomenon) in the urban domain is found in different civilizations and at different times²; in fact, from the first cities to the present day, we find this element is present in the road network; its mode of production and creation varies, in fact, from one civilization to another, and the status conferred on depends on the social rank of its occupants.³

For the Pharaonic Egyptian civilization, the city of Hotepsenusret (Kahun, twelfth Dynasty; Middle Kingdom) in the Fayum as well as the city of Akhetaten (Amarna-Egypt) reveal particular road layouts revealing the existence of dead-end roads that can be recognized in the following illustrations (Fig 1 & Fig 2).

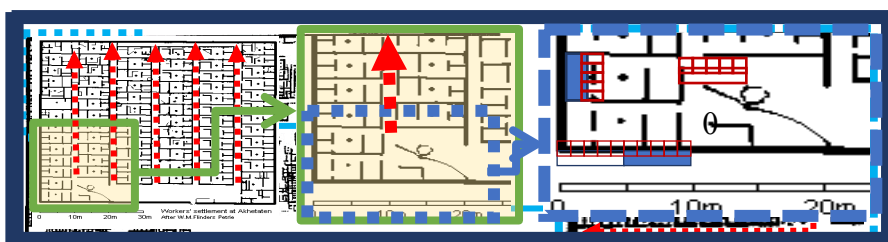


Figure 2: The workers' settlement in the city of Akhetaten (Amarna-Egypt) treatment: Author

Figure 1: The City of Hotepsenusret (Kahun, 12th Dynasty; Middle Kingdom) in the Fayum treatment: Author

According to Kuilman, the main streets had a width of 09 m, while the streets in the residential areas were only 1.5 m wide. For Kuilman, the working-class districts, separated from the more affluent districts and located in the western part of the city, were characterized by dead-end streets, and the author also notes the presence of traces of a temple on the south-western side⁴. What is apparent from the documents of the Pharaonic period working-class housing is not only the existence of dead-end roads

serving the dwellings, but also the dimensions allocated to these roads as well as those allocated to the dwellings. Approximately 1.5m wide by 60 to 70m deep, serving more than twenty dwellings (24 to 28), which makes them very cramped, even unhealthy spaces.⁵

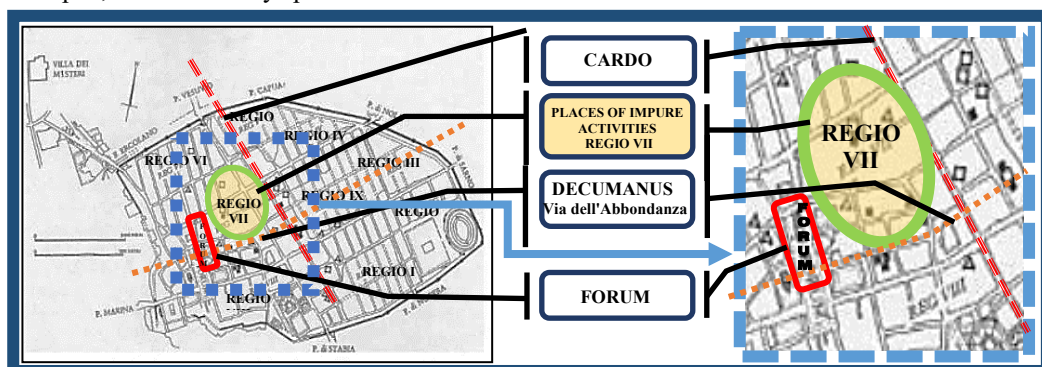
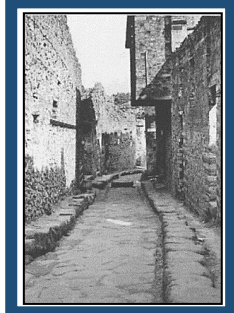


Figure 3: Map of Pompeii Distribution of places of impure activities.

▲ lupanar; ■ cella meretricia; □ private house supposedly lupanar
Source: [T.J.Cornell and Kathryn Lomas. Urban Society in Roman Italy

Figure 4: Alleyway in the Pompeii Impure Business Zone
Source: [T.J.Cornell and Kathryn Lomas. Urban Society in Roman Italy treatment: Author



As far as Roman cities are concerned, Andrew Wallace-Hadrill brings us particular information on a study of Pompeii (Fig 3). Opposite of the remarkable, regular, symmetrical open spaces of the forum or of the upper Via dell'Abbondanza (street of abundance), precisely to the east of the forum, at the level of the irregularly shaped blocks of the Regio VII, one finds a concentration of the activities most

strictly excluded from the parade center. This concentration of impure activities is kept away from the center and sent to the narrow, dark and winding streets at the back, in another discreet and hidden area. These are never on the wide main roads, but are hidden in the narrow alleys and dead ends (angiportus) ⁶ (Fig 4).

The Arab-Muslim civilization has made an important contribution to the production of dead ends in urban areas, especially since the majority of the cities generated by this civilization were large urban centers with significant human concentrations and equally significant building densities (one of the factors in the creation of dead ends as penetrators of residential areas). Moreover, according to Mazzoli-Guintard, the idea of a hierarchical system of traffic routes, induced by a certain number of cases, was then systematized⁷. The modes of prioritization of the road network, both for the Egyptian (Pharaohs) and Roman cities and for the cities of Muslim obedience, seem to be similar in appearance, but do not appear to have obeyed the same production logic. Indeed, for the former, the dead ends were intended to serve the dwellings of the lower classes and therefore constituted a reference in terms of social rank.

On the other hand, the dead ends found in Muslim cities obeyed other degrees of hierarchy insofar this last portion of the road network represented a major element of transition between the public zone and the residential neighborhoods⁸.

We have taken the case of the Medina of Constantine⁹ as an example, where we have some dead ends with quite significant characteristics showing how they ensure the termination of the road network by penetrating the blocks of houses, thus constituting a clear threshold between the public and the private zone. These dead ends are presented as follows (Fig 5).

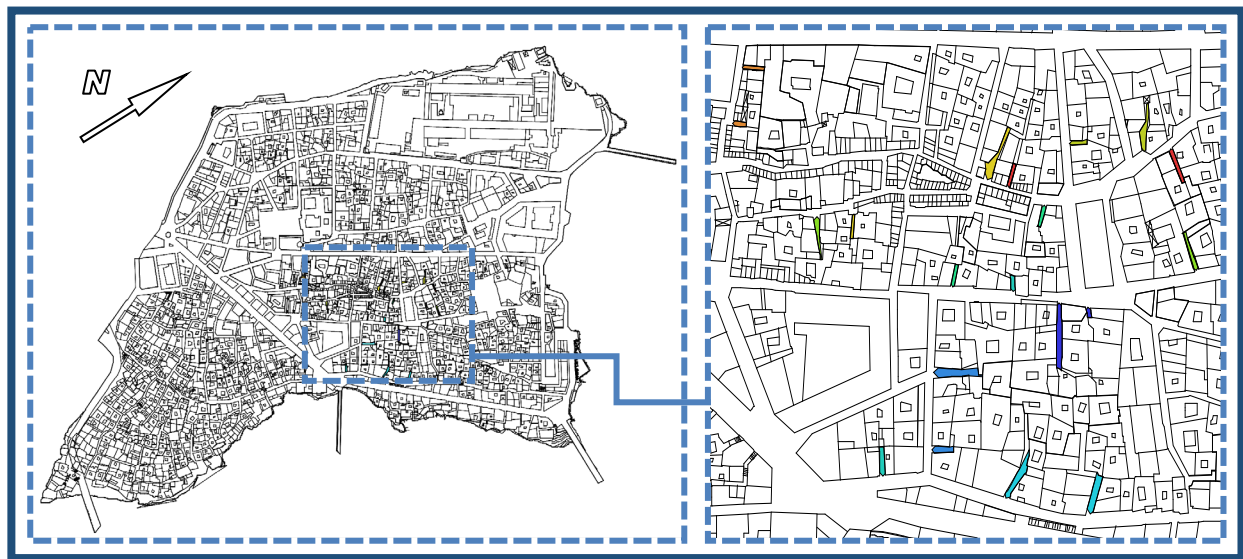
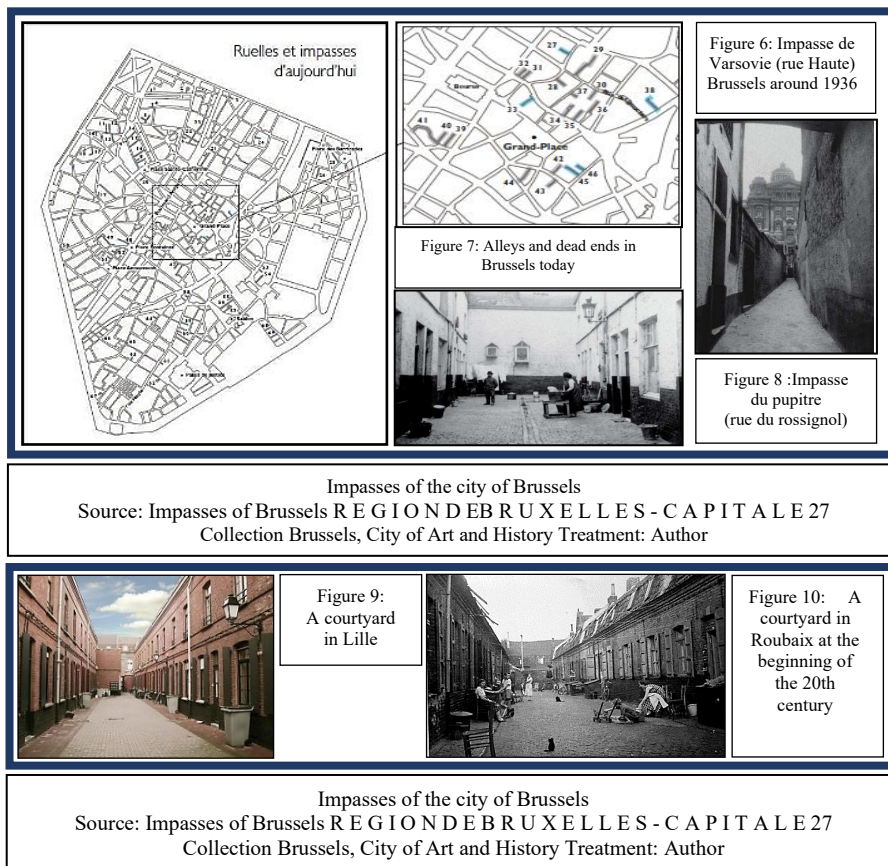


Figure 5: Medina of Constantine – The Rock- with location of dead ends
Source: PPSMVSS B.E.T Kribeche, J treatment : Author.

Following the example of the Arab-Muslim city, other human settlements have produced typologies close to the dead end. Thonnellier, J. cites the example of industrial cities with their workers' housing estates, as well as certain 19th and 20th century housing domains, and in this respect he cites "the courtyard" to which he gives a hybrid character, between public status and private use¹⁰. During the period of the Industrial Revolution, there was the creation of service areas similar to the dead end during the construction of workers' housing in Europe. For example, in Roubaix, Brussels, etc. the courtyard was a service road for workers' housing areas and represented a new form of organization of residential zones where a multitude of workers' families from neighboring factories were concentrated. The aim being to have cheap labor close to the factories and production sites¹¹ (Figs 6 to 10).



In the case of Roubaix and Lille, the creation of cul-de-sacs and courtyards followed the same production logic as for the impasses in Brussels. (The need to house the labors who came to work in the factories and plants of the time in the vicinity of the latter, given that during this period the means of transport were not a priority¹²).

The importance of the dead end in the different eras and civilizations is of great interest. In fact, the role that it has played in the urban spatial hierarchy has not gone unnoticed, insofar as each civilization has used this element according to the traditions and customs that govern its ways of life, from which derive the social and spatial practices that generate the productions of space. In fact, it is according to the civilization and the society that accompanies it that the rank of the dead end is defined in the urban hierarchy.

For the Pharaonic and Roman civilizations, the dead end and narrow roads were relegated to the poor and working classes. In the Islamic civilization, the dead end acquired a different status, reinforced by a character and status reflecting both the religious and the social dimension, as these two characteristics were often closely intertwined and complementary.

Finally, in some more recent urban forms, such as those resulting from the industrialization of European cities and the proliferation of workers' housing estates, a kind of avatar has emerged in the form of the courtyard.

To conclude this section, we note that the dead end, the cul-de-sac and the courtyard have been used throughout civilizations, taking on different forms and names to accompany the urban phenomenon and generating remarkable societal effects.

1.2 The Dead end and its Social Impact on the City

Through urban historiography, we can see that for each period and each civilization, the dead end has sometimes become a deprived area and sometimes an element which guarantees intimacy and the protection of private life. However, over time and with different modes of occupation, it has succeeded in injecting a form of community life where relations between neighbors have been at the highest level of mutual aid and solidarity¹³. Indeed, despite the cramped conditions, in most of these cul-de-sacs and courtyards, a phenomenon of attachment to these places has appeared, showing to what extent people from different backgrounds and social profiles have been able to maintain particularly close neighborhood relations, pushing them to refuse to leave these places where their landmarks are known and recognized. In a document on the dead ends of Brussels, the author relates the difficulties experienced by the inhabitants, who were rehoused in new housing estates, in leaving their homes¹⁴. He gives the example of the Impasse des Tourneurs, whose inhabitants were evicted by force because they refused to leave their social microcosm¹⁵.

With regard to the dead end as a social receptacle in European cities, experience has shown that housing areas that have contained this urban model have generated positive evaluations of social links among the inhabitants, with the exception of a few isolated cases of reluctant people¹⁶. In a remarkable article, Josselin Thonnellier stigmatizes the posture that sees the dead end as the consequence of an 'anti-urban' organization of housing estates, known as 'racket', and reminds us that the dead end has always enjoyed urbanity by favoring close neighborhood relations, socialization and sharing, particularly in the Arab-Muslim world. He recalls how this basic element and the basis of the socio-spatial structuring of the Muslim City has been studied at length by specialists such as E. Wirth¹⁷.

I.3 The Impasse As A Boundary Space Between The Sacred And The Profane In The City.

Among the most remarkable spatial characteristics in the Muslim City, we can state the "sacred" and the "profane"; two ambivalent sectors, opposed and complementary, obeying to a particular form of prioritization that carries symbols and connotations. In this respect, the role played by the dead end as a regulating element between the sacred and profane areas is characterized by versatility and flexibility which guarantees a rational and appreciated transition. Indeed, what the Muslim City represents as a complex container, with diverse contents, whose multiplicity of qualities and spatial atmospheres with particular connotations, imposes a halt that suggests we evaluate or at least understand the modes of articulation that this controversial urbanism teaches us.

In his article on the confrontation of the "open" and the "closed" in the "medina" of Constantine, Touati, A. underlines the important character of the Medina of this city, like other medinas in the Muslim world, where the organization of space reflects a way of being, and where the hierarchy is found in the signifying forms¹⁸. The place of the dead end among these signifying forms of urban space is concretized by the character of the threshold as an inescapable element in the transition between the public and the private zone, imposing an almost involuntary change of behavior dictated by this spatial configuration with signifying connotations and loaded with meaning, obliging the visitor to submit or to turn back. This physical characteristic charged with connotation reveals what the urban fabric of the Medina contains as meanings used and appreciated by the users who consider them as a specific heritage with sure values guaranteeing the preservation of traditions. Thus, the physical character of the Medina constitutes a receptacle of memories and ensures a conceptual relationship which determines the values (sacred/ profane).

II– Methods and Materials:

The Impasse and Its Social Impact in The Medina of Constantine

To analyze the cul-de-sac and its social influence in the Constantine medina, a sample of cul-de-sacs in the area has been chosen to determine their specific features as meeting places and hubs of social interaction.

The primary objective is to emphasize the social ideals that exist within these spaces and investigate their consequences. In order to accomplish this, a methodological approach was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with cohorts of inhabitants residing in the Medina of Constantine, namely within the vicinity of the Rahbet-Essouf neighborhood. The chosen locations (obstacles) are as listed:

- 1- Impasse Bachtarzi giving onto the Rahbet-Essouf square
- 2- Impasse (Derb) Bencharif leading to Mila street (Mila seghira)
- 3- Impasse Arbain Cherif (currently Frères Diabi) leading to Benbadis Street



Figure 11: Group of dead ends in the Rahbet Essouf neighbourhood
In the center of the Medina of Constantine Source and treatment: Author

We also undertook interviews with groups of inhabitants of the new town, Ali Mendjeli (former inhabitants of the Medina "Souika"), in order to see their reactions and opinions about the "Impasse" as a particular space of the Medina fabric. Based on the conceptual analysis and the assigned objectives, we proceeded to the elaboration of an interview guide. The latter includes the opinions recorded around the impasse. The semi-structured interview guide, also known as the interview grid, features a series of questions that serve as 'indicators' of the concepts outlined in the hypothesis. We design each concept as a theme.

- What are your thoughts on the physical character of the medina, as well as the dead end's appearance?
- Perspectives on the social aspects of the medina and the dead-end

Before beginning the interviews, some preparatory work was required: We selected samples of inhabitants based on the following criteria: We included both current and past residents of the Impasse Bachtarzi, as well as those from outside the impasse (Rahbet Essouf) and the current residents of the New Town "Ali Mendjeli", who were originally from Souika.

For this purpose, in the case of the impasse of Bachtarzi and the surrounding impasses, visits and photo-taking required prior agreement with a declaration of identity. (This was a prerequisite for access to the impasse.) We conducted interviews with five groups of people, two of whom continue to reside in the Medina (old town). One particularity about the groups of people we conducted the interviews with caught our attention: we prioritized the oldest people (respect and seniority) during these interviews, and since most of those who accompanied them agreed with their discourse, we essentially retained their words.

III- Results and discussion

III-1 Physical-spatial character

When asked about their opinions on the spatial configuration of the cul-de-sac, the former residents maintain that the physical or spatial aspect is assimilated and not problematic and has rather always been appreciated because of its introverted character. With regard to the spatial role of the cul-de-sac, the former residents see that the organizational and transitional patterns of the neighborhood and the introverted character of the cul-de-sac have created a strong sense of privacy, keeping it away from prying eyes. Moreover, the density of the buildings and the juxtaposition of the constructions made it a privileged place that was little or not exposed to the effects of the climate. As for the spatial qualities of the dead end, and if the former inhabitants of the Medina miss them, they do not fail to systematically compare their former living environment with the new one. They recognize that the amenities of the area and scale of the new dwellings are appropriate for today's life and are more spacious. However, apart from their spaciousness, they seem to be located in the middle of nowhere; a feeling of No Man's Land confirmed by many publications¹⁹.

Two problems were raised during these interviews: the large scale and dimensions of the buildings, the low density of the buildings and the scarcity of shaded areas (microclimate). Through the interviews held with these people, the majority of the reactions revolved around the frequent exposure of the access areas to the houses (unlike the dead end) making them permanently exposed and generating a worrying lack of privacy, as all their access points were bare and visible from points far from their houses. This constitutes a total lack of privacy, let alone security, coupled with unparalleled sprawl, making it difficult to move around.

Furthermore, for the current inhabitants, there is a mismatch between the physical setting and the requirements of (modern) life in terms of furnishing of household appliances (size), pointing to a problem of scale of the old building and its unsuitability for the elements (equipment) of modern comfort.

Some considered this inadequacy as a major handicap, insofar as the slightest change of furniture or equipment such as a bedroom, washing machine or cooker required careful thought and measurements; especially concerning the size and narrowness of the premises, such as the dimensions of the rooms or the stairs, which constituted a major obstacle to getting anything upstairs. Added to this is the problem of car size and parking, thus reducing the ambitions of users who, according to one of them, "Ma nakedrou nechriou ghir Maruti oula QQ oula 4L" "we are left with the choice of a Maruti, a QQ or a Renault 4". Moreover, they stress, the state of deterioration of the building remains a source of concern, particularly the recurrent problems of waterproofing, exacerbated by the lack of maintenance.

III-2 Social character

For the former inhabitants of impasse Bachtarzi, the social character has long been a real cement for the residents, who emphasise the strength of the links and relationships maintained by the inhabitants of the impasse, as well as the feeling of belonging and identity. Moreover, this character also constitutes an indelible nostalgic component around which memories of the quality of behaviour are grafted, where respect and intimacy were the major dominating factors and law, added to which was a particular feeling of security. Moreover, for Âmmi Boudjemâa, 72 years old, former inhabitant, "Bekri hna kounna kitengagi lemra fi Edderb, nhabbtou rissanna"; "when a woman came to the entrance of the Derb or the impasse, we systematically lowered our heads so as not to cause her any discomfort", which denotes a level of respect and civic-mindedness that is refined and above all rare nowadays. For the inhabitants of the extra impasse Bachtarzi, we find a different feeling from that of its former inhabitants, but with a particular vision highlighting the attributes of the latter. According to them, the impasse is considered to be a closed space, specific to its inhabitants (privileged by the fact of living in a space where intimacy and security reigned). They add to this the fact that the transition from the street to the impasse has always constituted a mental barrier that was difficult to cross, even for the youngest, who used to go to the bottom of the impasse to reach the Koranic school, which was none other than the Benabderahmane Zaouïa belonging to the Bachtarzi family. What was also peculiar was the fact that even if the extra-impasse inhabitant was a friend and neighbour of the inhabitants of the latter, the passage inside the impasse constituted each time an ordeal where the feeling

of being a stranger was omnipresent. For these people, the impasse still represents the unknown, the hidden, and even a certain feeling of rejection. For the present period, access to the dead end is still reserved only for local residents, as the Koranic school is no longer functional.

In order to dig deeper into the social role of the impasse, we asked the former inhabitants if the impasse favoured closer social relations? As far as the Bachtarzi dead end is concerned, both the current and former inhabitants agree on the strength of the links and relationships that the residents have with each other, but with more reservations about the new neighbours whose habits and behaviour are not yet familiar with the practices of this space. However, there remains a feeling of regret with regard to the neighbours who have left the area out of necessity (advanced state of deterioration of their homes) for whom the strength of the social links has generated a feeling of belonging, identity and tranquillity where intimacy was the major factor (a particular feeling of security), with the exception of the noise nuisance coming from Rouag Said Street (R'cif ex Vieux Street) and Rahbet Essouf Square.

With the inhabitants of the new town, who are in fact former inhabitants of the Medina, particularly of the Souika District, we tried to check whether they miss the dead-end system, and if so, why and what would be the elements they miss? This was verified according to the opinions that we were able to collect and which corroborate those of the former inhabitants of the Bachtarzi impasse: regret for the density of the buildings as well as the modes of transition from the streets to the impasses whose introversion guaranteed intimacy as well as quietness and security.

Concerning their new habitat, a feeling of discomfort and insecurity emanating from agoraphobia generated by the modes of organisation and the sprawl of the neighbourhoods with the feeling of being constantly watched and spied upon. Moreover, these inhabitants emphasise the contrast between a (past) experience full of nostalgia and a present full of dysfunctions which are revealed through a flagrant change in the type of contact and neighbourhood where anonymity and individualism are frequent. They believe that if there is a significant regression of social links compared to their initial environment, it seems to be due to the lack of adequate meeting spaces that can create links.

To summarise these interviews, we can say that for the majority of the people or groups with whom we spoke, with the exception of the difficulties of the built environment, the tendency was above all on the values of the social aspect that the dead end and the spatial configurations of the urban fabric of the Medina carried.

In fact, each time the subject of the dead end was discussed, each inhabitant had a point of view concerning this urban configuration. At the beginning, these points of view seemed to be opposed between the inhabitants of the dead end and the "extra dead end" inhabitants, but ended up joining on the social values that this physical context allowed to maintain. Indeed, the multitude of functions that this space provided, and still provides, varies from service, to children's play, to sharing, to meetings, etc. In fact, the point that all these activities share remains a constant of intimacy marked by the withdrawal of the dead end from the public area. Thus the first feeling on which both parties agree is that of security and privacy, essential factors in the way of life in a society in general, but even more accentuated in Arab-Muslim culture. It must be recognized that the threshold character enjoyed by the impasse imposes respect and creates a virtual barrier that society appreciates to the highest degree.

Indeed, these comments have allowed us to see the degree of attachment of these people to the character of the impasse as the last link in the public space and to the values that it conveys, particularly the strength of the social ties that exist between the residents, where mutual aid and the feeling of belonging to this micro-community and to the place are always must

IV- Conclusion:

The dead end, as a physical element of the urban environment, has been present in numerous civilizations. It not only becomes physically integrated into the urban fabric, but also holds significant values. Our research and investigation methods have shown that in the past, the Pharaonic and Roman civilizations used dead ends as a spatial arrangement for the impoverished and working classes. Yet, it was not until the rise of the Muslim culture that the dead end experienced a substantial change, elevating its position to a boundary that guarantees separation between the public and private realms. By doing documentary research, we collected testimonials about the cul-de-sac, which uncovered a noteworthy characteristic that is common among residents of cul-de-sacs from many categories, but particularly from diverse societies. The courtyards that emerged as a result of the Industrial Revolution in Europe, particularly in Roubaix, Lille, and Brussels, gave rise to an unforeseen phenomena among the groups living in these areas of Western civilizations. This phenomena was evident in the form of a community life that was marked by mutual assistance, unity, and a strong connection to these small-scale environments.

Our research has mostly focused on the significance of dead ends in cultures that have created, recognised, and encountered them. We have also examined their role and function in hosting notable social events for the residents.

Based on the accounts of the residents of the Medina of Constantine, the dead end area, along with its inherent values, serves as a central hub and a wellspring of expertise and refined social behaviour for most of its inhabitants. It imparts essential qualities such as intimacy, respect, and mutual assistance, fostering a mutually beneficial connection between the physical environment and the community that resides within it.

Ultimately, the former residents of both impasse Bachtarzi and the Medina (Souika) find their last remaining connection to this declining heritage in their want for a living environment characterised by specific values and attributes. We assert that the attributes of the Arab-Muslim metropolis encompass a cultural legacy abundant in principles and notable features, which society appears to neglect. The relentless drive for modernity indiscriminately diminishes whatever that does not conform to its goals, depleting society of its social resources and diluting its accomplishments as the Medina deteriorates.

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