

Support project to the protection of the cultural heritage in the Oriental Region NGO Movimento Africa 70

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Introduction

Oujda, Morocco's easternmost town founded in 994 by *Zanatah* Berbers, was the capital of French Maroc Orient and an important trading center with its strategic location at the crossroads of eastern and southern routes across Morocco and Algeria. Fought over by Berbers, Arabs and Turks, it was so often destroyed and rebuilt that it was called *Medinet el-Haira*, "City of Fear". In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, there were periods of occupation by the Algerian Ziyanids of Tlemcen and from 1727 until the early nineteenth century Oujda was under the Turkish rule - the only town in modern Morocco to have been part of the Ottoman Empire. Following the French defeat of the Ottomans in Algeria, France occupied the town twice, prior to its incorporation within the Moroccan Protectorate in 1912: an early and prolonged association, which remains tangible in the streets and attitudes.

In fact the Medina, walled in 1880, is largely a French reconstruction. Like other Maghreb's medinas, it consisted of different quarters, with patio houses and small and winding roads. The center was the *Souk Ghezel*: from there to the principal gate, *Bab sidi Abdelouahab*, there was the trading quarter, with specialized *souk* (markets), related to the corporation system.

Near the old *Kasbah* there were the main activities of government (sultanate, custom house, religious and civil tribunal).

The first colonial core was placed inside the walls (a peculiarity of Oujda, contrary to the general separation between European town and traditional habitat). Until 1920, it contained all the population, but from 1921, because of the saturation of the European town, it started the process of demolition of the walls, to ease the development outside the walls: many traditional handicrafts were transformed in trading ones, the clothes shops were grouped in the *Kissarias*, becoming the main activity in the Medina. At the same time, the Medina lost its command role because of the dislocation of the public and administrative services, and even the *souk* started to be located outside the gate *Bab sidi Abdelouahab*.

With the Independence of Morocco, and the decolonization process, started the process of degradation of the habitat; in fact, many houses were abandoned by the original inhabitants, to be occupied by poor immigrants coming from the farms of the entire region.

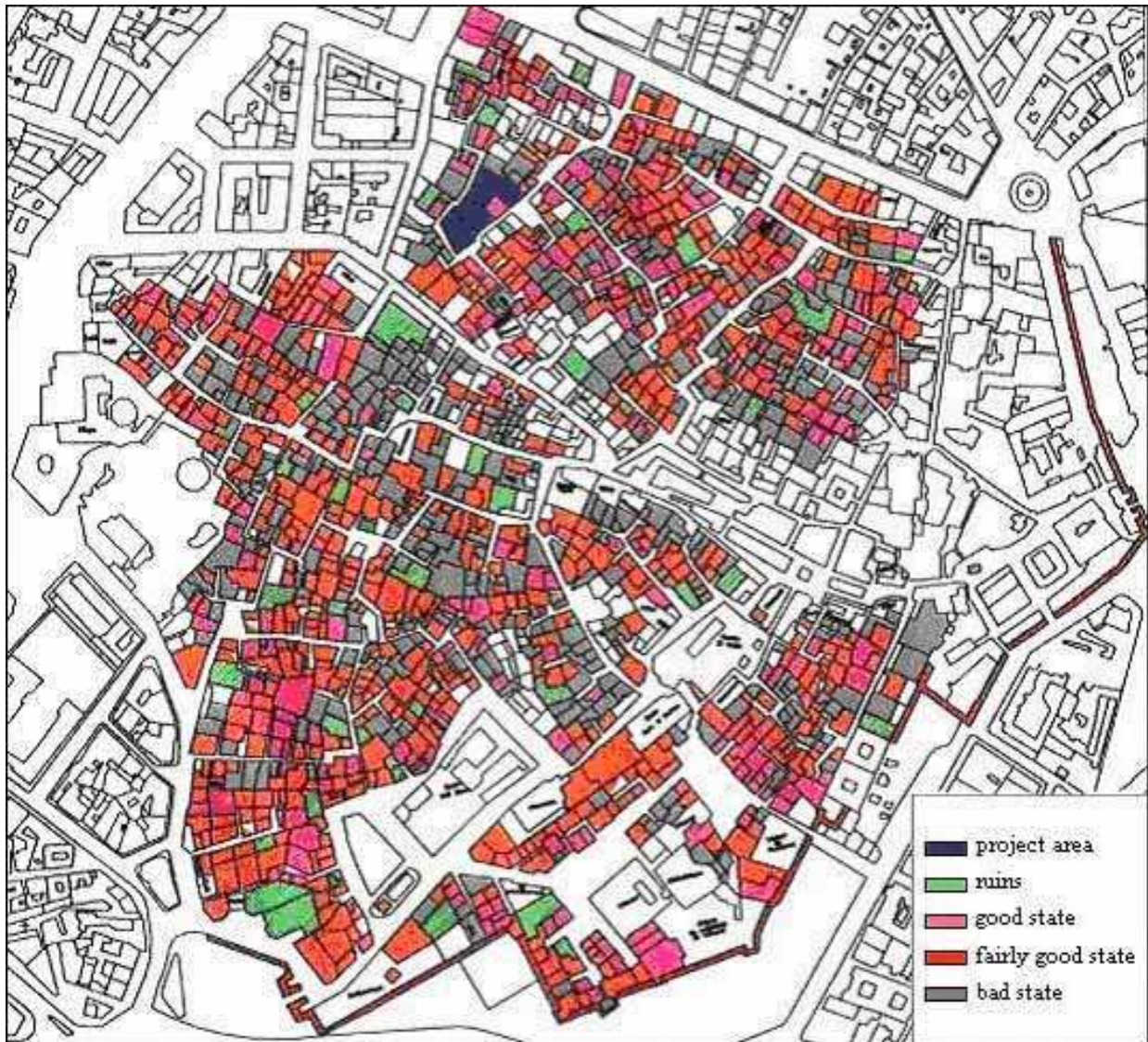
From the seventies the town started a big expansion in all directions, many big building and new streets were built, and the Medina's fabric of the city became thicker, with the occupation of the green residual areas. At the same time, many houses were replaced by new *Kissarias*, starting the process of decline of the residential function, and increasing of trading functions.

The old Medina is now characterized by a process of densification, with overcrowded and unhealthy buildings, with a big presence of tenants, whose low-incomes contribute to the deterioration of the habitat and to the development of social problems, like unemployment, prostitution, delinquency. This situation has been deteriorated with the closing of the frontiers between Morocco and Algeria, (because of the problem of the sovereignty over Spanish Sahara), that has dramatically changed the socio-economic conditions of the entire Oriental region.

The project of the NGO Movimento Africa '70

The Italian Ministry of foreign affairs, and in particular the Italian Embassy in Morocco, met in 1998 the Social Development Agency (ADS), the Development of north provinces Agency (ADPN), and the Italian NGOs already being in the area, to work together on a project for the

social and economical development of the Oriental region. The NGO Movimento Africa '70, that was working in the near city of Nador, with the assistance of the Foundation *Moulay Slimane* (the local partner), identified the necessity to improve the conditions of life of the local population through a process of revalorization of the physical cultural heritage of the area, to be related to the redevelopment of the handicraft resources.



State of the buildings in the old Medina

The intervention fronts are

- The restoration of some buildings in the old medina of Oujda
- The realization of a Cultural Complex with a library, exposition and conferences spaces, a research center for old manuscripts studies, an handicraft centre and a small health centre
- Support of the handicraft activities, with training and creation of opportunity of micro credit, for the economic recovery of the traditional crafts
- Institutional support to the Foundation *Moulay Slimane*

The specific goals of the project are

- Awareness of the local population by demonstrative activities
- Capacity building for the protection of the historical and cultural heritage
- Capacity building for the management of cultural patrimony

The Architectural Project



Ground level plan



Main front of the Cultural complex

The intervention area is located in the northern part of the Medina, in the district of *Derb Senia*, and the block area is about of 1.300 m²; it includes a small mosque that will be completely transformed, with the help of the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

For the realization of the Complex the Italian Cooperation has acquired some buildings, and the inhabitants have been displaced in houses in better conditions.

The project spreads out around some open patios, with covered galleries, that create a continuity between all the spaces; the most interesting building is the *Maison Sinaceur*, built around 1916 in ottoman-moroccan style, actually in restoration, that will be a Centre for the conservation and the study of old religious Manuscripts (the aim is to promote the diffusion of the pacific aspects of the Islamic religion).

The prospect is to reach a regeneration of all the district, starting by a pilot-intervention, to make the population aware of the problems of heritage preservation: in fact the strategy of the project tries to involve the local inhabitants by the organization of training courses for the young unemployed of the district (starting from the artisans of ceramics, of bricks and wrought iron that are now working at the restoration of the *Maison Sinaceur*).



Artisans of typical ceramic "Zellige Beldi"



The restoration of the Maison Sinaceur

For a better accessibility to the complex it has been studied an urban project, with the prevision of opening new entrances to the area, that will be completely paved and equipped with a green space and a new small square.

At the moment the Library (the first building realized), works as office of the project, and in its spaces take place exhibitions, training courses, meetings with the local associations and Institutions. The Maison Sinaucer is in restoration, the Museum is under construction, and in a short time will start the works for the other buildings (conference room, handicraft centre, health centre).

Activities of training already realized

- Course of management for small artisan enterprises (with the University of Oujda)
- Course of web masters
- Course of modern couture for women
- Course for masters mason
- Course for local artists in cultural promotion

Activities of awareness of the population

- Actions of solidarity in the district, during the Ramadan
- Organization of ritual festivals
- Awareness of the children by the organization of football competitions, visits to the library, drawing exhibitions, showing of films
- Monthly exhibitions of local artistes in the Library of the Complex

Activities of cultural promotion

- Participation of the project to the associative local life (exhibitions, seminars, meetings...)
- Participation of the Foundation *Moulay Slimane* to national and international seminars
- Agreements between the Foundation *Moulay Slimane* and Italian Institutions and Universities
- Exchange of students for stages in Italy and working training at the project
- Organization of the international seminar “Valorization of the heritage and local development”, with the University of Oujda and the University of Chieti – Pescara (June 2004)

Micro credit

- 35 artisans have already obtained the micro credit, and other loans will be issued in a short time.