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THE CASBAH OF ALGIERS: A LIVING URBAN LANDSCAPE OF CULTURAL MEMORY, RESILIENCE, AND HERITAGE CONSERVATION

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the Casbah of Algiers as a living urban landscape, emphasizing its historical, architectural, and cultural significance in the Mediterranean context. Rather than treating the Casbah solely as a preserved monument, the research conceptualizes it as a dynamic, resilient cultural system shaped by successive Amazigh, Arab-Islamic, Andalusian, Ottoman, and European influences. An interdisciplinary qualitative methodology combines historical analysis, architectural observation, urban morphological analysis, and field-based investigations, including site visits, photographic documentation, and informal interviews with residents. Drawing on the Historic Urban Landscape approach and living heritage theory, the study explores the interplay between tangible and intangible heritage within the evolving urban fabric. Findings show that the Casbah is a palimpsestic environment in which diverse cultural traditions have been continuously layered, adapted, and integrated, contributing to a distinctive urban identity sustained by social memory, community resilience, traditional craftsmanship, and everyday practices. Despite its recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage site, the Casbah faces significant challenges, including structural deterioration, demographic pressures, environmental vulnerability, inadequate urban management, and rising tourism. These pressures threaten both its physical fabric and the social practices that sustain its cultural vitality. The study argues for a shift from monument-centered preservation toward integrated, participatory, and sustainable conservation strategies that recognize the Casbah as an evolving socio-cultural system and a significant Mediterranean space for intercultural dialogue, urban resilience, and living heritage conservation.

KEYWORDS

Casbah of Algiers, Urban Development, Cultural Diversity, Urban Morphology

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1. Introduction

Historic cities are more than collections of monuments; they are dynamic cultural landscapes where architecture, memory, and everyday social practices converge to shape collective identity. Among the historic urban centers of the Mediterranean, the Casbah of Algiers holds a distinctive place as one of the best-preserved Islamic medinas that remains a living urban settlement. Perched on a hillside overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, the Casbah has evolved over more than a millennium through successive layers of Amazigh, Arab-Islamic, Andalusian, Ottoman, and European influences, producing an urban fabric of exceptional historical, architectural, and cultural significance. Its narrow streets, traditional courtyard houses, monumental mosques, Ottoman palaces, public squares, and artisanal workshops collectively illustrate the evolution of a Mediterranean city shaped by continuous cultural interaction rather than by a single civilization.

The Casbah's historical importance extends beyond its architectural heritage. Throughout its history, it has served as a political, commercial, religious, and cultural center, and its strategic position has facilitated exchanges among North Africa, Southern Europe, and the wider Mediterranean basin. Founded during the Zirid period on the remains of earlier Punic and Roman settlements, the city expanded remarkably under

Ottoman rule between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, when Algiers emerged as one of the Mediterranean's principal maritime capitals. During French colonization after 1830, the Casbah underwent profound physical and social transformations while becoming a powerful symbol of Algerian identity and resistance. Its central role during the Algerian War of Independence further strengthened its significance as both a physical and symbolic space of anti-colonial struggle. These successive historical layers have endowed the Casbah with a complex cultural identity that reflects both continuity and adaptation across changing political contexts.

International recognition of the Casbah's universal significance was confirmed in 1992, when UNESCO inscribed it on the World Heritage List under criteria (ii) and (v), acknowledging its exceptional contribution to Mediterranean urban planning and its representation of a traditional human settlement that embodies centuries of cultural exchange. UNESCO recognizes the Casbah as an outstanding example of a historic Maghreb city, whose urban morphology, architectural traditions, and social organization have influenced cities throughout North Africa and beyond. The property's authenticity derives not only from its built heritage but also from the continuity of residential life, traditional craftsmanship, religious practices, and community organization that continue to characterize the district despite growing urban pressures.

Nevertheless, preserving the Casbah faces numerous challenges in the twenty-first century. Accelerated urbanization, demographic pressure, deterioration of historic buildings, inadequate maintenance, environmental hazards, and the effects of modernization threaten both the physical integrity of the built environment and the continuity of its intangible cultural heritage. Conservation therefore requires approaches that move beyond monument restoration to encompass the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of living heritage. Recent debates within heritage studies increasingly emphasize that historic cities should be understood not as static museums but as evolving urban systems in which conservation must be reconciled with contemporary urban life. In this context, the Casbah offers an important case study for examining how historic cities can preserve authenticity while adapting to changing social and economic realities.

This article examines the Casbah of Algiers through an interdisciplinary lens that integrates urban history, architectural heritage, cultural geography, and heritage conservation. Rather than presenting the Casbah solely as an architectural monument, the study treats it as a living cultural landscape whose identity has been shaped over centuries of interaction among diverse civilizations. Particular attention is devoted to the interplay among urban morphology, historical memory, community resilience, and cultural identity within the broader Mediterranean context.

Against this conceptual background, the study addresses two central research questions:

Q 1: How have successive historical and cultural transformations shaped the Casbah of Algiers' urban morphology, architectural identity, and socio-cultural practices as a living heritage landscape?

Q 2: How can integrated conservation and sustainable management approaches address the contemporary pressures facing the Casbah while maintaining its authenticity, cultural significance, and capacity to adapt to changing urban and social conditions?

To address these questions, the study pursues four interrelated objectives. First, it reconstructs the Casbah's historical evolution from its origins to the present. Second, it analyzes the characteristics of its urban morphology and architectural heritage that distinguish it among historic Mediterranean cities. Third, it examines the Casbah as a living cultural landscape by considering the interaction between its tangible and intangible heritage. Finally, it investigates contemporary conservation challenges and considers the implications of sustainable heritage management for preserving the Casbah's cultural significance while supporting its continued social and urban vitality.

2. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary case study methodology to investigate the Casbah of Algiers as a historic urban landscape and a living heritage environment. The approach integrates historical analysis, architectural observation, urban morphological study, heritage assessment, and field-based investigation to examine the relationship among the Casbah's physical fabric, cultural practices, and contemporary conservation challenges.

The study draws on both primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources were collected through a review of academic literature and historical studies to understand the Casbah's historical evolution, from ancient Icosium and the Zirid period to Ottoman development, French colonial transformation, the Algerian Revolution, and the contemporary heritage context. Primary research was conducted through direct fieldwork in the Casbah of Algiers. We visited the site to observe its urban structure, architectural characteristics, and

everyday social activities. Field observations focused on the organization of the street network, the relationship between the Lower and Upper Casbah, traditional courtyard houses, religious buildings, public spaces, traditional crafts, and the interaction between residents and the historic environment. During the field visits, we collected photographic documentation to record architectural details, urban elements, material conditions, and examples of living heritage practices. These photographs served as visual evidence to support the interpretation of the Casbah's spatial and cultural characteristics.

In addition to direct observation, the field investigation included a guided visit with a local guide familiar with the Casbah's history and cultural significance. The explanations provided during the visit contributed additional information on historical events, architectural elements, local traditions, and the neighborhood's transformation over time. Informal conversations were also held with residents and others involved in the daily life of the Casbah. These discussions provided valuable insights into community identity, traditional practices, changes affecting the neighborhood, and residents' perceptions of heritage preservation.

The collected data were analyzed using a thematic approach, organizing observations and documentary information around four main themes: (1) historical evolution and cultural layers, (2) urban morphology and architectural identity, (3) the Casbah as a living heritage landscape, and (4) contemporary conservation challenges. This framework allows the study to move beyond a monument-centered interpretation and examine the Casbah as a dynamic urban system shaped by historical processes, social practices, and ongoing interactions between people and place. By combining literature analysis with field-based investigation, this methodology aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Casbah as both a World Heritage site and a living Mediterranean urban landscape facing contemporary transformation.

3. Results

3.1 Historical Evolution and the Formation of a Layered Urban Identity

Historical analysis shows that the Casbah of Algiers emerged from successive political, cultural, and spatial transformations that have shaped the city's identity over more than two millennia. Rather than a linear process, the urban fabric has evolved through phases of adaptation, reconstruction, cultural exchange, and political intervention. Each period added new layers to the built environment while modifying, reinterpreting, or incorporating elements of earlier urban structures.

Settlement in the area dates to ancient Icosium, initially Phoenician and later incorporated into the Roman urban system. Although few physical remains from these periods survive within the present-day Casbah, archaeological evidence indicates the site's strategic importance within the wider Mediterranean network of maritime exchange and settlement. A more substantial transformation occurred during the medieval period, particularly under the Zirid dynasty, when Algiers developed as an Islamic urban center. During this period, the settlement acquired a more defined urban structure characterized by defensive elements, religious institutions, residential quarters, and a compact morphology adapted to the site's topography and environmental conditions.

The Ottoman period was a particularly significant phase in shaping the urban character still associated with the Casbah today. After Algiers' incorporation into the Ottoman political sphere in the sixteenth century, the city experienced substantial political, economic, and architectural development. Mosques, palaces, fountains, residential complexes, and other civic structures helped consolidate its urban hierarchy and architectural identity. At the same time, Algiers developed into an important Mediterranean port, strengthening connections between North Africa, the Ottoman world, and European commercial networks (Ravéreau, 1989; Çelik, 1997). The resulting urban fabric reflected not only Ottoman architectural and institutional influences but also the interaction of local traditions with broader Mediterranean patterns of exchange.

The French occupation beginning in 1830 introduced another profound transformation, affecting both the city's physical organization and its symbolic meaning. Colonial authorities developed a European urban center alongside the existing medina, introducing new streets, administrative buildings, infrastructure, and regulatory systems that disrupted established spatial relationships (Figure 1). The resulting juxtaposition of the colonial city and the indigenous urban fabric was not merely an architectural transformation but also reflected broader processes of colonial restructuring and political control. As Çelik (1997) demonstrates, urban planning and architectural intervention became important instruments through which colonial authorities reorganized space, established new social hierarchies, and separated the European city from the existing indigenous urban environment.



Fig. 1. French architecture in the Casbah. Source: taken by the author.

The twentieth century added a layer of political and symbolic significance to the Casbah, particularly through its role in the Algerian War of Independence, which began in November 1954. The historic district became an important center of nationalist activity and resistance, while its dense urban fabric and established community networks facilitated clandestine organization and political mobilization (Figure 2). The Casbah subsequently acquired a prominent place in narratives of the struggle against French colonial rule and became closely associated with the broader history of Algerian national liberation. Following independence in 1962, these wartime associations became increasingly embedded in Algerian collective memory, reinforcing the Casbah's significance as a symbol of national identity, cultural continuity, and anti-colonial resistance. Its heritage value therefore extends beyond its architectural and urban characteristics to encompass the political memories and historical narratives associated with the place (Horne, 1977; Evans, 2012; UNESCO, 1992).



Fig. 2. Symbols of the Algerian revolution in the Casbah. Source: taken by the author.

The results therefore indicate that the Casbah should be interpreted as a historical palimpsest, where ancient, Islamic, Ottoman, colonial, revolutionary, and contemporary layers coexist and contribute to its present significance.

3.2 Urban Morphology, Architectural Identity, and Cultural Continuity

The spatial analysis reveals that the Casbah's urban morphology is a highly adapted Mediterranean (Figure 3) Islamic urban model shaped by environmental conditions, social organization, and cultural values. Contrary to colonial descriptions that characterized the medina as chaotic or unplanned, the results demonstrate that its spatial structure follows principles of hierarchy, privacy, climatic adaptation, and collective use.



Fig. 3. The Mediterranean view of Casbah. Source: taken by the author.

The street network is a defining morphological feature of the Casbah of Algiers, reflecting how the historic urban fabric adapts to both its steep topography and Mediterranean climatic conditions. Its narrow, irregular pathways follow the hillside's natural contours, creating a dense spatial configuration that can reduce direct solar exposure while facilitating airflow through the urban fabric (Figure 4). The Casbah's internal organization also shows functional differentiation between its lower and upper areas. The Lower Casbah historically developed in close relationship with the port, commercial activities, and maritime exchange, whereas the Upper Casbah was more strongly associated with residential functions and religious institutions. This spatial differentiation illustrates how topography, economic activity, social organization, and environmental conditions interacted to shape the settlement's historic morphology (UNESCO, 1992; Çelik, 1997).



Fig. 4. Streets of Casbah. Source: taken by the author.

The traditional courtyard house (dar) is the fundamental architectural unit of the Casbah. These houses are organized around an internal courtyard that provides light, ventilation, privacy, and a central social space for family activities (Figure 5, 6). The analysis confirms that this architectural typology reflects a close relationship among social customs, environmental adaptation, and domestic organization (Ravéreau, 1989).



Fig. 5. A house in the interior of Casbah. Source: taken by the author.



Fig. 6. A Carpenter in Casbah. Source: taken by the author.

Religious, civic, and infrastructural elements also play a central role in shaping the Casbah's identity and social organization. Mosques (Figure 7), zaouias, Ottoman palaces (Figure 8), fountains, and communal spaces have historically provided settings for religious practice, social interaction, administration, and collective life, thereby contributing to the cohesion of the historic community. Equally significant is the traditional water infrastructure, including public fountains and associated hydraulic networks, which formed an integral part of the urban system and supported everyday life in the dense historic settlement. The integration of water infrastructure within the built environment illustrates how the Casbah's urban form responded to local environmental conditions and resource constraints. These elements therefore demonstrate that the Casbah's historic character derives not only from individual architectural monuments but also from the interaction among religious, social, infrastructural, and environmental systems embedded within the wider urban fabric (UNESCO, 1992; Çelik, 1997).



Fig. 7. Mosques of the Casbah. Source: taken by the author.

The results show that the Casbah's architectural value depends not only on individual monuments but also on the coherence of the entire urban system. Its significance emerges from the relationship among buildings, streets, public spaces, and everyday practices that continue to shape the neighborhood's identity.



Fig. 8. Palaces from the Ottoman Empire in the Casbah. Source:<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1EGiGT2U7Z/>

3.3 The Casbah as a Living Heritage Landscape: Identity, Memory, and Social Practices

The findings demonstrate that the Casbah of Algiers retains significance not only as a historic urban district but also as a living cultural environment where tangible and intangible heritage remain closely interconnected. Unlike heritage places primarily preserved as physical remnants of the past, the Casbah continues to support residential life, religious practices, artisanal activities, and community networks, thereby maintaining key aspects of its historical social function. Traditional craftsmanship is a particularly significant component of this living heritage. Practices such as metalworking, woodworking, textile production, and other forms of artisanal production contribute to the transmission of skills, knowledge, and cultural practices across generations (Figure 9). Beyond their economic and cultural value, these activities reinforce the relationship between community identity and the historic urban environment in which such practices have developed and persisted. The continued presence of these activities therefore highlights the importance of conserving not only the Casbah's architectural fabric but also the social practices and local knowledge that give the historic district its cultural vitality (UNESCO, 2003, 2011; Hadji et al., 2023).



Fig. 9. Shops of Casbah. Source: taken by the author.

The results also underscore the importance of intangible heritage, including oral traditions, religious celebrations, social customs, and neighborhood-based solidarity. These practices help preserve collective memory and strengthen community identity. From this perspective, the Casbah's heritage value emerges from the ongoing interaction between inhabitants and the urban space.

However, the analysis identifies tensions between conservation objectives and social realities. Heritage policies focused primarily on architectural preservation risk weakening the Casbah's living character by neglecting residents' needs. The results support approaches aligned with the concept of living heritage, which treats communities as active actors in interpreting, protecting, and transmitting heritage values (Smith, 2006; Poullos, 2014).

3.4 Heritage Recognition, Conservation Challenges, and the Mediterranean Significance of the Casbah

The UNESCO World Heritage recognition in 1992 significantly heightened international awareness of the Casbah's cultural importance. Its inscription reflects its Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) as an example of Mediterranean urban development and as a historic settlement that illustrates cultural interactions among different civilizations. The analysis confirms that the values recognized by UNESCO extend beyond material authenticity to include traditions, functions, knowledge systems, and cultural continuity, consistent with contemporary interpretations of authenticity established by the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994).

Nevertheless, the long-term preservation of the Casbah of Algiers remains constrained by a combination of physical, environmental, demographic, and institutional pressures (Figure 10). The deterioration of historic buildings, compounded by inadequate maintenance and the loss of traditional conservation practices, has contributed to the progressive degradation of the historic urban fabric. UNESCO has also identified weaknesses in coordinating conservation actions and implementing management instruments as significant challenges to effective heritage protection. These pressures are further intensified by the vulnerability of the Casbah's historic building stock to seismic hazards and environmental stresses, particularly given the age and structural characteristics of many of its buildings. Consequently, safeguarding the Casbah requires an integrated approach that combines building rehabilitation with effective governance, continuous maintenance, risk reduction, and the sustainable management of the living historic environment (Novelli & D'Ayala, 2015; Hadji et al., 2023; UNESCO World Heritage Committee, 2025).



Fig. 10. Deterioration of the buildings of the Casbah. Source: taken by the author.

Tourism presents both an opportunity and a source of pressure for the sustainable conservation of the Casbah of Algiers. Increased visitation and associated economic activity can generate financial resources for

heritage conservation, rehabilitation, and local economic development. However, when tourism growth is poorly managed, it may contribute to the commodification of heritage, place-based inequalities, and the gradual displacement of everyday social and cultural practices. In a living historic district such as the Casbah, tourism management must extend beyond the protection of architectural assets to consider the needs, participation, and well-being of local communities. A sustainable approach requires an appropriate balance among conservation objectives, community involvement, and tourism development, ensuring that the economic benefits of increased visibility support rather than undermine the Casbah's cultural vitality and residential function (UNESCO, 2011; Timothy & Boyd, 2003; Hadji et al., 2023).

Finally, the analysis highlights the Mediterranean dimension of the Casbah of Algiers as a space of interaction, circulation, and cultural exchange rather than merely a geographical boundary. Situated at the intersection of North African, Islamic, Ottoman, Andalusian, and European spheres of influence, Algiers reflects the movement of architectural forms, cultural practices, knowledge, and urban traditions across the Mediterranean. The Casbah offers a particularly tangible expression of these historical processes, as its urban fabric and cultural heritage reflect the successive encounters and interactions that have shaped the city over time (UNESCO, 1992; Clancy-Smith, 2011). From this perspective, the Casbah can be understood not simply as a repository of Algerian heritage but as part of a broader Mediterranean cultural landscape defined by continuous exchange and historical interconnectedness. Its preservation therefore has significance beyond the protection of individual buildings or local cultural identity, contributing to broader discussions on shared Mediterranean heritage, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable approaches to conserving living historic urban environments.

4. Conclusion:

This study shows that the Casbah of Algiers should be understood not merely as a collection of historic buildings but as a complex, evolving urban landscape in which historical layers, architectural forms, cultural practices, and collective memory remain interconnected. Its urban identity has been shaped by successive periods of cultural and political transformation, including Phoenician, Islamic, Ottoman, colonial, revolutionary, and contemporary phases, resulting in a distinctive urban fabric marked by continuity, adaptation, and resilience. The analysis further highlights that the Casbah's heritage significance extends beyond its material fabric to encompass the everyday practices, traditional crafts, social relationships, and forms of collective memory through which its cultural identity continues to be reproduced.

At the same time, the Casbah's status as a living heritage landscape is increasingly challenged by physical deterioration, environmental vulnerability, demographic change, inadequate urban management, and pressures associated with globalization and tourism. These challenges reveal the limits of conservation approaches focused primarily on protecting individual monuments or physical structures. The Casbah's continued vitality requires an integrated approach that considers the interdependence of the built environment, local communities, cultural practices, and socioeconomic conditions. In this regard, participatory and sustainable management strategies are essential to reconcile the conservation of historical authenticity and cultural significance with the legitimate needs of contemporary urban life.

Ultimately, the Casbah of Algiers illustrates the potential of historic urban landscapes to function as living repositories of cultural memory, resilience, and intercultural interaction. Its conservation therefore requires a conceptual shift from static preservation to adaptive, people-centered heritage management. Such an approach can contribute not only to safeguarding the Casbah's outstanding cultural values but also to developing broader models for the sustainable conservation of historic urban landscapes facing rapid social, environmental, and spatial transformation.

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