



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Re-Inventing Public Spaces in an Algerian City: MilaGhania Guettiche ^{1*}, Yves Guermond ², Amel Baziz ³

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ABSTRACT

Public spaces play a crucial role in facilitating a wide range of activities and practices, as well as providing opportunities for leisure and relaxation. However, public spaces in the city of Mila, Algeria, have been neglected, particularly in the suburbs, over the past few decades due to the need for new constructions resulting from rural exodus. This article presents the current state of public spaces in the southern area of Mila and highlights the results of a survey conducted to understand the expectations of citizens, with the aim of promoting sustainable public space perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

Following Algeria's independence, a considerable population shift from rural to urban areas led to a construction boom in Algerian cities. Initially, the pressing need for urban planning was viewed primarily from a functionalist standpoint. However, criticism of this functionalist approach has now opened up a new avenue for discussion. As Giovanni Fusco notes during a seminar at the Université de la Côte d'Azur in 2021 on urban planning, public spaces, once deemed insignificant gaps between buildings, are now being reevaluated and prioritized in discussions on urban development. In the context of emerging smart cities, public spaces are being redesigned in various ways, facilitating the seamless integration of neighborhoods into their surroundings and empowering users to reclaim their territory. Our analysis of Mila city aims to highlight this crucial aspect of public spaces.

According to J. C. David (2002), it is clear that there have been notable changes in the public spaces of the Arab-Islamic world. N. Semmoud (2021) has conducted a study on several neighborhoods in Algiers and found that the residents reject, and even deny, their own surroundings. They appreciate the housing, but consider the area around them to be empty space that they simply pass through without paying much attention. It seems that the houses are considered separately from their

physical and social surroundings. However, this issue extends beyond the psycho-sociological aspects. During the French colonization period, public spaces were designed to serve the European population, while after gaining independence, the urgent need for new urban habitats led to a purely functionalist approach. Consequently, it is not surprising that residents focus primarily on housing during surveys.

In the present day, there has been a noticeable shift in this situation. According to N. Semmoud's observations on residential changes in Algiers, there is now a positive perception of chic neighborhoods such as Ain Benian, where residents can enjoy coffee with their neighbors outside their homes. Similarly, J. C. David highlights that in today's globalized context, citizens must learn to identify with a new-shared identity. With more women entering the workforce and leaving their homes, new notions of work and leisure time are emerging for both genders. This free time can now be spent in new public leisure spaces. T. Paquot (2009) has developed a concept of "debonair integration" in the European context, where individuals experience a direct and evident coexistence and a sense of belonging to a society that depends, in part, on the quality of these public spaces. The pandemic crisis of 2020-2021 has further emphasized the feeling of space and social life deprivation and underscored the importance of parks, gardens, public squares, and promenades.

In the town of Mila, such spaces were once present in the old town. E. Wirth's (1997) study of Maghreb cities suggests that public spaces are likely to be culturally specific, bearing a cosmopolitan influence that reflects the characteristics inherited from the Roman and Byzantine periods when public spaces played an important role. As the Islamic conquest and subsequent conversion to Islam took place, the Arab-Muslim urbanization pattern gradually emerged while still preserving the original urbanization marked by the Greco-Roman style, despite their differences. The traditional Arab city of ancient times was built around a center that provided culture, scientific and religious education, known as a "djamaa," and examples of such centers still exist today: El Azhar in Egypt, El Kairouan in Tunis, and the Sidi Ghanem mosque in Mila itself.

Over time, the functionalist outlook has become ingrained in urban planning, which endeavors to rejuvenate public spaces to foster social connections (F. Kettaf). The objective is to rebuild diverse urban fragments in informal settlements to promote urban continuity, in essence, to envision public spaces as a place for communal living. Additionally, Fadila Kettaf mentions conceptual tools that could be utilized to develop spaces where various forms of collective living can be better expressed. Which models should be referenced? In truth, there is a strong feeling within the Algerian context that everything needs to be (re)invented! Thus, this article seeks to address this issue. Its aim is to explore the integration of these public spaces into neighborhood activities, relying on a survey of residents and an ecological approach to pedestrian and cycling amenities separated from automobile traffic. Furthermore, the project also focuses on designing a center of attraction in the city, providing a sustainable development center near the metropolis of Constantine.

METHODOLOGY

In this article, we aim to examine the evolution of public space and urbanization in Algeria, with a particular focus on the city of Mila. Our research draws on a variety of sources, including urban planning documents, articles, reports, and laws, as well as field surveys and observations. To gain a better understanding of the state of public spaces in Mila, we conducted reconnaissance trips and made regular visits to observe the environment, identify its characteristics, and document the practices and behaviors of users in relation to the space. We also conducted interviews with local government officials and city managers to gain their perspectives on public space in Mila.

To study the use of public spaces in Mila, we developed a questionnaire and conducted interviews with users of the public spaces we studied. These interviews provided valuable insights into the practices, modes of appropriation, and social dynamics of each public space. We also examined

attendance patterns and conflicts between users, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the social life of public spaces.

Throughout our research, we utilized a range of data collection techniques, including observation, interviews, and consultation with public actors at the provincial and municipal levels. By combining these approaches, we aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of public space in Mila and its impact on the social life of the city.

Mila: a particular study context

Mila, a town in Southern Kabylie near Constantine, its origins can be traced back to an ancient Byzantine center, to which a small colonial center was later added. After independence, Mila was designated the center of the province and given an administrative city, a new urban housing zone (ZHUN), and several large collective housing complexes. However, the rapid growth of construction in the peripheral area occurred without any real urban planning. Plot sizes vary depending on the buyer's budget, resulting in buildings of varying heights and a lack of standard alignments. In this peripheral area, apart from parking lots that occupy certain open spaces, public spaces are undeveloped, and the only public spaces available are in the city center. As noted by L. Yamani and S. M. Trache (2020) regarding Mostaganem, this reflects the authorities' focus on producing housing rather than building the city itself. Their primary concern has been to provide land for building to the middle and upper classes, without any attention to the quality of coherent spatial planning.

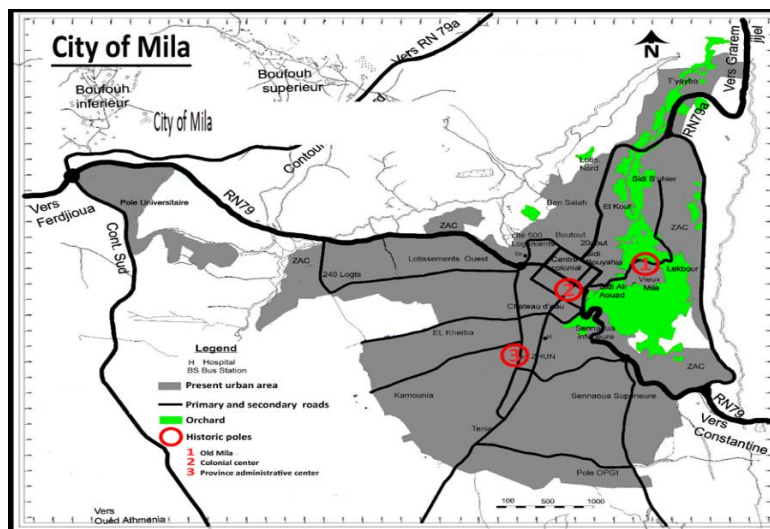


Figure 1: Urbanization of city of Mila

Public spaces in the city center

The city of Mila is characterized by an unequal distribution of public spaces, a phenomenon that reflects disparities in urban development between the city center and its peripheral areas. Mila's center, which hosts the main administrative, commercial, and cultural infrastructures, benefits from a higher concentration of public spaces, such as gardens and squares (see figure.), providing residents with places for relaxation, social interaction, and leisure. These spaces are not only better equipped but also play a key role in the urban social life.

In contrast, the peripheral areas of the city are severely underdeveloped in terms of public amenities. These neighborhoods, often made up of informal or illegal settlements, suffer from a serious lack of quality open spaces for residents. The rapid growth of these areas, largely driven by rural migration and unplanned urbanization, has led to overpopulation and unregulated land use, leaving little room

for the creation of public spaces. The focus has frequently been on housing construction, without a comprehensive plan for integrating communal areas to meet residents' needs for recreation and socialization.

This imbalance in the distribution of public spaces exacerbates social and urban inequalities in Mila. While city center residents enjoy well-maintained parks and squares, those living in the peripheral zones, often the most vulnerable, are deprived of these essential infrastructures that contribute to a harmonious urban life. The lack of public spaces in these neighborhoods not only affects the residents' quality of life but also contributes to social exclusion, deepening the sense of isolation and marginalization of the peripheral populations.

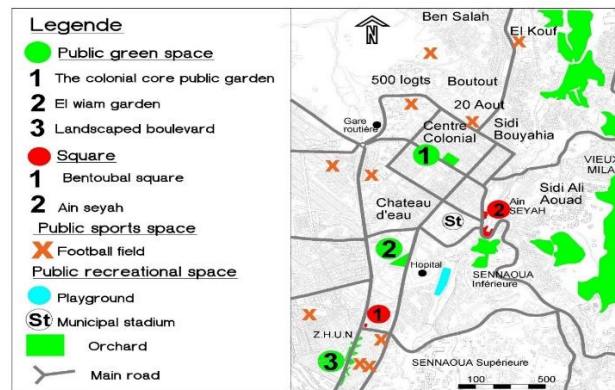


Figure 2: Public spaces in the centre of the city

Ain Siyah Square is a large, open space covering 28,948 m² that is frequently used for hosting events in the city. Historically, a public fountain was located at the site, which was used as a meeting place for local residents. The fountain has since been removed and the square has undergone transformation with the development of a covered canal in the wadi and the creation of a promenade, which connects the square to old Mila. The square also features shops and cafes, making it a popular destination for Milevians during their leisure time.

There are three planted areas of varying sizes in the city. The Chaaboub Rachid garden is located in the old colonial nucleus and is fenced in like traditional European public gardens. It contains preserved rosebushes and ornamental plants from the colonial period, which have been partly regenerated. The El Wiam Garden has a surface area of 4,680 m² and is situated on the Boulevard de l'ALN, which links the south of the city to the centre. The garden is surrounded by three roads, including the main boulevard, and is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Young people attending the Benarima brothers' high school often frequent this garden. Approximately 65% of the garden's surface is planted, and work carried out in 2016 has increased its attractiveness. The garden serves as a relaxation spot for young people and a waiting area for high school students and visitors to the Maghlaoua Hospital.

The boulevard of the wilaya was once a wadi bed and covers an area of 6,038.76 m². Over the years, it has undergone several transformations, including conversion into a single lane and later into a double lane with a median strip in the middle. The watercourse has been drained, and a public space has been developed along the southern part of the boulevard. Additionally, concreted arcades and green spaces have been created on both sides of the road. The boulevard now features concrete benches and trees in the middle and on the sides. The quality of its layout and cleanliness, along with its surrounding administrative buildings, including the House of Culture, the El Moudjahid Museum,

the Treasury headquarters, and the Directorate of Programming and Budgetary Monitoring, all contribute to its appeal. Kiosks and small shops are dotted throughout the space.

Although other public spaces were planned, the city opted to sacrifice some of them to make room for new constructions. Unfortunately, this decision led to the abandonment of the garden in the El Kouf neighbourhood, which had a surface area of 2,200 m², in favour of a public facility. Similarly, the Sennaoua Garden, which covered a vast area of 12,880 m² and was located at the city entrance on the RN 79, was eventually replaced by the Cour de Justice. The public space in the northern housing estate was intended to be a designated area for social gatherings and recreational activities. However, the local authorities did not adhere to the master plan and instead constructed a primary school on the site.

The lack of public space in the peripheral urban areas.

Open spaces located outside the central part of the city are significantly underdeveloped and are mostly occupied by parking lots near buildings. The southeastern part of the city, extending from the city center to the end of Route de Constantine, was the focus of our analysis. The primary objectives were inspired by S. Pincetl's (2005) recommendations for enhancing the presence of nature in the city, as it already exists but is frequently overlooked. Land can be transformed into green spaces that offer various activities, such as vegetable gardens, orchards, small sports fields, children's gardens, or meeting places for the elderly.

Throughout our analysis, we have taken into account previous research on public spaces in Annaba (A. Benzarara and A. Acidi 2021), specifically the usage of these spaces by diverse populations and their habits and preferences based on age and gender. Due to the somewhat ambiguous understanding of public space and desired amenities in these poorly organized urban districts, consultation with local inhabitants was necessary.

Meeting the Expectations of Residents

The survey questionnaire

To ensure that public spaces effectively fulfill their intended purpose of promoting well-being and leisure for various activities such as meeting, crossing, sitting, resting, observing, waiting, visiting, playing, and participating in events, it is necessary to meet the expectations of users. As such, we conducted a survey of 270 local inhabitants to gain insight into their expectations.

The survey was conducted in October 2019 in three public spaces located in the southern part of the city, with the assistance of two experienced urban engineers who possess comprehensive knowledge of the city and its urbanization. The questionnaire consisted of four sections: the first section provided information on the user's profile, the second section focused on usage (type and frequency), the third section addressed the characteristics of the public space surveyed and its quality, while the fourth and final section gathered the expectations of the local inhabitants regarding the public space and the necessary actions according to their preferences.

To ensure a clear understanding of the questions, the interviewers were trained before conducting the survey. They first counted the number of users in the three public spaces: El Wiam, Place Bentouba, and Boulevard de la Wilaya. After obtaining authorization from the local authorities, we mobilized the interviewers to work half a day each (two per site in the morning and afternoon) for a week to determine the sample size and the number of people to be interviewed. We chose a sample size of 20% in relation to the total number of users counted during the week, from which we calculated an average number of visitors per day. A random sample of 80 people was used for the El Wiam garden, 70 for Bentouba Square, and 120 people for the area developed on the Boulevard de la Wilaya.

Users of public spaces:

The southern zone's public spaces are primarily utilized by students and workers. Within the El Wiam garden, students make up 30% of the user population while workers comprise 47.50%. Pensioners constitute only 10% of the garden's users, likely due to the garden's proximity to administrative and school facilities. The garden's small shops also attract unemployed individuals from a diverse range of geographical origins. Bentoubal Square, located across from the wilaya building, receives the highest number of users from outside the Mila agglomeration. It has become a hub for protests and serves as a space for community discussions. The majority of users near this square live, work, or study in the surrounding area. Boulevard de la Wilaya is another popular space for district residents, with 93% of users originating from the area. Bentoubal Square sees primarily worker activity, with 66% of users fighting for their rights or addressing problematic situations. Unemployed individuals make up a smaller percentage and typically join in social or political demonstrations. Students and pensioners make up 16% and 13% of the user population, respectively.

The frequency of visitors to each location varies. The El Wiam garden and Boulevard de la Wilaya receive daily visitors, while Place Bentoubal sees fewer visitors. An analysis of the El Wiam garden's visitation frequency shows that 36% of users are regulars. These users often include students from the Benarima high school and civil servants working in administrative facilities near the garden. They frequently visit the small shops and restaurants within the garden during their daily routines. Similarly, Boulevard de la Wilaya is also regularly visited by residents of nearby housing estates during their off-peak hours and on weekends. Respondents note that they also frequent other public spaces, with the most popular being the Chaaboub Rachid garden and Ain Essiyah square located in the city center.

The public spaces surveyed in the southern zone are not just places of waiting and transit but also spaces for social interaction. The survey revealed that although neighborhood sociability is not systematic, it does exist and occurs at furtive moments. These results indicate that public spaces in the southern zone are indeed places where different forms of sociability can be developed and fostered.

Bentoubal Square has been a gathering place for protesters, with respondents stating that participants come from all over the wilaya for a specific cause. As these movements develop and renew themselves, participants get to know each other, and the gatherings foster relationships and ties among them. Users of El Wiam garden and Boulevard de la Wilaya also reported meeting new acquaintances in these public spaces. Some even stated that Boulevard de la Wilaya is the only place where they can gather and meet up with friends and acquaintances. These findings suggest that public spaces in the southern zone are not only functional but also serve as a hub for social interaction and community building.

According to the survey results, 60% of respondents perceive public spaces as green spaces, often referred to as public gardens. Respondents emphasized the significance of the "green" character of these spaces, with 20% of them directly associating public space with Chaaboub garden located in the colonial city center. For these respondents, the garden is considered a heritage and symbolic of their history. Additionally, 8% of respondents believe that the garden is a common space for all, and the state is responsible for its maintenance for the well-being of the population. These findings highlight the importance of green spaces and public gardens in the perception of public spaces in the southern zone.

Gender relations

The survey results indicate that despite the influence of the West on gender relations, there is still a persistence of gender inequality in the southern zone. The population's lifestyle has changed, and

women have gained more emancipation, participation in economic development, and inclusion in politics. However, social norms continue to perpetuate the inequality between men and women, resulting in an invisible world governed by gender separation and male domination that sidelines women in traditional mechanisms. The Muslim culture's prohibition of coeducation also influences the behavior of individuals, where public life is seen as the domain of men. These findings suggest that gender inequality remains a significant issue in the southern zone, and cultural norms continue to play a significant role in perpetuating these inequalities.

According to the survey results, there is a significant disparity in the use of public spaces in Mila based on gender, with men utilizing them at a rate of 84%, while women only use them at a rate of 16%. Women are confined to specific areas in public spaces, often segregated from cafeterias and male groups where their presence is unwelcome. Women are rarely seen alone in public spaces, being only transient visitors. For instance, they may wait for hospital doors to open at El Wiam garden or participate in protest movements at Bentouba Square, particularly during demonstrations that occurred in February 2019. Women also tend to wait for buses at designated stops along Boulevard de la Wilaya. The study's findings suggest that only a small number of women frequent public spaces, indicating a significant gender disparity. The survey did not include children, but some participants noted the lack of public spaces designed for them.

Dissatisfactions and expectations:

The results of the survey conducted among public space users in the southern zone have revealed several dissatisfactions and expectations. Visitors of El Wiam garden have highlighted that the garden's water fountain, which provides a sense of well-being, is rarely turned on. Furthermore, the garden's location on a busy street of (National Liberation Army Boulevard) results in a lack of peace and quiet. The noise caused by students from Benarima High School, who occupy the garden during entrance and exit hours, further detracts from the garden's tranquility, which is undesirable for those seeking a peaceful environment. As for Bentouba Square, users feel that it is lacking in terms of design, natural surroundings, comfort, and street furniture. However, 10% of the respondents appreciate the atmosphere, which they attribute to the water fountain at the roundabout in front of the space.

According to the survey results, young people in the southern zone reject the conventional design and layout of public spaces, feeling that they do not meet their needs. They perceive these spaces as too small for activities such as cycling and rollerblading and rate them poorly in terms of the design of greenery, as well as the atmosphere, both visually (landscape, colors) and acoustically. On the other hand, seniors appreciate the traditional forms, the environment, and the tranquility of these public spaces. They reminisce about the good old days when the city was much greener, with trees, orchards, and allotments.

The results of the survey indicate that the management of existing public spaces in the southern zone is inadequate. The El Wiam garden is rarely maintained by APC services, leading to frustration among frequent users of the space. Some interviewees criticized the designers for a lack of imagination and excessive paving, resulting in a shortage of trees and planted areas. This design flaw makes it challenging to remain in Bentouba Square, especially during the hottest summer days, as users suffer from direct exposure to the heat.

In addition to design problems, management issues such as cleanliness, furniture, and maintenance of green spaces were also noted. A young man from Belatar housing estate near Bentouba Square commented that he and other young people of the Hirak movement found the square to be the best place for protests in front of the wilaya headquarters. However, it was impossible to stay in the square for an extended period due to the lack of comfort.

Despite varying preferences among interviewees, the survey results indicate a strong desire for local green spaces. With an increase in construction and population density, residents prioritize local green spaces for their aesthetic appeal, seeking a pleasant and peaceful living environment. The majority of respondents prefer green spaces because they offer moments of tranquillity in the heart of the city and provide opportunities for relaxation and enjoyment that can foster a sense of belonging. However, in underprivileged neighborhoods, the quality of public spaces appears to be inadequate for the resident population.

A complementary survey in an illegal housing area:

The results of the complementary survey in the Sennaoua housing estate reinforce the need for a diverse range of public spaces that cater to the varied needs and preferences of the residents. The desire for spaces for walking, cycling, and sports fields highlights the need for spaces that are both functional and provide opportunities for entertainment and leisure. The absence of public spaces is seen as a lack of urbanity, suggesting a desire for a more vibrant and lively urban environment. The dreams of the two young administrative employees for a lively promenade with greenery further highlight the desire for public spaces that not only serve functional needs but also provide opportunities for social interaction and leisure activities.

Conclusion

The survey conducted in the city of Mila revealed a deficiency of public spaces throughout the phases of urbanization, especially in modern phases where illicit neighborhoods are void of public spaces. Additionally, the survey revealed that women experience gender inequality in the use of public spaces as they tend to avoid male-dominated spaces that are unwelcoming and unsafe for them. This is consistent with Djelloul G's analysis of the restriction of women's mobility in the outskirts of Algiers, where women are viewed as undesirable in public spaces and are seen as intruding on men's personal space.

To address these issues, it is necessary to enhance the environment and transform public spaces by reclaiming the banks of the wadis and renaturing them to provide inhabitants with spaces that promote urban ecology. UN Habitat emphasizes the importance of public spaces in successful urbanization as they create a sense of belonging and community where quality of life can be improved. To achieve sustainable urban development, public spaces should be used to combat inequality in the distribution of urban space by establishing public spaces that are accessible to women through the creation of women's and family spaces.

It is also crucial to consider women's needs in the design of Muslim public spaces, which will enable the inclusion of other populations such as young children. The organization of public spaces should respond to the area's particular history and context to reinforce the image of a green city and its history in the user's memory.

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