Medina: The Alternative and Hidden Sides of Fez el Bali

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Title: Medina: the Alternative and Hidden Sides of Fez el Bali

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Abstract:

The project Medina: the Alternative and Hidden Sides of Fez el Bali is prompted by a general question – what does the space inside the old medina quarters tell about the history, culture, and contemporary society of Morocco. The project aims to help uncover, but not to conclude, the relationship between the space and residents inside the old medina of Fez el Bali. Employing a combination of photography works, computer images by AutoCAD Architecture, and digital mapping samples by AutoCAD Map, the project is to offer a preview of a potential platform archiving both first-hand visual documents and creative artworks. It is to encourage the adaption of digitalized visual information in local effort of heritage preservation, and hence expected for helping further relevant studies and projects regarding the contemporary Moroccan society.
Background:

**Fez Medina – the World Cultural Heritage**

Entering through any one of these Babs (big gates) around the Fes el Bali, you would feel being placed in a real labyrinth where there are 9,000 small roads (Houdek, 11). Some of these roads are only a few feet wide from wall to wall, and most of them seem to lead to nowhere but probably everywhere. As walking through the inner space of Fes el Bali, your gaze is drawn ahead to the “sky-lit breaks in the walls and ceilings enclosing your passage. But as reach any one of these openings, its quality as a one-time focal point of your path disappears and another near-distant opening draws your gaze again. As in an ever-receding desert, your arrival seems deferred” (McLaren, 9).

Established in 808 A.D. as the first capital of Morocco, Fes el Bali, reached its present-day size around the 13th century (UNSCO). Along with a later extension Fez Jedid founded in 1276, Fes el Bali, or Fez medina quarter as appeared in most English references, is still the largest pedestrian city in the world. Although Fez medina lost the title as a capital in 1912 when the French re-located the capital to Rabat, it is still the cultural and spiritual center of the Maghreb nation (Houdek, 11). With around 200,000 Fassi (Fez people) living inside the medina quarter, Fez medina has a very high population density – 800 to 1200 persons/hectare comparing other urban areas in Morocco (Radoine). As stated by Hassan Radoine, an Assistant Professor of Department of Architectural Engineering in University of Sharjah, UAE, Fez medina has about 13,385 buildings, 3,000s historic monuments, and it is “a most sophisticated built environment.
with an architecture and urban intricacy.” Surrounded and enclosed by historic wall of around 20 kilometers long and 20 - 30 feet high, Fez medina is a most active historic site with vibrant artisanship in Morocco (Radoine).

In 1976, Fez was nominated for World Cultural Heritage and later officially inscribed in 1981. As a juncture of the past and the present, the continuation of old styles and adaption of modernization, Fez medina is “the fruition of a long experiment in Arab-Muslim urban design that has its roots in the pre-Islamic past and its decline in modernity. For all their apparent inscrutability and potent connotations of traditional Muslim life, these medinas are neither timeless nor an immutable expression of Arab-Muslim, including Moroccan, civilization” (O’Meara, 7).

As claimed by the World Heritage program, the Fez medina “not only represents an outstanding architectural, archaeological, and urban heritage, but also transmits a lifestyle, skills and a culture that persist and are renewed despite the diverse effects of the evolving modern societies” (UNESCO). With its “architectural language that is deeply indebted to the Islamic heritage” (McLaren, 12) and other cultural and historical values, the Fez medina is a universal city museum that deserves comprehensive preservation effort from the entire world.

Fez Medina in the Contemporary Era

Since 1981, being one of World Cultural Heritage sites by UNESCO has definitely introduced the Fez medina to a larger international stage. Particularly among the tourist community worldwide, the Fez medina is definitely renowned as one of these must-see

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sites in North Africa. Being under the international spotlight, the Fez medina has stepped into and is still in a complication facing dynamical issues from globalization, modernization, and ruralization.

Under the mission of UNESCO’s World Heritage program, a series of preservation campaigns from both the international and local have taken place during last three decades. However, as Houdek described in his thesis, “Morocco is the largest pedestrian city in the world, a walled city, and has proven a challenge for various preservation campaigns over the years and since first being inscribed in the (World Heritage) program’s early years” (Houdek 8). The complexity of the medina’s historical root as well as its cultural diversity brings challenges to the preservation work in terms of coverage of immaterial heritage elements and the maintaining of the medina’s cultural richness. One side product out of such dilemma is the preservation under tourism – the “aestheticized preservation campaigns” (Houdek, 18).

“As a result of the French and Italian preservation efforts — which were conducted for the purposes of providing an authentic tourist experience — the Islamic cultural heritage of North Africa continues to be read through the lens of European colonial domination” (McLaren, 12). My personal experiences of visiting these historical sites lean to be a solid confirmation of such touristy phenomenon pictured by McLaren. The majority of visiting groups in the Fez medina are foreigners. The past preservation and development of the medina were yielded toward the preference of tourism. More real estate investment flow into the old cites in the old medina, and a growing number of hotels and “Moroccan food” restaurants and “authentic Berber” craft shop are
constructed for business with the foreign visitors. “The monuments and the urban fabrics of the Moroccan Medinas of Casablanca, Marrakesh, and Fez became ‘caught up in the commercialization of Moroccan art, past and present... in the guise of protecting it.’ Privileged Europeans could come to Morocco, stay in the French urban districts with all of their modern conveniences, and tour the traditional Moroccan cities at their leisure. Such preservation projects thus became a western stage-setting for Moroccan life ‘in order to create’ a Disneyland world “(Wright, 157-159).

In addition, following by Morocco’s modernization process, the Fez medina “is evidently a far cry from these basic, essentially militarist beginnings” (O’Meara, 8). Expectation of making the Fez medina become the continuation of the traditional and the transition to the modern just adds another thick layer of difficult to these preservationists and policy makers. What challenges “architects, designers, and developers in their efforts (is) not only to preserve the rich cultural heritage of Middle Eastern cities but to shape these urban spaces in ways that address the physical and socioeconomic pressures occurring within them.” (O’Meara, 6).

Another ongoing issue inside the Fez medina is “ruralization”. Told by Sadik Rddad, an English professor at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University in Fez, after Morocco declared independence, the socio-economical elite groups of Fassi started to move to coastal cities like Casablanca where they believed would be the future eco-political center of Morocco. Thus, there was and still is a “vacuum” left over in the old medina. The existence of the physical and socio-economical vacuum attracted and is still attracting the rural population and foreign capitals. Thus, the old medina quarter is

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under a process could be titled as "ruralization" due to the enormously increasing population from rural regions. Such process actually enhances the lack of local awareness toward the heritage value of the Fez medina. " ‘no one actually cares about cultural heritage value. They only care about the tourist element,” said by Davis (pseudonym), an American expatriate living in Fez (Houdek, 82). “ ‘at the end of the day it's about making money, supporting their families, and about survival’, that is, Davis suggests that the locals see no intrinsic value in the preservation of their heritage as it is materially represented.”

Davis also suggested that the international (preservation) projects only focus on the large-scale and highly visible monuments and material project in the medina (Houdek, 82). And most preservation campaigns usually neglect the importance of intangible heritage\footnote{UNESCO’s definition of intangible heritage: “Intangible Cultural Heritage means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.” <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ch/en/convention>.} because its practices are unable to be so easily promulgated as universal in value given their essential immaterial character” (Houdek, 29). The effects that globalization, modernization, and ruralization have on local populations and communities are indeed related to the preservation process. The difficulty in maintaining local intangible culture elements brings the overall preservation work into a phase in which comprehensive understanding of cultural heritage and creative tools are desired.

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Objects:

Questions behind the Space in the Medina

What is behind the change of the space inside the medina? Either to the macro scale of modification such as roads and parks, or on the smaller level of architectural reconstruction such as interior improvement? How are the socio-economical factor driving the life of local residents inside the medina? What motivates the Fassi living in the medina quarter to keep changing the spatial substance within the community? How this could help the better regulation/community creating, by studying the physical space within the inhabitation of a community?

What Matters?

The medina is not at its final stage; instead, it is changing and will keep evolving. Before a heritage becomes a history, effective and insightful work are needed in practical application of heritage conservation. Also, the Fassi need “a new paradigm of designing urban spaces for sustainability — comprehensive in that it encompasses all physical components of human settlements such as buildings, streets, public spaces, and infrastructure; balanced in that it supports physical and economic growth while accommodating the traditional and cultural needs of the local community; responsive in that it protects and enhances the health, safety, and general wellbeing of inhabitants; and innovative in that it incorporates new technologies into designs so as to reduce the stress on the natural environment” (O’Meara, 6).

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Thus, the project *Medina: the Alternative and Hidden Sides of Fez el Bali* is to behave as a preview of a potential platform archiving both first-hand visual documents and creative artworks, and hence expected for helping further relevant studies and projects in terms of the contemporary medina life. The project is to suggest various ways in discovering the role of the medina quarter among the lives of Moroccans. It is to find creative methods to visualize the communities and interactions of different groups inside the medina quarter. It is to find visualization-based approaches to examine and re-present the connections among interior space, urban setting, and community construction in the medina quarter.

By employing visual works, the project aims to encourage and inspire further proposals or ideas toward creation of heritage conservation tools using advanced information technology, and thus to utilize the values of the intangible heritage of Fez el Bali, for worldwide academia and scholarships.

**The Visual Portfolio**

In the end of the article, a set of samples of personal visual work during ISP period are attached to demonstrate potential formats of creative tool. Further explanation and reflection would be given in the project presentation time taking place on 12/8/2015 at CCCL in Rabat, Morocco.

**Photography** -- To document the scenes of the medina which are not usually seen or neglected by both the tourists and local Fassi, and thus to present and hope to rise up the appreciation of medina’s aesthetic complexity, architectural

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intelligence, foresight of old-time engineering and urban planning back to a thousand years ago. Photography works from specific angles, such as looking upward from the ground level, are to examine the people’s interpretation of public space in different occasions. It is also to encourage local artists to participate in contributing to presentation of the non-touristy image of the Fez medina.

**Computer Imaging** – 2D and 3D modeling present the “skeleton” (the framework and spatial dynamics) of specific architectures. Using computer imaging technology can lead to a better understanding of Fassis’ interpretation of space. As a growing number of deconstruction and reconstruction are going on inside the medina, the change of domestic space could reflect the tension between personal space and public space, or the impact of individualism to traditional value of being an individual.

**Digital Mapping** – How the living space and collective data in an area where massive human actions are taking on would reflect the cultural shifting and mainstream value? The hidden words and untold facts are enormous behind the collective data. These data can be visualized into digital maps and thus to be used aiding civil construction and urban modification, as well as policy-making helps maintain the co-existence tradition and modernization. One practical application would be exanimating the geographical distribution of real estates in Fez medina owned by foreigners in order to study the impact under tourism and globalization. Such mapping could also provide comparative plots to see if the

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flow of foreign capitals has been potentially ‘pushing out’ Fassi inhabitants out of the medina. Another useful mapping topic can be study of the mosques’ locations in the medina. “The centripetal organization of the traditional Moroccan medina, whereby both economic activities and domestic residences were, broadly speaking, arranged in ascending order of religious and monetary value respectively, from periphery to center, likely has been followed from the start.” (O’Meara, 8). So digital mapping upon such topic would numerically help reveal the relationship between active social zone and the religious center.
Conclusion:

One great saying in *When Heritage Preservation Meets Living Memory- Constructing the Medina of Fez as a World Heritage Heterotopia* is that the preservation work of a cultural heritage should be “bottom-to-up”. The Fez history and culture will be preserved the best by the local communities – Fassi. Hence, one of the most vital parts in cultural preservation is to raise local awareness of the value of the heritage, and to bring encouragement to care more about the heritage from individual scale. That is Fassis’ culture, so they are the best and most influential preservationist.

The project is designed to be a “prototype”, or visual proposal, trying to introduce the importance of adapting creative artworks and advanced information technology in culture preservation work. My time and experience in Fez and other medina quarters in Morocco gave me the idea of the validity and possibility of composing such a multi-media archive center. The employment of multi-media formats in tooling the heritage preservation also makes the intangible part of the medina heritage visually tangible and digitally reachable.

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Visual Samples

Photography

Fez Medina

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Photography

Fez Medina – Pass way

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Photography

Fez Medina - Gap
Photography

Riad Verus – Interior

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Nejjarine

Nejjarine - Top View

Nejjarine - Perspective View

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Computer Imaging

Riad Verus

Riad Verus – Top View

Riad Verus - Perspective View

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Digital Mapping

Note: the black outlines are urban roads inside the medina of Fes el Bali. The lines are digitally drawn based upon image sources from Google Map and Bing Map. Colorful dots and rectangles are representation of atriums in each traditional house inside the medina. The variation of colors is to imply the diversity of local cultures.
Cited Works:


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