Youth Perceptions and Constructions of Urban Space in Morocco

Hadwynne Gross

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Youth Perceptions and Constructions of Urban Space in Morocco
Hadwynne Gross
Rabat, Morocco, Africa
SIT Study Abroad, Spring 2023

Academic Director: Dr. Et-Tibari Bouasla
Advisor: Dr. Mourad Mkinsi
Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for Morocco: Migration and Transnational Identity
Clark University - Geography, Ethics and Public Policy

“We must consider not just the city as a thing in itself, but the city being perceived by its inhabitants.”
Kevin Lynch, The Image of the City
Abstract

Moroccan urban spaces are influenced by 800 years of history, and in particular, legacies of colonialism. This research seeks to examine urban space in Morocco through the lens of youth between the ages of 18 and 25 in the capital city of Rabat. Inspired by the book *The Image of the City* by Kevin Lynch, this research uses a variety of qualitative methods, namely a semi-structured interview and two mental mapping exercises, to explore how youth in Rabat perceive the city’s ability to both adhere to its historical roots and adapt to a rapidly changing world. Exploring urban geography in Morocco through the youth lens offers valuable insight into urban identity, senses of belonging, relationships with community, definitions of authenticity, and attitudes towards development. This research found that Moroccan youth in Rabat are generally pleased with the modernization efforts happening in the city, such as the building of malls and other amenities, but fear infringement on old ‘authentic’ spaces and ways of life. Moroccan cities, heavily influenced by globalization and pressures to become ‘modern,’ are at a crossroads between efforts to attract global capital or adequately preserving their histories and identities.
Acknowledgements

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شكرًا

Wynnie Gross
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1. Introduction

Morocco is facing growing urban populations as urbanization rises across the globe. In 2021, over 64 percent of Moroccans lived in urban areas and cities and that number continues to rise (O’Neill, 2023). Both the physical makeup and the culture of Moroccan cities are influenced by historical processes. The rule of different empires, industrialization, globalization, and, most importantly, lasting legacies of colonialism are not only influencing, but embedded into the footprint of Moroccan urban spaces. Cities are often the site of political, cultural, social, and demographic change; as such, it is important to investigate human experience in urban spaces.

This research is inspired by the book *The Image of the City* by Kevin Lynch. In it, he points to the idea of the city as a complex and multifaceted entity. He writes, “At every instant, there is more than the eye can see, more than the ear can hear, a setting or a view waiting to be explored. Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequences of events leading up to it, the memory of past experiences.” The city is constructed by people and for people, and the physical environment can point us to how people feel connected to their culture, community, or family. In this, the mental images that people create are “product[s] of both immediate sensation and of the memory of past experience... The need to recognize and pattern our surroundings is so crucial.”

In Morocco, there is a “tension between urban planning and towns or cities as spaces of living” (Studer 2015). Morocco is a compelling example of urban space as it has been influenced by the history and architectural styles going back 800 years. In particular, the French colonial presence challenged the idea of the ‘modern city’ and created tensions between the interactions and sociospatial practices of those who live in more traditional settings like old medinas and those who lived in European-created spaces. The divide between traditional spaces and modern
spaces today creates conversations around urban development that are unique to the Moroccan context. Moroccan urban spaces being comprised of two fundamentally different planning outcomes, one being the Islamic space and the other being the European city, and those spaces existing in a singular city only divided by walls, makes it a fascinating case study. This research seeks to investigate how youth view and interact with these spaces and histories.

In doing this research, I am interested in the ways that urban spaces are perceived by youth, specifically how their perceptions of the ‘new’ city and ‘old’ city are different. Exploring urban geography in Morocco through the youth lens offers valuable insight into how the new generation views adaptation to modernity and simultaneous attempts to preserve history and identity. The way that people think about their relationship to urban space is linked to their views on community and sense of belonging, which are important for residents’ livelihoods. As Morocco grows and changes in the future, it will be important to study how cities adhere to their authentic and historical roots, while continuing to develop. It is my hope that this research also shines light on the need to celebrate and preserve Moroccan culture in the midst of rapid globalization processes and lasting colonial legacies.

2. Research Questions and Objectives

Upon my arrival to Morocco, I was fascinated by the way that Moroccans navigate around urban spaces. Coming from the suburban United States where most people’s primary form of transportation is the car and most are heavily reliant on GPS technologies like Google Maps, I could not help but notice that Moroccans view and interact with physical space in ways that reflect a different way of life. I thus began to question how the influence of multiple histories, cultures, and legacies impacts how Moroccan cities are built and why residents’
relationships with the city are different. I noticed that urban residents know each other through their shared spaces, and communities are often comprised of common landmarks like street corners or shops. With the distinct physical nature as well as unique ways of life, I figured that Moroccans use alternative ways to conceptualize urban space and thus interact with it differently.

My hypothesis is that youth perceptions and constructions of urban space in Morocco depend on the environments that they grew up, but in general, I think their constructions reflect a tie more to their localized environment and what they would consider their home community. The old medina is set up such that the streets are connected in all different ways, and you can only walk or bike through the space. Thus, I expect to find that people connect their sense of place more with the people and culture they see in that space, such as knowing where to turn when you see the person who you buy oranges from, or a shopkeeper you know well. Despite this, I also expect to hear from Moroccan youth that they may seek to live in the ‘new’ city and enjoy the amenities that come with the more modern areas when they have more freedom to do so. To examine these concepts, my research questions are as follows:

1. How do Moroccan youth ages 18 to 25 make mental constructions of urban spaces?

2. Does the construction of urban space tie youth more to community, particularly in the old medina setting?

3. Are perceptions and constructions of urban space impacted by Moroccan youth residence in the ‘old’ city versus the ‘new’ city?

4. How does Moroccan youth culture impact feelings about urban development and growth into the ‘new city’?

5. Are there cultural, economic, and/or social ties to the old city that relate to youth perceptions of urban ‘authenticity’?
3. Background

3.1 Cities and Social Change

Studying cities and the built environment can teach us a lot about the populations that reside there, as cities are a site of social change. Spaces mean different things to different people. People who live in cities construct their own ways of living, and thus construct what they think of as “authentic” to that city. It is in this way that users of cities perceive and sometimes contest notions of social norms, social change, and authenticity in urban space. By living and constructing space both physically and emotionally, people in cities “transform the spaces of conceived and represented authenticity into authentic lived spaces” (Piazzoni, 2018). In other words, urban dwellers both are impacted by and make an impact on the spaces that they exist in. As such, cities can help us to understand the intricacies of social change from generation to generation.

Cities are additionally seen as key drivers of economic development. In this realm, they can also be considered ‘modern’ spaces. ‘Modernity’ is a contested and often problematized concept. Although cities can aid in economic development and offer better opportunities to their inhabitants, they can also be playgrounds for the world’s unequal systems of power. Urban areas have been the world’s “economic dynamos” for centuries, mostly because they are able to attract skilled workers, are the site of productive businesses, and greatly benefit from economies of scale. As such, urbanization rates and GDP per capita tend to move in sync with country development. In Africa, urbanization rates are very high because many countries are in rapid development processes. The growth rate in Africa is ten times higher than it is in Europe, making urbanization in Africa an essential phenomenon to study (Mharzi Alaoui et al., 2022). Cities being drivers of economic development impacts their ability to affect social change because they
are often vehicles for people to find better economic opportunities, and thus higher qualities of life. Urban spaces are often the meeting point between the economy and greater society.

Morocco is a case study upon which one can examine urban growth, transition, and development processes because of its roots in colonial history and its contemporary movements and projects in ‘modernity’. In Morocco, the city is “constituted by interactions and sociospatial practices in local, regional, national and global contexts” and embedded in “dynamic networks of simultaneities” (Studer, 2015). Because of this, Moroccan cities can also point us to changing desires and dynamics in and around the cities. Studer argues that “there should be no division between urban studies of third world cities and urban studies of Western cities which are perceived to be ‘modern’ and are considered to be models for cities all over the world.” Cities are dynamic places and can be studied in the similar ways across cultures, economic outlooks, and political systems. Being a post-colonial state, Morocco faces challenges in adhering to historical tradition, challenging colonial legacies, and also continuing to develop in the context of a globalized economic system.

3.2 Cities in Morocco

Cities in Morocco are rapidly expanding. The urban population in Morocco has grown by 57.1 percent from 1994 to 2014, according to the Moroccan Department of Statistics about population and housing (Moreno-Navarro, 2022). More than two thirds of the total population of the country is concentrated in twenty percent of the most populated places. In a press release done by the High Commission for Planning in Morocco titled Répartition géographique de la population d’après les données du Recensement Général de la Population et de l’Habitat de 2014, it was reported that five regions constitute about three quarters of the country's households.
These regions include Greater Casablanca-Settat, Rabat-Salé-Kénitra, Marrakech-Safi, Fès-Meknes, and Tangier-Tétouan-Al Hoceima. Furthermore, seven large cities comprise more than a quarter of the country’s households, namely Casablanca, Fez, Tangier, Marrakech, Salé, Rabat, and Meknes. In terms of population dynamics, those same seven cities accounted for 25 percent of the total population and for 41 percent of the urban population (Bounoua et al., 2020).

The last census in Morocco in 2014 further documented that polarization dynamics in terms of population around big cities. The census confirmed that there is a somewhat defined urban sprawl phenomenon, indicating that urban growth is not concentrated in city center, but rather around their peripheries. There has been discussion about how the urban sprawl phenomenon is bound to “last and intensify in the coming decades, due to rural exodus and the extension of urban perimeters” and impact changes in urban environments (Bounoua et al., 2020). Although more than two thirds of the population do live in the major cities, the largest cities are not classified as megacities on the global scale. This raises questions about urban planning, sustainability, city livability, and migration patterns because these cities are not yet attracting larger-scale investment in global capital and populations. As Morocco’s cities are growing and the population is concentrating in and around them, Moroccan cities have experienced a lot of change, especially in recent decades.

Youth populations play a key role in maintaining the culture and essence of the city, and their views will have growing importance as modernization processes endure. Urban planning practices in Morocco in the modern day are trying to attract global capital. Cities like Casablanca, Rabat, Tangier and Fez are being redesigned and restructured to satisfy the desires and interests of global investment and specifically using state-space frameworks that seem structuralist. Additionally, these urban development movements are tending to take the focus
away from resident agency (Bogaert, 2012). The state wants to keep up with the realities of
global flows of capital but also has exercised significant power over city planning which has
differential impacts on the urban population and the “authenticity” of Moroccan culture. Youth
perceptions are an eye-opening account of what is important to Moroccan urban residents and
what values cities will be shaped by in the future. Youth conceptions of urban space can point to
changing cultural values and social norms, as well as can identify areas where government
services are lacking.

3.3 History of Urban Space in Morocco

The development of distinct urban cultures and unique spatial organization in Morocco
spans centuries of history. In *Constituting urban space in the Moroccan Context*, Heide Studer
examines the history of urban planning in Morocco; in particular, she looks at the influence of
the French colonial protectorate on Moroccan urban space. She discusses the development of
historical medinas as towns created by urban residents pre-colonization, elaborates on the 100
years of organized urban planning that began with the arrival of the French in the early 1900s,
and then identifies current debates about the role of cities in Moroccan society and culture. In her
piece, she emphasizes that cities are spaces for living and are constructed for and by urban
residents. As such, Moroccan cities and the built environment can lead us to interesting
conclusions about social, political, and cultural dynamics at play.

She begins by discussing the historical *medina*, which in Arabic translates to a town, city,
or historical center. The medina developed over time and is seen as the most authentic spatial
organization in Moroccan cities. The medina had an elaborate system of accessibility and
developed mainly based on neighborhoods of socially-related people. In other words, the
communities that existed in these spaces created them and maintained them. During this period before the French protectorate, the Moroccan state had a ‘laissez-faire’ attitude towards civil society and thus left the responsibility for infrastructural elements like roads, water, lighting, and social life to the inhabitants. As such, the main responsibility for the organization of the pre-colonial city, or the medina, was not on the shoulders of the government or administration but rather on the inhabitants to create their own space and subsequent way of life.

In terms of the physical makeup, the medina and informal quarters have a spatial organization that distinguishes residential areas from central areas. Centers in the medina have wider streets, which lead to them from other areas of the city. These centers are lined with shops, trades, and telephone and internet shops. Center parts, especially today, are places for both residents of the medina as well as people coming to visit the medina, whether that is tourists or residents of the city at large. The medina and informal quarters meet the needs of the residents and non-residents alike by providing open spaces like the centers and parks in addition to the smaller streets where residences are. The medina is structured around livability and continues to operate that way even today.

The French protectorate in Morocco lasted from 1912 until 1956, and greatly influenced both the physical nature and also culture of Moroccan cities. Colonies like Morocco were often used “experimental terrains” for urbanism, and as such, the urban planning in many Moroccan cities outside of medinas mirrors that of European cities. Morocco looks back on a century of professional urban planning completed by the French protectorate. In this period, the medinas were designated to be preserved in their state of being, which would allow them to exist side-by-side with the new experimental towns and cities being created by the French. At the same time, in the 1930s, the French authorities found maintaining the medinas difficult and had concerns
regarding living conditions for the Moroccans. The French urban planning measures lacked concepts for the Moroccan residents and thus their quality of life declined. In all, the French protectorate attempted to preserve the Moroccan way of life and exist in their state of being, but at the same time, the *villes europeannes* created for the newly arriving Europeans were more of a central focus. As Studer puts it, “the combination of a de facto authoritarian regime with modern architecture and urban planning made it possible to build ideal types of modern cities.”

As seen in the Moroccan context, urban life is “not based on a structure of atomized individuals … but on complex patterns of belonging.” The case of Morocco is interesting in that there are clear spatial divides between Morocco pre-colonization and Morocco post-colonization, and examining how those spaces interact can lead us to important conclusions about the systems of power at play in planning and governing urban spaces. Studer says that “spatial practices are seen as embedded in daily routines and they form recurring patterns incorporated into social structures” and that “neighborhoods continue to be organized around households, through mutual exchanges of attention, respect, support and goods.” With this in mind, the case of Morocco demonstrates Studer’s main point, which is that “urban space cannot be controlled or planned outright, it comes into being in permanent processes combining built structures and everyday practices of town and city people.”

### 3.4 Legacies of Colonialism

The French colonial presence has influenced Moroccan cities since their arrival and continues to impact them today. In *Urban design and architecture in the service of colonialism in Morocco*, Assia Lamzah writes about the ways in which the French used their power in urban policy and design in Morocco to continue to enforce their colonial regime. She writes about the
impact of the French protectorate on urban space still being present in the social and political processes of post-colonial Morocco. Even though the French presence did not last long, their legacy changed the physical landscape immensely; Thus, a lot of the urban spaces and architecture today reflect values and norms brought by the French during the colonial period. As Lamzah states, “under French colonialism, Morocco’s traditional cultural and political systems were disrupted, and spatial concepts and the physical landscapes were radically changed.”

France began its occupation of Morocco in 1912. They used new urban and architectural styles and took advantage of this playground for new types of urbanism. In this way, the French “manipulated urban space, the built environment, and cultural heritage to advance their colonial agenda.” In their altering of space, administrative and political lives became more centralized in the cities of Rabat and Casablanca, respectively, and both cities began to grow as a result. Other cities, such as Marrakech, Fez, and Meknes, which were previously the “core of the country’s urban structure,” remained stagnant because they were not the central interests of the colonizers making changes in the built landscape. With the French presence, changes in the urban landscape served colonists’ purposes in that they disrupted the Moroccan way of life in urban space and the cultural meaning space holds in Morocco. Instead of urban space being about people who live there, space during the colonial period became tied to politics and administration.

The French used an urban design and architecture method of separating the old medina from the ville nouvelle, which translates to “new city” in French, namely building a wall enclosing the old medina. It was introduced explicitly to, as Lamzah states, “point out the lack of functionality, hygiene, and order in pre-modern Morocco”. The way that the French kept the ville nouvelle completely separate from the medina illustrates their disapproval of the Moroccan traditional way of life and also demonstrates their need for power and control over the spaces.
Although the old medinas were preserved, the introduction of the *ville nouvelle* in Moroccan cities had a direct and big impact on people’s relationship with urban culture and space. Lamzah explains that “at the socio-cultural level, it had direct severe consequences on people’s definition of themselves, their identity, and their relationship to urban space as well as to what became later cultural heritage, while ‘modern’ urban space was perceived as superior in opposition to traditional, more functional”. With this in mind, they used the separation and also the building of the new city as a way to exert their influence, power, and concept of modernity onto Morocco.

Lamzah makes the claim that “the French pretended to preserve the medina by disallowing modernity. Indeed, they preserved it physically, but the social meaning of its space and the symbolism behind its layout and morphology were altered because it was misunderstood and misrepresented.” In this way, the pre-colonial Islamic urban way of life was disrupted and almost erased. Previously, there was “a symbolic meaning of space expressed in terms of house or compound size, dwelling form or distance between dwellings, related to social and cultural meaning”. As the French continued to exert their influence and power in the *ville nouvelle* creating new ‘modern’ spaces, this system was broken. Moroccan architecture was reduced to its aesthetic and picturesque aspects and not seen as a hygienic or acceptable way of life. More importantly, there was little effort by the Europeans to understand the social meaning of its space as well as of the cultural or social needs of the locals. Legacies of colonialism still impact Moroccan urban landscapes and create contesting definitions and conceptions of ‘modernity.’

### 3.5 Urban Gentrification and Questions of Authenticity

Moroccan cities are also affected by urban gentrification. In *Urban gentrification and its impacts on urban and architectural heritage appropriation: Marrakech medina*, Assia Lamzah
defines urban gentrification as the “process of transforming the economic and social profile of an old urban neighborhood to the benefit of a higher social class”. In urban gentrification, there are complex and interconnected impacts on space and social practices in cities. Especially in Morocco, the physical environment and social practices are closely linked, and thus the physical changes often affect social life, the perceptions of neighborhoods, and also create new meanings of spaces and new urban cultures.

Lamzah discusses that since the 1990s the process of urban gentrification developed in a context “characterized by the fact that medina space no longer met the changing needs of the local population, especially in terms of accessibility (use of the car), equipment and urban and architectural spatial organization.” In other words, Moroccan urban development did not meet the needs of the local population but rather met the needs of global audiences. Also, Lamzah states that “urban gentrification introduces new ways of life, until then foreign to the medina, new social, cultural and religious values, as well as a new behavior towards space and architecture.” Urban gentrification is an ongoing process and still affects the changes in people’s perceptions and feelings about urban space in Morocco.

Furthermore, there are many movements to create more ‘modern’ urban spaces in many Moroccan cities. And in these movements, urban gentrification is a driving force, but it is also raising questions about the role of the state in creating new spaces. In New State Space Formation in Morocco: The Example of the Bouregreg Valley, Bogaert writes about how the urban development project of the Bouregreg Valley demonstrates a way in which governments are trying to attract global capital rather than provide for the needs of its local residents. As Bogaert points out, “the reality of contemporary neo-liberal capitalism leads not so much to an unevenness between nations … as it produces a geography of uneven development within
national and regional boundaries.” In this way, the cities in Morocco are getting a lot of focus from policy-makers because cities are the sites “through which the global economy is coordinated, where surplus value is realized and accumulated.”

Three-quarters of the national GDP is generated within the urban economy, as pointed out by Bogaert, but the decisions in Morocco concerning big urban infrastructure or socioeconomic development are made with business in mind and not necessarily typical residents. For example, Bogaert points out that instead of investing in development and improvement in the medinas, they allowed the medina to deteriorate and “become transit zones for rural migrants … therefore inhabited by many poor tenants.” Bogaert argues that “just as the French had built their new modern cities around the Arab medina during the Moroccan Protectorate (1912–56), imposing a design of spatial and social segregation, current project[s] imposes an almost-similar segregation.” Bogaert says, “Urban development strategies such as the Bouregreg project led to the juxtaposition of privileged zones of inclusion where capital can design luxury and grandeur into its space, and the outside spaces where urban poverty and exclusion constitute the other side of this spatial division of consumption.”

Furthermore, the concept of authenticity is often contested in state-sponsored urban development projects. In Authenticity Makes the City, Piazzoni describes authenticity as “a dynamic relationship among people, places, and meanings.” Furthermore, the definition of authenticity affects the production of space. Authenticity and all that it entails determines the makeup of physical landscapes as well as how they are consumed and contested. It is also argued that authenticity can be used as a tool to attract certain populations and fabricate reality. As Piazzoni puts it, “urban designers fabricate the authenticity of historical places ad hoc by featuring the built environment with symbolic décor and layouts”, something that can definitely
be seen in Morocco’s old medinas in order to make them more consumable to tourists from the global North. Although authenticity is a contested concept, it is both hegemonic and also can be used as a “liberating apparatus,” both of which can create the city in different ways. Piazzi says that “authenticity, then, is more than a finite quality. It is a relational, dynamic, practice-related condition that emerges when individuals engage with the world around them.” Differing definitions of authenticity then, combined with movements of urban gentrification and state urban development projects, profoundly impact the creation of spaces.

3.6 Perceptions and Constructions of Space

Many things impact the creation of urban space, including politics, economy, culture, social relations, et cetera. But, as Kevin Lynch argues in *The Image of the City*, the city itself consists more of just the built environment. He says, “At every instant, there is more than the eye can see, more than the ear can hear, a setting or a view waiting to be explored. Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequences of events leading up to it, the memory of past experiences.” Furthermore, he says, “Moving elements in a city, and in particular the people and their activities, are as important as the stationary physical parts. We are not simply observers of this spectacle, but are ourselves a part of it, on the stage with other participants.”

As he mentions, the city is not a singular entity, but is involved in complex system involving the built environment, urban culture, and inhabitants. He says, “We must consider not just the city as a thing in itself, but the city being perceived by its inhabitants.” The way that Moroccans perceive their urban spaces can point to their relationships with economy, community, and culture. Lynch also writes, “In the process of way-finding, the strategic link is
the environmental image, the generalized mental picture of the exterior physical world that is held by the individual. This image is the product of both immediate sensation and of the memory of past experience, and it is used to interpret information and to guide action. The need to recognize and pattern our surroundings is so crucial…that this image has wide practical and emotional importance to the individual.” Cities are complex organs filled with many interconnected entities. The city both is affected by and affects its inhabitants, and as such, the built environment can clue us into the changes in society, economy, politics, and culture that exist in any region of the world.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Study Area

This research was carried out in Rabat, Morocco, and more broadly the Rabat-Salé-Kénitra region, which has a population of 4,552,585. Rabat, as the capital city of Morocco, takes on the role of being the administrative center of the country and “embodies a century of entanglement between pre- and post-colonial Morocco and the modernization efforts of the French Protectorate” (Wagner and Minca, 2013). When the French arrived in 1912, Louis Hubert-Gonzalve Lyautey, the first and longest French Protectorate Resident-General, pushed a very specific vision for redesigning Moroccan urban landscapes, especially in Rabat. Pulling lessons from other colonial failures, Lyautey thus decided to “build and enforce a ‘dual city’ within Rabat, one side focusing on the preservation of Moroccan ‘heritage’, with the other focusing on the acceleration of (French) modernity”.

The city in the modern day is heavily influenced by the fact that it was a playground for French urbanist experiment during the colonial period. Additionally, it is now influenced by state-dominated urban development projects like in the Bouregreg Valley, which is constructing a space for new malls and restaurants. Under the reign of King Mohammed VI, “the launch of urban megaprojects and large-scale infrastructural works came to characterize a new development strategy… trying to link networks of investment capital in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East and if possible, Asia and the United States.” In other words, Rabat as the capital city is influenced by investments from foreign actors, changing cultures, and colonial legacies, making it an interesting city to study from the perspective of urban construction and perception. It is a modern city that is the site of much state influence and shifting cultural values.
4.2 Overview and Participant Profiles

In order to study these concepts and themes, I used a series of different qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, and then two mental mapping activities with 4 selected participants. Two participants were female, and two participants were male. Three participants lived in the ‘new’ city, and only one participant selected lived in the old medina. All four participants are residents of the Rabat-Salé-Kénitra region of Morocco and thus the study area was selected for this reason. Participants were selected based on prior relationships and friendships; Due to the relatively-short amount of time to complete the project, I only focused on these four participants. I spent between 45 to 60 minutes interviewing each participant. For research purposes, I refer to each participant with the title Participant A, Participant B, Participant C, and Participant D. I met each participant at a different time in a public park in Rabat. I used notes and voice recordings to gather my data, and then also provided the supplies for the mapping activities. The qualitative data collection happened over the course of three days.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Old Medina</td>
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</table>

Figure 2. Participant Profiles
4.3 Semi-Structured Interview

I firstly conducted a semi-structured interview with each participant. The purpose of the interview was to examine how participants’ backgrounds impacted their thoughts and perceptions of the city of Rabat. The interview included three main sections and associated guiding questions with each section. The first section was about general participant information, specifically their age, gender, occupation, and hobbies or interests. The second section is about the participants’ homes and backgrounds. I asked questions about the physical nature of their home residence, the way they interact with their home residence, and their relationship with their home community or neighborhood and if they feel tied to it. Through these questions, I aimed to get a sense of how they relate to their home environments and how that might impact their other answers in the interview. The last section is about participants’ relationships with Rabat and their perceptions of the changes occurring throughout the city. These questions are examining how participants interact with the city as a whole. I asked about their attitudes towards urban change and expansion, their thoughts on the medina and its role in the city, where they like to spend time, and what they think would make the city better.

4.4 Mental Mapping

After conducting the interview, I asked participants to draw a mental map of the city they call home. This was inspired by Kevin Lynch’s book *The Image of the City*, in which he uses symbols and lines to demonstrate big landmarks and paths throughout the city. Lynch states that “there seems to be a public image of any given city which is the overlap of many individual images.” Lynch describes that these individual images are made up of elements, namely paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. In order to create a mental mapping exercise that
emulated that of Lynch in a more understandable fashion, I used methods that focused mostly on identifying landmarks. Lynch describes landmarks as “a type of point-reference … [that] are frequently used clues of identity and even of structure.” I was specifically inspired by methods used by Fraser et. al. in their paper *My neighbourhood: Studying perceptions of urban space and neighbourhood with moblogging*, which looked at new methodologies for examining perceptions of urban space.

I asked participants to draw the city on a blank sheet of white paper, pointing out in particular the places they go to in a typical week. I asked them to identify 5 ‘landmarks’ on their map and describe the importance of each landmark. Participants were able to use any visual keys to indicate geographic elements, like streets, homes, schools, stores, and also non-geographic elements like people, friends, ‘vibes’ of neighborhoods, and anything they feel is important to their mental construction of the city. They had the opportunity to use different writing instruments and colors as they saw fit for their mental map. I also told participants that maps can be as spatially or non-spatially explicit as possible. The point of this exercise is to identify what landmarks are important to youth populations.

### 4.5 Tracing Routes

To examine how youth utilize urban space and traverse the city, I asked participants to do a second mental mapping exercise. This activity was inspired by the methodology used by Natalia Garcia Cervantes in her paper *Using Participatory Visual Methods in the Study of Violence Perceptions and Urban Space in Mexico*, which explores the potential of participatory visual methods in looking at perceptions of violence and makes the case for their use in urban planning. Her participatory mapping strategy was described as asking participants to draw on a
map of their neighborhood, “locating and color-coding different spaces: transit routes (blue),
friendy and familiar territories (red), preferred places (yellow), areas they avoid (brown), places
where they feel insecure (purple), etc.” I adapted this methodology to better fit my research
questions as my project is not focused on violence and safety, but rather on identity and senses of
belonging. During this shorter exercise, I gave participants a printed map of Rabat and
highlighters. I gave them the prompt of tracing the places they typically go in one week. I gave
them one color, namely green, for mandatory routes like school and work and one color, namely
pink, for leisure time and other activities like shopping or hanging out with friends. This exercise
was used to identify common areas and differences that exist between required areas and areas
that youth populations choose to spend time in.

4.6 Ethical Concerns

Because this is a geographical and sociological study, the qualitative methods had ethical
considerations. The semi-structured interviews as well as the mapping activities do involve
personal sharing and reflection about participants’ home lives, backgrounds, and attitudes
towards complex things like colonial legacies or systems of power. However, I made sure to
conduct the interviews in a way that did not entail discomfort, such as haring traumatic
experiences or anything of that nature. Furthermore, the participants selected for interviews were
youth that I had previously established relationships with and had developed connections before
the research project was taking place. In this, it was my hope that participants felt comfortable
with me as a researcher and my project. Furthermore, I did not require them to answer every
question, instead treating each interview like a conversation. As for creating the mental maps as
a part of the interview process, I kept identities anonymous and made sure that there were no
identifiable parts on anything that they produced for me. Lastly, to protect their anonymity, I use Participant A, B, C, and D instead of names.

5. Results

5.1 Semi-Structured Interview

5.1.1 Participant A

Participant A is a male 20-year-old student at Mohammed V University in Rabat as well as a music producer. He is originally from Marrakech, but now lives in Salé with his family. When prompted to describe his home and background, he began with Marrakech. He explained that around 90 percent of his family lives there, and that even though he did not live there much, he loves to go back to visit when he can. He described his strong attachment to the city by saying, “I belong there, our family is there, everything is there, basically”. But now being a resident of the greater Rabat-Salé-Kénitra region, his family moved to a small town called Sala Al Jadida, which he explained is a town that some link to Salé and others link to Rabat. He describes Sala Al Jadida as “not a city where you find people from Salé or people from Rabat, you’re gonna find people from everywhere… a region where you just settle”. The town is set up as a bunch of squares and is “less chaotic … Not a city that you go out and have a nice time”.

He lives in an apartment with his mom, dad, and two siblings, one brother and one sister. In his building, he explained that there are 16 apartments and thus 16 families that live in the building, and that none of the families are from Rabat originally. In terms of his relationship with the community, he said, “We used to spend a lot of time with our neighbors. They’re good neighbors… Even though we’re different, they’re Amazigh and we’re Arab… but there are no problems. It’s a common thing”. He seemed to have a very positive relationship with this
community and an overall positive outlook on the neighborhood. He explained that he enjoys his home location because “Everything is close to me. Some people would find it hard to get to the bus… Everything is in one place”. Although he has an overall positive relationship, he was much more excited to talk about his relationship with Rabat as a whole.

He spends a lot of time in Rabat, both because he is a student there but also because there are a lot of things to do with friends. He said, “The first thing about Rabat is being the meeting spot. That was the thing for me to explore the city”. He spends much more time in Rabat than in his home neighborhood, not only for classes, but also for amenities like the National Library, and other spots to hang out with friends. He describes Rabat as “not that big, but it is diverse in a way that makes me think Oh this city is really interesting”. He describes that the old medina is full of traditional people whereas places like Rabat-Agdal and Hay Riad are full of more “fancy” people. He says, “The way I see Rabat is that it’s a beautiful place, simple, less chaotic, and I think it’s easy to find calm places”.

When prompted to talk about his attitudes towards urban change and expansion, he replied with, “I’m really iffy about it… There’s a positive side and a negative side”. He explained that the positive side of it is that there are ways to preserve Moroccan culture. He thinks that “Morocco should stay Morocco” because “Culture is really important to be preserved especially in a globalized world”. He explained that identity is very important to him and that it is not something you get to choose, and that it’s important to preserve and celebrate Moroccan identity. Furthermore, he described some of the more modern parts of Rabat, for example Agdal. He says, “If you go to Agdal, you hear more French. This is the problem with expansion. People in Agdal see language as a tool of prestige.” He explained that he loves the modern amenities and new things to do, but that “people should preserve the nature of the country”.
In that vein, he spoke to his love for the old medina. He says, “The medina is a really beautiful place” and that “I wish that people would appreciate the culture more… I’m scared the old medina won’t be the old medina anymore in the future”. He fears that Morocco is going to lose its identity in the future if there is not a distinct effort to preserve culture. He is not scared of modernity, rather he is excited by the prospect. He says, “It makes you feel better to have things that you have around you and it feels like a bonus”. But, at the same time, he says, “Yes, it is modern, but they are preserving culture. Modern Moroccan”. As long as culture and identity are preserved, he is excited by the new changes happening. Finally, he says that his love for any city is not necessarily about any specific thing, but more as a big entity with lots of moving parts. He concluded the interview by saying, “Maybe my love to [the city] is not about the city itself, but also the way it is. The ambience, everything about it, the geography matters surely, but not only the geography, what carries within”.

5.1.2 Participant B

Participant B is a 20-year-old female student at Mohammed V University in Rabat. She grew up in Rabat and lives in an apartment in a residential complex made up of 7 buildings. Each building has 8 apartments, of which each apartment has 3 bedrooms and common rooms like kitchen and bathroom. Each apartment houses one family, and she lives at home with her parents and siblings. She describes her neighborhood as “a popular neighborhood. We have two markets next to us … we have all that we need next to us”. Although she added that it is not really a meeting spot, she still likes where she lives and is not planning to move. In terms of the community, she explained that “I know a lot of people because we’ve been living there for a long time”. She’s lived in that neighborhood her whole life and has come to know a lot of the
neighbors and are close with some of them. She overall has a positive relationship with her home community and also loves Rabat as a whole.

She says, “I appreciate living in Rabat. I think that it’s a city that combines modernity and also traditional stuff”. She said that she likes going to the more traditional places like Oudaya, the old medina, the Hassan, and the beach. But also, she loves going to the modern places like malls. Even though she does appreciate the modern spaces, she says, “I really appreciate going to old towns because they have a special added value for me”. She further explained that she likes Rabat for all it as to offer. She says, “I am lucky because I’m living in city that has an old town and a new town. I think it adds a special value to the city as a whole. And, it adds authenticity, shows aspects of history, sometimes you wonder Who built that? How did that end up being here?”. She talked a lot about how the old medina is probably the most important part of Rabat city.

In terms of urban change and expansion, she mentioned that does like the new modern things like the marina in Salé, but also said that “I just like them because they don’t modify things in the old medina”. She explains that the new modern things are “important for the people’s entertainment, transportation, help them move around the city” but that also they shouldn’t come at the expense of the tradition that exists in the old medina. She likes that the government is making a real effort to enhance the infrastructure, but at the same time, sees the old medina and other traditional spots as some of the most important in Rabat. She loves Rabat and feels a strong connection to the city. She concluded her interview by explaining that she loves the way that people know each other and yet there is also a lot to do. She says she loves that “it’s a small and a big city at the same time”.
5.1.3 Participant C

Participant C is a 21-year-old female student at Mohammed V University in Rabat. She grew up living at home with her parents in Salé, but now lives in her own apartment also in Salé. She feels sort of divided between her home and her parents’ home, but when I asked her where she considers ‘home’ the most, she replied with, “Where I consider to be home is where I was born and raised”. She grew up in a house, not an apartment, with her mom, dad, and brother. In terms of the house, she described it as a meeting point for a lot of family activities. She says, “There are a lot of people coming in, especially family. Our house here is that house where everyone gathers around most of the time. We have cousins from different cities who come and stay with us”. In this way, she explained that she is absolutely the type of family that all will gather together and open their home to others when they are in town.

The house is in Hay Salam, a residential neighborhood. She described Hay Salam as “a popular neighborhood where everything is around us, like supermarkets, coffeeshops, and other things”. I asked her if she feels connected to the neighborhood, and she replied by saying, “I absolutely feel connected to [the neighborhood]. It’s where we grew up and it’s very beautiful that you see neighbors and their kids growing up together and having them as friends and now seeing them all grown up still having those relationships, its nostalgic in a way”. Her relationship with her neighbors is very important to her. She said, “The neighbors feel like family in a way. If you need them, they’re there”. It makes her feel connected to the place she calls home. Now that she lives away from Hay Salam, she still spends time at home with her parents and neighbors.

In terms of her relationship with Rabat as a whole, she said, “I love the city. It’s my favorite city”. She wants to live here in the future and loves Rabat because there is a lot to do. Some of her favorite spots include Agdal and the old medina. She says, “I find myself mostly in
Agdal because I sit in coffeeshops and restaurants there”. But, at the same time, she also expressed that she thinks the medina is very important. She says, “I love the medina. It’s very authentic – it changes, of course, but not really a dramatic change”. She says that the old medina is very special to her “because this is where you see Oh this is where my grand-grand parents lived and did their business. It’s also very beautiful to see at that point that we had Muslims and non-Muslims living together”. So, the medina to her represents her own history as well as the history of Morocco and therefore it is a special space that she likes to spend time in.

When asked about urban change and expansion in the new city, she said, “The new city is beautiful. Of course, we need that modern life. We can’t just focus on the medina on its own – there is a balance between the city and the old medina”. She overall really likes the changes that are happening. She likes the modern amenities and new things to do. She said, “Those changes are also creating more job opportunities and more entertainment places. As long as they don’t touch the old medina – any city can change, as long as the old places are appreciated and staying there, we’re good”. She made it clear that she loves Rabat because of its ability to change but also preserve history and culture. She appreciates what the government is doing for the development but hopes that the old medina and other traditional spaces will continue to be preserved in the future. She wrapped up our interview by saying that “it’s a big city but it doesn’t feel like a big city” and finally, “It’s my home, I want to come back. I want to buy a house here and come for vacations. I definitely want to live here”. She loves Rabat and feels connected to it.

5.1.4 Participant D

Participant D is a male 20-year-old student and photographer. He lives in the old medina in Rabat in a house with his family. He said, “I like living in the old medina. I like my house, its
an old house and it belonged to my grandpa, who bought it from his brother or something like that”. The house has been in his family for a very long time, and he feels as though they all are very connected to it. He usually will spend the whole day at home, but go out at night, especially when the medina isn’t busy. At his house, he says that there are a lot of people coming and going, but it is mostly family and his mom’s friends. So, the house is a meeting place, but the medina also feels like more of a general home community. He says, “[The medina architecture] has a great impact on my mental health. Helps me improve my photography”. Furthermore, he really likes the community that exists in the old medina. He said, “Most of my neighbors, they know me, but I don’t know them. Mostly from my mom and dad”.

Besides the medina, he also has a positive relationship with the rest of the city of Rabat. He really enjoys places like the beach, Challah, and also some other public parks and things that are the places he spends time with friends. But, overall, he really just enjoys the old medina. He also said, “I just hate one thing – it’s always busy. Everyone goes to the medina to shop and get food there” and for the residents, it can be annoying to always be dodging through people. But, overall, he loves spending time at night walking around, taking photographs, seeing friends, and being a part of the medina community. He thinks that although “too many tourists come to the medina”, it is really cool that one can look at how people live then versus how they live now. He says, “There is no difference, if you look at pictures from 200 years ago, you’ll find that it’s the same”. He feels very connected to the medina and his history there.

When prompted about what he thinks about urban expansion and development in the new city, he replied with, “Those places, too many people got robbed there before. But now it is safe for people to hang out there”. He thinks that a lot of the developments, especially in places like the new marina in Salé, have made those places safer for people to spend time in and also more
fun. So, overall, he thinks the developments are positive for the city. At the same time, he also thinks that the government is making good changes but also could do much better. He says, “There is a lot of places they can develop, especially the beachside or just here outside of the medina. They are doing well but they don’t use all the money”. He thinks that as long as the medina stays the same, the developments around the city are good. Overall, he enjoys living in Rabat and feels connected to the city.
5.2 Mental Mapping Exercises

5.2.1 Participant A

Figures 3 and 4. Participant A Mental Map (left) and Tracing Routes (right)

Participant A drew his mental map using different colors. His first landmark is the National Library (labeled above on the bottom left as NL) and it means a lot to him because it provides an opportunity for him to read and a calm place to work on schoolwork. The second landmark he selected was Arribat Center (labeled with AS in the top middle of the map). This is where he goes when he has nothing else to do because there are good shopping places, good restaurants, and can hang out with friends and it is not too expensive. The third landmark is the Rabat-Agdal train station (labeled with TS on the bottom right of the map). He goes there with his friends to study and travel home to Marrakech. The fourth landmark is university (labeled UNI on the top right). It is where he studies and is a calm place that he enjoys. The last landmark is the Garden of Hilton (labeled H at the top left of the map). He sees people hanging out,
playing sports, and has looked at it on his bus routes and finally visited and now spends a lot of time there. In his tracing routes representation, he highlighted most of the places he likes to hang out with friends, namely Residence Al Sabah, Agdal, and Hassan. His mandatory routes consist of home and school.

5.2.2 Participant B

Figures 5 and 6. Participant B Mental Map (left) and Tracing Routes (right)

Participant B drew her map in a more linear way and attempted to make some of it spatially accurate. Her first two landmarks were her own house and then her grandmother’s house (labeled H and GH at the bottom right corner of the map). Next, she labeled M on the left bottom for a mosque. After that, she drew Hassan, a neighborhood. She then drew the United Nations tram station (labeled TS at the top right) and drew some of the traffic patterns around the tram station. She then drew Arribat Center and another mosque. She drew a shop in her neighborhood, labeled M, for marche. She drew how all the places connected through the tram
lines and main roads, which connected her home to other places that she likes to spend time in. As for her tracing routes, it reflects similar themes. She clearly understands her navigation and the public transit she uses. She also indicated that some of her routes overlap in both mandatory and leisure, depending on the purpose or time of day.

5.2.3 Participant C

![Participant C Mental Map (left) and Tracing Routes (right)](image)

Figures 7 and 8. Participant C Mental Map (left) and Tracing Routes (right)

Participant C drew her map all in one color. She did label roads and neighborhoods as well as point out her landmarks. Her first landmark is the beach, a very important place for her and a space where she spends a lot of time. She drew it very large in comparison with the rest of the landmarks. She also drew the river next to it that separates Rabat and Salé. She drew Oudaya as a place to hang out, then Avenue de France where she goes during her free time with friends. She described that Avenue de France is really referring to all of Agdal, but that is the way they get to the area, where there are malls and restaurants. Next, she drew Arribat Center Mall
because she loves to spend time there as well. Then, she drew university, where she studies, and *centre ville*, which she passes through to get there. Finally, she drew her own home as well as per parents’ house. Her home and her parents’ house are in two completely different neighborhoods and are far away from each other, and so she indicated the two different neighborhoods. Her Tracing Routes map indicates similar themes. She spends leisure time in some of the more modern neighborhoods like Agdal, but her only mandatory route is between school and home.

### 5.2.4 Participant D

![Figures 9 and 10. Participant D Mental Map (left) and Tracing Routes (right)](image)

Participant D drew a simple map in which he put his home community, the old medina, at the center. He drew the old medina not as an enclosed space, but one that you can exit from all sides. Next, he drew the ocean side because he enjoys the nature there and that it is not full of people. He goes there to chill out and for photography. He drew his next landmark as Oudaya, where he only goes at night but is also a place for photography inspiration and hanging out. Next, he drew Agdal, which he only goes to on the weekends to go to bars and restaurants and spending time with friends. Lastly, he drew Challah and the marina in Salé at the bottom of the
map, both places he also likes to spend time with friends. His Tracing Routes map is also very simple. He leaves the medina to go to school, and for leisure he only ventures to the beach and then outside to the Hassan neighborhood. He described that he spends a lot of time at home and in the old medina, working on his photography and hanging out friends. In all, he had a pretty limited view of Rabat and expressed that he enjoys going to the places he knows well.

6. Discussion

6.1 Proximity Matters

A broad trend that I identified in all four interviews was that participants thought that it was good to be located in an area that is near other things. They all explained in different ways that they like Rabat because of the varied things to do around the city. Furthermore, I found that nearly every participant mentioned the fact that they enjoyed their homes or home neighborhood if it had proximity to other things, specifically supermarkets or public transit connection points. Participant A spoke about the fact that he liked the location of his home because he was in the “center of it all” and that he is lucky. Both Participants B and C also expressed similar sentiments, saying that they liked having places to go and meet up, go shopping, and see neighbors. In all, I identified that the Moroccan youth interviewed enjoyed having access to amenities and saw it as a positive draw of different urban spaces, particularly ones that are well connected to other parts of the city.

6.2 Neighbors and Definitions of Community

All participants also talked about neighborhood and community strength. Participant A said he knows his neighbors, and that even though they are different, they still get along and that
the community is very tight-knit. Participant B spoke to how because she has lived in her home neighborhood her whole life, she knows most people there and thus has a strong attachment to it. Participant C saw her neighbors and community as one of her most important aspects of being from her home neighborhood. She talked about how her neighbors would show up for her like family, and she would show up for them. Lastly, Participant D, growing up in the old medina, has a meaningful connection to that community through his parents, and maybe doesn’t know everyone himself but they all know him through proximity. Overall, all participants pointed to the idea that the uniqueness of each neighborhood comes from the people who live there. Each explained their relationships with their neighbors and discussed their association with their home with the community that surrounds them. This reflects the traditional Moroccan culture of being community-oriented and associating spaces with the people who reside in them.

6.3 Authenticity and Preservation of Culture in Modernity

When prompted to talk about the differences and preferences towards modern amenities, like Rabat-Agdal with Arribat Center Mall or the urban development project in the Marina in Salé, each participant expressed that they like modern amenities, but not at the expense of preserving the cultures and histories that exist in the old medina or other traditional spaces. They all spoke about how they enjoy the old traditional spaces because it connects them with their Moroccan identity and makes them think their ancestors who lived here and built the city. But, at the same time, all participants also explained that they love going to the more ‘modern’ parts of Rabat. Participant A spoke about how he feels as though it is a bonus to have nice amenities and entertainment like that close-by and thinks that it is something unique to Rabat. All the participants spoke to how preserving culture and identity is crucial, and that the old medina is a
special place. Simultaneously, all participants felt good about what the government was achieving in terms of urban expansion and development in the city.

6.4 Study Limitations

This research was carried out in 4 weeks, and thus there was not enough time to do the extent of research that I wish I could have. Given the time constraint and logistical concerns, I was only able to interview 4 participants, which therefore limited the range of my results. Additionally, I intended to do some quantitative research via short surveys disseminated to more of the youth population but ran out of time. The language barrier also presented some challenges. I interviewed participants who spoke English, but if I had more time and access to a more reliable translator in the research process, I would have taken the time to interview different groups of youth in Rabat that may not have spoken English. Furthermore, since English is not any of the participants native language, it may have limited the scope of their answers and their understanding of my interview questions or activity instructions. Overall, the study would have been more conclusive given more time, additional resources, and the chance to identify broader patterns.

7. Conclusion

Urban space in Morocco is rapidly changing, especially as globalization continues to control capital investment. Rabat is a compelling case study to examine the influences of colonial legacies, the shift towards modernity, and the role of the government in urban planning practices. Interviewing four participants, I received valuable insight into how Moroccan youth are adapting to modernity in the built environment, but also how preservation of communal
history is at the forefront of their minds. I found that Moroccan youth associate their home communities with the people who live there, and that a city to them is not only about the built environment but also the people and culture that it houses. Furthermore, I found that as Morocco changes in the future, Moroccan youth find it imperative that cities both adhere to their authentic and historical roots but develop and expand modern amenities for inhabitants. All four participants expressed a genuine love for Rabat and care about its success in the future. It is my hope that this research demonstrates the importance of Moroccan culture being celebrated and preserved amid rapid globalization processes and lasting colonial legacies.
8. References


