

From the Gate to the Gateway : The Impact of Colonial Intervention upon the Entries of the City of Constantine

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Abstract :

The gates of the Medina of Constantine constituted traditional architectural elements, which marked the boundaries between urban and rural, reassured protection, controlled transitions between exterior and interior and structured the commercial fabric of the city. French colonisation of the city in 1837 was a flagship event, which profoundly transformed the Medina and especially its entrances. This article, based on a historical approach, reveals the colonial urban interventions and the radical mutations, which affected Constantine's entrances throughout more than a century of colonisation, led to the disappearance of the gates, and bequeathed the current form of gateways.

Keywords: City Entrance; Constantine; French colonisation; Gate; gateway

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1. Introduction

According to Guilhembert “the entrance has its own history, rhythms and specific cycles which must be established and deciphered”¹. Along the course of history, the entrances to the city have been the object of several concomitant transformations most often to that of the cities. Hence; the need was inevitable in favour of expansion and urban development, which took place on the outskirts of cities by being direct receivers until today.

In the past, city entrances designated the gateway to the urban universe, whose current and recurring image was often summed up as the “gateway to the city”. This structure represented the initial and almost widespread form, and marked the arrival of various civilisations in cities: Ancient, Arab-Muslim and Medieval. For these old societies and others, the functions, which took place at the gates and approaches to entrances presented themselves as a sign of urban distinction.

The city gate stood for and before the city, confronting that which was outside itself, from monarchs and prelates to foreigners and peasants. It served as an instrument of war, justice, commerce, and ceremony. It was a place of political and economic negotiation, a nexus of worlds — as any port must be. Frequented by elders, judges, officials, vendors, pilgrims, refugees, and charlatans. City gates were often centres of residential neighbourhoods as well. The gate was both edge and centre².

Industrial development, especially in Europe towards the end of the 18th century and at the beginning of the 19th century, led to a multiplication of inventions and innovations, a technical economic supremacy, demographic development, an unprecedented rural exodus and an acceleration of urbanisation, etc. As a result of these unprecedented developments, the traditional urban space was undergoing radical changes, and likewise the entry areas to cities. The changes favoured by the expansion of road networks and the motorisation of means of transport were, for the traditional city, a turning point or a chief factor in its diffusion and its passage to modernity.

City entrances were particularly forced to keep up with the new pace of urban development, and inevitably adapt to new modes of transport. This led, a few centuries ago, to the emergence of a new form of city entrances, totally

different both morphologically and functionally, marking the threshold of the extramural city: it is the “City Gateway”.

The concept of “gateway” seems adequate to describe the new figure of urban thresholds. The choice of this concept was not random. It is based upon two arguments: Firstly, the term “way” illustrates the better the gradual transition to the urban. Secondly, with the course, a relationship is established between the territory and the entrance³. Indeed, the gateways are transitional areas, they materialise “the user’s first physical contact with the city⁴. Moreover they are the new contemporary gates”. This concept of the entrance of a modern city was closely constructed through two fundamental dimensions: The peri-urban situation, and the road appearance of these territories.

In this article, the interest is put on the effects of modernity upon the urban space of formerly colonised cities, particularly in the transformations which were with the origin of the passage from the classic gate to the modern entrance route. As a case in point of an Arab city at the time of French colonisation (1830-1962) in Constantine, the capital of eastern Algeria.

Constantine is one of the most ancient cities in the world. Over a large temporal sequence of about 2500 years, it has known a succession of different dynasties and civilisations: Numidians, Romans, Arabs, and Ottomans. Formerly renamed by “the fortress”, thanks not only to its naturally fortified site, but for its surrounding wall, and its famous access gates to the city as well. Before the French colonisation, the Gates of Constantine were traditional and architectural elements, which, in addition to the protection of the Medina clearly marked the boundaries of the city and the non-city, controlled the flows and structured the gate surrounding areas as well (internal and external surroundings). With the arrival of French colonisation to the city, these segments of the former had gradually and completely changed.

The aim of this work is to highlight the place of the entrances of Constantine within its urban framework, as well as the transformations to which they underwent during the French colonisation, leading to the disappearance of the gates, and bequeathing the current form of gateways.

2. Methodology of approach

The aim of this article is to highlight the transformations that affected the city of Constantine during the colonial period and which mainly led to the passage from the entrance through the classical gates to the entrance through gateways. It

was opted for a historical retrospective analysis. The chronological reference axis is 1830-1962; the interval of the French colonisation of Algeria.

Throughout this analysis was first unveiled the inventory of Constantine before its occupation, then the progressive transformations of the traditional Medina on the old rock after the colonisation, and the extramural urban extensions which were carried out until the eve of the independence highlighting the evolution of city gates and the transformation of surrounding areas. So, as to carry out this historical investigation, it was mainly relied on documents addressing the history of the city (books, articles, theses), graphic and cartographic data (photos of archives, diagrams, town plans of various dates).

3. State of the entrances of Constantine before French colonisation

During modern times, more precisely before the occupation of Algeria by the French army in 1830, Constantine and all of Algeria were under the Ottoman regency. During this period, Constantine reflected a typical example of an Arab Medina with its narrow and winding streets, its dead ends, its high density, its souks and commercial system, etc. Due to the particularity of its naturally fortified site, Constantine resembled a fortress located on the rock, surrounded by walls pierced with gates.

The city had four main gates: Bab El Kantara, Bab El Oued, Bab Djabia, and Bab El Djedid; this is fairly unanimously affirmed by historians such as Mercier. Although, a lot of resources and historical writings had less pointed out other gates like Bab Erouah, and Bab Lahnancha (or Héninecha).

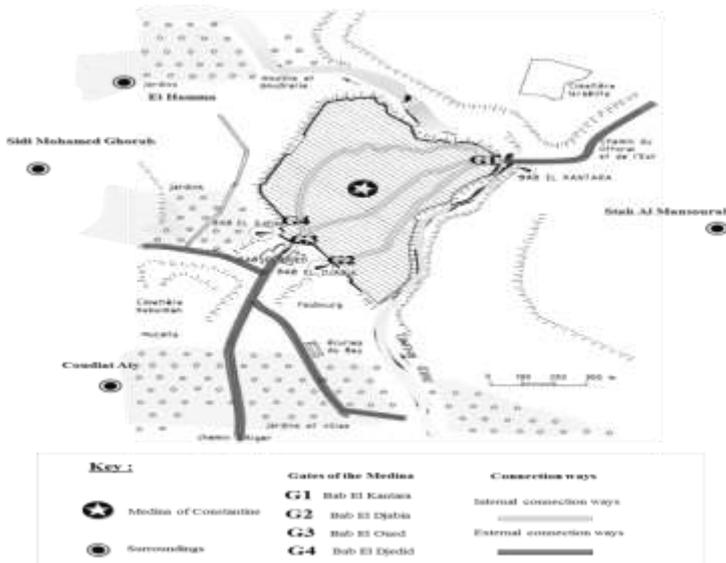
Constantine also shone as a commercial city, and the large market of Beylik of the East, even of all Algeria. Its tertiary character was based mainly on wholesale trade, crafts, and wheat in particular. The gates of Constantine at this time were of paramount importance. In addition to their various roles of security, control, and marking transition between urban and rural space, they formed more of a structuring element, or outright an ecosystem of the commercial and economic apparatus of the city.

They:

- Filter products and cargoes entering the city.
- Represented the place where customs and tax formalities were carried out on foodstuffs.
- Played the role of benchmarks in the organisation of the internal commercial network (distribution of souks and major commercial axes).

- Marked a clear delineation between eligible commercial activities inside the city and others located outside deemed inadequate for the centre given their polluting, cumbersome nature or their connection to the countryside.
- Were a suitable choice for the development of high-traffic major trade and economic areas. This well-thought-out choice of location spared the city from the mass frequentation, which could harm its proper functioning and the tranquillity of its inhabitants.
- Presented the ideal field for the establishment of structures complementary to commercial activity such as fondouks at the service of foreign traders in the city.

Figure 1. The City of Constantine in 1837: City, Entries and Foreign Relations.



Source: (B. Pagand,1988)⁵+ Adaptation of the Author.

4. The assault on Constantine

The year 1830 marked the beginning of a new era in Algerian history just after the colonisation of the country by the French army. Constantine remained under Turkish rule until 1837. During this period, the city was tough to cross by the French forces which failed several times due to the difficulties encountered: the geographical location (city surrounded on three sides by the deep canyon of Rhumel Valley), the fortification of the walls and gates as well as the fierce resistance. On the last expedition in October 1837, Constantine was ready to fight.

The defenders of the place took advantage of the lessons of the offensive which they repulsed the previous year and which had mainly focused on the bridge and the gate of El-Kantara. This is reinforced by huge stones piled up at the rear and surmounted by two floors of artillery pieces. The weak sides were strengthened. Batteries, very well established and armed, defend Bab el-Oued and Bab el-Djedid. A battery of mortars is fixed on a platform, at the top of the Casbah, and can throw bombs in all directions⁶.

Faced with these defences, it appeared to Lieutenant General Sylvain Charles Valée and Rohault de Fleury that the only possible way to take control of the town was to carry out an attack by Coudiat Aty to the west of the rock ⁷. The French army concentrated its frontal attack on the solid wall of the city near Bab El Oued, where it was breached. This military strategy was ultimately successful. Constantine, and after many failed attempts, it was taken by storm on October 13th, 1837.

5. Entrances of Constantine face to colonial urban evolutions (1837–1900)

- Colonial settlement: motor of mains interventions at the interior and the exterior of the old rock

After the fall of the city, the gates and walls were maintained. The section of the wall located on the west side of the rock where a breach practised, “was modified and provided with a round path”⁸ .

At the premises of French colonisation (around 1837–1850) and according to historical collections, the urban tissue of the city kept its specificity. Bouadam, reporting from the document of Eichelbrenner *Constantine la conquête et le temps des pionniers* so as the colonial administration installs services, appropriate building which has already existed and readapted its assignments⁹. The reasons why the French administration could not train the mutations in the tissue of the city respecting the sample of the French City separated of the Arab one: on the one hand, they were linked together by the strategy of the site. On the other hand, to the weak number of the French population in the city around 200 persons in 1839 which raised to 840 inhabitants only in 1843.

The first modifications of the urban frame started bias the prescriptions of Valée June 9th, 1844 (of Marechal Valée). This prescription divided the city into two districts: The one on the low part attributed to native Muslims who entirely

occupied the rock. On the other one in the north where coexisted the French newcomers and the Jews who already existed.

This spatial division to the ethnic group (Muslims, French and Jews), generated three centres¹⁰: one for each community appropriate to administrative and cultural facilities, and “declared important changes in the socio-spatial practices and built surroundings as a result to that change of population”¹¹

With the promulgation of Constantine as the capital of the prefecture in 1849, the city which has not practically changed since its occupation in 1837, it was open to colonisation and began to transform inside, spread outside, and the surroundings were about to be renewed by the insertion of farms, factories and agricultural exploitations¹² and this is for the purpose in order to reassure and reinforce more colonial presence in the city.

Inside the walls, the mass arrival of the colonial population¹³, led to deep structural and formal changes in the fabric of the initial city, and to adapt it to the requirements and the lifestyle of the newly arrived inhabitants. The period around 1850 and 1880 was a very active phase in the city’s urban history.

The Medina on the rock has become of a distinct hybrid character, composed of two fully contrasting urban fabrics. European-style neighbourhoods were gradually taking their place to the detriment of parts of the Arab City demolished for the installation of several extrovert buildings and public edifices (For example: le grand hotel de Paris completed in 1868, the theatre 1883, courthouse, cathedral ...) lined up on the edge of the wide new streets¹⁴ pierced in the Haussmann style.

As for the exterior of the walls, several suburbs settled and developed on peripheral communication axes, to receive the European population who converged on Constantine or left the European districts in the upper Medina. In this case:

- *Suburb Saint Jean*: The first suburb built on the edge of the Rue de Bienfait Street (the current Kitouni Abdelmalek Street) to the west, on sloping land below Coudiat Aty.
- *Suburb Saint Antoine*: which is the continuity of the Faubourg Saint Jean.
- *Suburb of El Kantara*: This suburb located on the east bank of Rhumel, on the axis of the road to Biskra (RN°3 on the south side). It was realised (from 1864) a few years after that of Saint Jean.

The development of these first suburbs and urban extensions revealed the beginning of an unprecedented urban phase for the city of Constantine. A phase

where the city tends towards the extrovert after long periods of confinement, while keeping its traditional character:

- On the one hand, the expansion of the city beyond the walls and the old rock, more oriented by the peripheral communication routes.
- On the other hand, the maintenance of walls, gates and mainly commercial activities at the level of the gates surrounding areas.

- The City Gates and their surrounding areas

At the time of the French conquest, the city had the same four gates from the Turkish era. Later, they only became three gates after cancelling two old ones and replacing them with only new one.

- Bab El Kantara: (Gate of the Bridge)

During the colonial period, this gate represented a main access which connected the city to the suburb of El Kantara, the plateau of El Mansourah and Djebel El Ouahch, coastal path, and later the Constantine railway station (inaugurated in 1870¹⁵) through El Kantara Bridge.

It should be noted that the latter, restored by Salah Bey in 1792 ¹⁶, remained functional until 1857 when it collapsed¹⁷. It was rebuilt in 1863. The structure of the new bridge was in the form of a main metal arch resting on two stone piers.

Figure 2-3: The Old Bridge of El Kantara 1856 before Its Collapse in 1875.



Source: Archive photos

The design of this new bridge involved a readjustment of the gate. As reported by Mercier “the old entrance which based on the blocks of the Roman gate”¹⁸ was demolished. The new bridge led directly to a new monumental gate (fig 4). The latter was later considered unsuitable, and was removed around 1920.

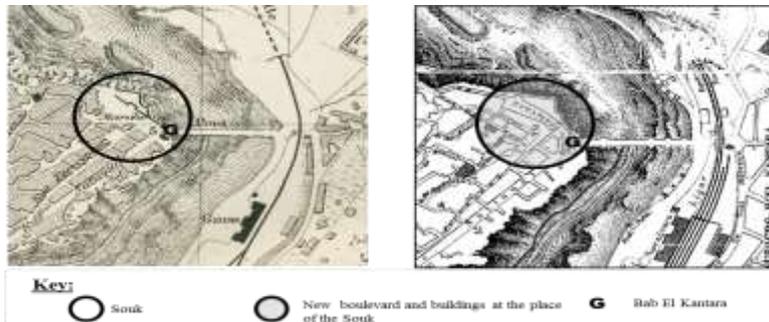
Figure 4. The New Bridge and Gate of El Kantara - In 19XX.



Source: Archive photo

An important public place or a souk existed behind Bab El Kantara, which was destined to merchandises of all the Algerian East and that of Tunisia¹⁹. It seems that this place disappeared between 1888 and 1895 (see figure 5), and was replaced by colonial buildings.

Figure 5. Internal Surrounding Area of Bab El Kantara (1888-1895).



Source: Section from Constantine and its Surroundings (Plan 1888) + Section from Constantine (Plan 1895) + Adaptation of the Author

At the exterior, the bridge led to the closest outskirts of El Kantara. The latter was built on land that was used for market gardening and small livestock for local consumption²⁰. The railway line crossed this suburb, and the Constantine railway station is located just in front of the gate of El Kantara.

- **Bab El Djabia: (Gate of the Cisterns)**

Rather, it was a small postern as described Regis²¹. It gave access to the lower part of the city reserved for the natives, exactly in Rahbat Djemal, Souika ; extraordinarily a populous Arab district and the souk of the eponymous district. This gate once facilitated “access to the Rhumel dam where water is drawn for the city.”²²

Outside this gate, there was a souk in one corner, and in another, parked (at the bottom of the descent), the camels which carried the various loads and goods. This gate did not undergo any modification during colonisation and remained intact until it was demolished in the early 20th century (after 1916) during the town planning works.

The surrounding areas of this gate was characterised by its commercial character. Inside, the gate open to both Souika; shopping district, and Rahbat Ledjmel (figure n°6). The latter district was demolished during the construction of the theatre²³, which occupies its site. On the outside, El Djabia gate also opened onto an Arab merchant surface as shown in figure n° 7. Until now, a commercial activity is still maintained in the same place called Le Remblai. It is used for shelves and street vendors: (clothing, footwear, household appliances, etc.)²⁴

Figure 6. Rahbat Ledjmel During Colonial Times (Before Demolition).



Figure 7. Souk from the Exterior of Bab El Djabia between 1897- 1900.



Source: Archive Photos.

- Porte Valée Gate: (or the La Brèche Gate)

The main changes made to the city at the beginning of the French colonisation have indeed affected the gates. “The two gates: Bab El-Djedid and Bab El Oued Gates were blocked and pierced the Valée Gate between them so that the current Constantine did not only have three gates: The New Valée Gate, the Djabia Gate, which has not been touched, and El Kantara Gate, which has been rebuilt in the same location.”²⁵

This new gate, built in 1845²⁶ bore the name of Marshal Sylvain Charles Valée. It occupied approximately the same location as Bab El Oued, and it was oriented in the same way²⁷. It directly joined the la Brèche Square, gave access to the heart of the city, and opened up the isthmus on the grain market, the Coudiat Aty and the paths of Algiers and Mila.

Around 1881, this Valée Gate was destroyed,²⁸ with the walls which surrounded it and the exterior edges were landscaped in the form of a square. At the same time, the site of the two omitted gates was later occupied by public edifices opened to La Brèche Square.

- Grain Hall (old Rahbat E'zzra'a), Large Souk Outside Valée Gate

The extramural surrounding area of the two missing gates (Bab El Oued and Bab El Djedid) was maintained near this new Valée Gate, where most of the trade with the outside world and the entire eastern region took place. The construction of the grain hall began outside the new Valée Gate in 1851 at the Lamoricière Square, more exactly on the same location of the old Rahbat E'zzra'a (wholesale grain market), which was also destroyed by Haj Ahmed Bey on the eve of colonisation.

Figure 8. View on the West Side of Constantine 1865.



1: Valée Gate.

Figure 9. Grain Hall of Constantine in 1865 during the Trip of Emperor Napoleon III.



2: Grain hall under construction on the same location of the old Rahbat E'zzra'a

Source: Archive photos.

- Regional and International Economic Vocation of Grain Halls: From Boom to Distress

In fact, Constantine within just a few years of colonisation could quickly regain the economic and commercial influence that flourished during the Turkish rule. It reconquered its territory of exchange and it once again became the most powerful commercial place in the province²⁹ with 500,000 visitors per year, that is to say about 1,400 persons per day came from outside the city to visit its markets³⁰.

Constantine, the richest province, therefore regains its growth at the head of the network for the production, collection and export of cereals and wheat, this relay role is confirmed according to Pagand, with the implementation of a large grain market in 1860, which became the main granary of the province³¹.

However, Constantine's supremacy in the wheat trade was affected in modern times with the advent of the railroad. The project for the construction and extension of an interconnected railway network from the east to the west, and from the south to the north, served the development of new export channels. Something which was unfavourable for Constantine, and will considerably weaken its position within the grain export network³². Especially since "the instrumentalisation of the city in the export circuit being less and less useful to the colonists"³³.

In terms of the city's urban space, the new Place Lamoricière (1909), where the grain market was located, quickly became the most important crossroads after the La Brèche Square. As a result of this new urban dynamic, the grain hall begins "to become troublesome, especially as its usefulness was less since the construction of the railway. It was therefore decided to demolish the hall in 1925 and its construction on the edge of the avenue de Philippeville (project carried out in 1926)"³⁴. And the construction of a "Citroën" garage on its site (1933).

- La Brèche : important square Inside Valée Gate

La Brèche Square was built near the gate (inside the walls) from the beginning of colonisation (1837) to the detriment of several destroyed houses. This square had a symbolic value for the colonial administration. It was built on the site of the access point of the French forces, which succeeded in their attack on Constantine in 1837, by causing a breach in the city walls. This is where the origin of its name already comes from.

This square was the subject of several transformations which undeniably changed its appearance and that of its environment. In this case, the openings of the broad streets that were to lead to it, the construction of the equipment and large buildings that surrounded it, and later the destruction of the city walls and the Valée Gate.

Figure 10. State of Places in 1837

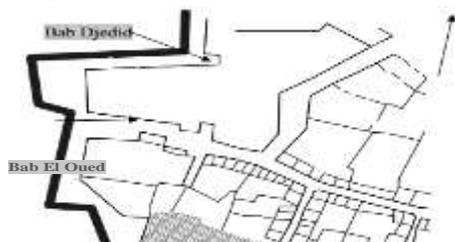
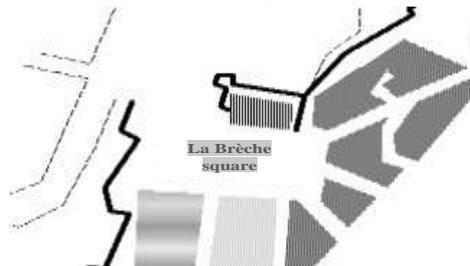


Figure 11. The La Brèche Square by 1915



Source: (Bouchareb, 2006)³⁵.

The result of these changes is a famous, important, and a much frequented square, which had all the architectural and town-planning characteristics of a western square. It also represented in a way, the new central core of Constantine, a major articulation between the Medina on the rock and the peripheral extensions; the new colonial city: Coudiat, rue de Sétif Street (currently Aouati Mustapha Avenue)...

- Expansion of the City, Disappearance of Traditional Gates and the Appearance of Urban Gateways:

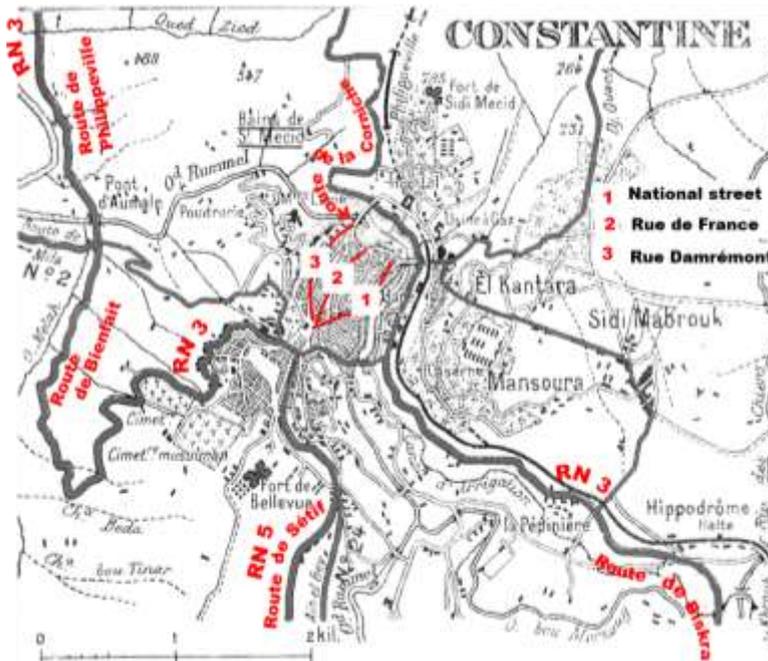
The construction of the railway, the advent of the automobile and the development of public transport in the city of Constantine were indeed the consequences of the flourishing Industrial Revolution in Europe. This mechanisation of the means of transport had undoubtedly influenced and guided the operations of restructuring the urban fabric, the widening of communication routes inside the city and the development of the suburbs outside it.

These changes met the demands of the European population who arrived in large numbers in the city (especially circa 1850–1900). All these circumstances and unprecedented transformations inside and outside the walls were gradually preparing the city to break definitively with the traditional model of the Medina.

The walls and the gates, which were necessary for centuries, began to disappear successively roughly around (1880), especially as their role was in decline. The walls were replaced by a virtual limit between the city and the countryside, a limit that stretches and pushes back with the spread of urbanisation. At the same time, the disappeared physical gates yielded their accessibility and transition functions (between the city and the countryside), in favour of urbanised peripheral routes, which now played the role of new urban gates.

The first urban gateways were mainly located near the route Bienfait Road, Route de Sétif Road, Route Batna- Biskra Road. As the city developed, the entrances to the city slipped on the same highways, which later integrated the network of national roads traced towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. La Route de Sétif Street was integrated into the RN ° 5, Route Bienfait to the RN ° 3 on the west side, and the road from Batna-Biskra to the RN° 3 on the south side)

Figure 12. Beginning of the Slippage of the Urban Fabric and the Entrances on the Road Axes (City Entrance Route) -Constantine around 1920



Source: Map of Constantine 1920 ³⁶.

The beginning of the 20th century, and especially during the war for the liberation of Algeria, was marked by a massive flight of the population from the countryside to several towns following the various massacres of colonisation. In Constantine, migratory flows were important; “in 1954, there was an influx of more than 80,000 people from the regions of Jijel, Mila, El Milia. In 10 years, the city has grown from 120,000 to 220,000” ³⁷. Several peripheral extensions emerged and housed the huge hunted population. The development of the new peripheries was rapid, but above all spontaneous. Disorderly neighbourhoods and slums grew in unspoiled land on the outskirts of Constantine and near national roads.

The Plan of Constantine 1958 provided several solutions for the colonial administration for the city, especially with regard to improving the living conditions of the indigenous population, particularly in the new unfit and marginalised peripheries. In effect, the latter “were considered to be the source of the popular uprising against their very miserable living conditions, including illiteracy, illnesses, slums and misery”³⁸. The absorption of precarious housing was the subject of the programme of the Constantine plan, which resulted in the

and especially the appearance of the automobile; a 19th century's most influencing invention in the transformations of the urban space.

During the war of liberation, and just after the various massacres of colonisation, a massive exodus of the population from the countryside to Constantine was recorded. The majority of the new arrivals occupied virgin land along the streets scattered on the outskirts of the new colonial city. These new peripheries were distinguished by their unplanned, improper and marginalised character.

In the aftermath of independence, the city of Constantine continued to experience strong demographic growth, mainly driven by large migratory flows to the city (waves after independence). Under the pressure of the demographic weight, the peripheral urban development of the city accelerated sharply, in particular around Oued Rhumel and Boumerzoug, and around the roads inherited from the colonial era (the current RN ° 3, 5.27. 79), from where several informal urban fabrics grew such as: Sidi M'cid, Cité El Bir, les Muriers, Bentelis, and the 4th kilometre, by forming peri-urban routes, and ensuring the function of a new generation of urban gates.

Post-independence urban development was problematic; fast, massive and almost in all directions at the same time. City boundaries and urban thresholds were becoming more blurry, reflecting discontinuous, disorderly and difficult to master urbanisation, which is entirely the opposite of the classical gate, once a symbol of order and strength.

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³⁸ Benidir, 2007, op. cit. p. 91.

³⁹ (EGSA): <https://www.egsa-constantine.dz/index.php/aeroports/aeroport-de-constantine-mohamed-boudiaf> (accessed 24 January 2021).