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The purpose of this paper is to report on the characteristics of modern architecture in Setif, a town in eastern Algeria, created from scratch during the French occupation. It will be of a particular interest to unveil an important part of the puzzle that represents the "backdrop" of modern architecture, in this city.

The present paper tries to contain and recognize the different forms of expression of this architecture, through a historical perspective, punctuated by major events in order to shed light on the characteristics of modern architecture in Setif (1930–1962) and by which they were motivated.

Introduction

The treaties of philosophy and history of ideas attest the uniqueness of modern thought based on universal values: freedom of spirit, equality, emancipation, rationality, etc. Values whose credibility has grown steadily since the Enlightenment. However, the treaties of modern architecture demonstrate the diversity of its approaches and its formal expressions, indicating the maturity of this movement and the more and more increasing dialectical relationship between theory and empirical evidence related to the site at large, the economy, social data. This article aims to answer the question: "What were the different expressions of modern architecture in Setif between 1930 and 1962 and by what were they motivated?" It questions the period starting from 1932, the date of Le Corbusier's arrival in Algiers, which marks the beginning of the modern influence in North Africa, until 1962, corresponding to the end of the French presence in Algeria, which had as a result, the departure of so many professional architects, engineers, contractors, directors and so on. The corpus of this study developed from the urban and architectural history of Setif during this period suggests three registers for the three scenarios that marked the urban dynamics of Setif: returning to the city, bridging the non-urban area fortifications and the various extensions through the suburbs. The projects belong to both public and private sectors, programed through various development plans, supported by new financial and fiscal measures and clutched by the early introduction of new technological processes. The actors: architects, engineers and contractors, although installed mainly in Algiers, spread out throughout the national territory and beyond to Tunisia and to the metropolitan area. The intramural approach was rather Perretist: consciously urban (alignment, prospect) and with classic reminiscences through new typologies. The unconstructable zone also provides an urban architecture although promoting an modern architectural language. In the suburbs and as we move away from the city center, the Corbusian principles become more obvious; Les Pins neighborhood in the west and that of Bouaaroua in the east are such witnesses. We can conclude that modern architecture in Setif (1930–1962), evolves with that of the West. Setif like other Algerian cities has even been a real testing ground of the Modern Movement, when the French public has displayed resistance by opposing innovation and condemning change.

Modernity On, the Introduction of Reinforced Concrete

The technical dimension formed alongside the philosophical and plastic ones, a catalyst for the development of modern architecture. It is for this reason, that we are discussing the early introduction of reinforced concrete in Setif, through dealers and agents of the F. Hennebique design agency that, from 1908 enabled the achievement of various architectural works using reinforced concrete: grain silos, banks, multi-story mixed use investment properties, townhouses, among which were Hennebique agent's own house (J. Giovannelli (1929)) as well as the home of F. Hennebique in Bourg-la Reine (1921), to serve as models. Large spans, pile foundations, expanded concrete, and translucent concrete attest to the level of technology and performance of the protagonists of construction in Setif, from the early 20th century.

Direct and Indirect Involvement of the State in the Production of Social Housing

From the beginning of the second decade of the 20th century, the colonial state was involved in social housing programs, initially in collaboration with associations and cooperative movements, then through public offices and HLM (Habitation à Loyer Modéré) financial companies. This program was based on a legal arsenal whose application had been extended to Algeria.

We then saw the birth of suburban housing districts, average housing density. The duplex houses are constructed on plots of 352 m², with a front garden, a courtyard and a garden at the back. The first two garden cities, Lévy city (1926), south of the railway, and the railway city (Cheminsots) to the east, are in a checkerboard urban form. The cities are equipped with public buildings at the scale of the district: school, market and worship place. The third, "the city of veterans", introduced the curved line in the drawing of the islets and closes, referring to "the English landscape tradition". On the closes we find secondary entries, while public presentation and main entries open on to the street. As part of the plan of Constantine, the public sector was also pressured to realize workers' housing schemes. The OPDHLM (Office of Public Moderate Rent Houses), was the owner of several operations, including that of the Ramparts city. Conscious of urban constraints, the three buildings are situated along the ring road that resulted from the dismantling of the fortifications, opting for a rational and minimalist architecture.

Returns to Town

Abandoned by the bourgeoisie in favor of the Faubourg de la garesuburban neighborhood, the city center was reinvested twice. In the 1930s, with public operations that glorified modern architecture, occupying small parcels of land, organizing programs with extreme rationality ensuring compliance with alignments and prospects. We cite as examples: the Galeries de France building by
the Hennebique agent JL Giovanelli (1931), with spans of 16 m, and that of the Ponts et Chausées (Roads and Bridges) (1936), an expressionist asymmetrical building.

In the aftermath of the World War 2, the holders of agricultural capital monopolized the best locations (places) in the old center. Consolidation operations were required to form the base of tall buildings, made with reinforced concrete structures, most of it on piles, with elevators, central heating, a collective water tank, laundry and common terraces, local bins and janitor. We can cite as an example, the Carlone building, operating on seven levels on top of a ground floor reserved for shops. The first floor is occupied by a birth clinic. The apartments increased from two to five rooms. This set of Perretist inspiration, conceived on the basis of social and functional diversity principles remains, despite its modern aesthetic, devoid of ornament, respectful of urban rules of alignment and prospect and of classical tripartite architectural composition. This building was presented at the exhibition held on the side lines of the XIII National Housing and Urban Development Congress in 1952.

All investment property buildings (immeubles de rapport) downtown conformed to the same Perretist approach. We cite as an example the Brincat building (1950) whose facades are punctuated by bow windows, the Bernabé companies building, the Ugolini building, etc.

The New Modern Urban Form Neighborhood: The Pines

We cannot talk about this district, without mentioning the famous public hospital. By its primacy in the northwest part of the city, it is undoubtedly the forerunner of modern architecture. Built by Ch. Tisserand and Perret brothers companies, whose model was presented at the World Expo 1935 in Brussels, this project was classified according Haegelen (Governor General), second in France and fifth in the world by its architecture and modern amenities. It consists of rectangular buildings, occupying the center of the plot, connected by galleries, including the general configuration, in the form of a comb, corresponding to the typology of hospitals responding both to hygiene concerns and functionality.

The new modern area, The Pines, located at the southern boundary of the civil hospital, was first formed along the roads as a growth axis, before developing on the north side. The first building (Brincat I) stands on the alignment of this pathway. The second, Brincat II, is set back from the boundaries of the plot down a level, which allows it to gain an additional floor. The remaining part of the neighborhood is in an entirely new urban form. An urban form composed of enclosures in which the buildings are freed from the constraints that govern the urban design of the old districts. We find towers, having all the elements of comfort at both levels: apartments and common areas. This neighborhood is completed on the west side by the city of Orleans, whose buildings have between eight and nine floors above the ground floor. This height corresponds to the optimal standard established by Gropius, to maximize both the structure and equipment: lift, boiler, etc. The ornament there appears to be a “crime” and, in promoting the utilitarian dimension of modern machine aesthetics “art and architecture are seen as neutral and objective, independent of individual taste”.

This empty site permitted a combination of a modern typology and a modern morphology. A similar situation occurs in the new district Bouaroua located at the eastern end of the city.

Return to the Past

The author of the civil hospital designed the Peguin school with a traditionalist style whose facades are finely carved with “rustic” materials, timber, stone and brick. This is also valid for M. Christofle opting for a decidedly modern parti at the Lévy city school stadium (1949) and the Arabist style of the Hammam Chia Turkish Bath (1930) and the central post-office (1932–32). The Arabist style clearly shows the return to the past by


07 Plan of Sétif on which were located urban entities mentioned in the text. © Perret, Auguste et Perret brothers fund, 535 AP, 34411 // Cité de l’Architecture et du Patrimoine/Archives d’Architecture du XXe siècle, 1930.
drawing on the register of what is commonly called "Islamic architecture." Hamman Ctieb and the central post office are adorned with polychromed horseshoe arches, lowered, twisted columns, stucco and polychrome mosaic, both in front and inside. This return to the past therefore is probably more the result of a Situationist approach than of a doctrine.

The Filling of the Non-Aedicificandi area, the Ring Setifois

Setif, like fortified towns, had a strip of land around its wall, which was untouched by urbanization in the late 19th century. Around 1932, the infilling of this area followed the traditional pattern of the dismantling of fortifications and building a ring road. In the eastern part of the intramural area there are several public buildings running from north to south. All these buildings have pure lines and simple volumes generally located at the edges of their plots. The finance building offers elegant and imposing façades; its central hall is illuminated by a canopy of monochrome molding details, including a general tendency is apparent except some generally decorative elements.

The use of reinforced concrete and associated technologies in the early 1930s did not cause too much disruption of the original urban form. Whilst the architectural language was considerably simplified, it still maintained the tripartite composition of the classical facade in both public and private developments.

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The filling of this area, the ring of Setif, was executed as a result of the return to the past. At the background, the six slab blocks of Palm City, 1958–1959. On the left: P. Bourdeix, Mun., Wagner, Botta company, 1934–1938. Five blocks of the "veterans" city © rue de Setif, 1962.

Comfort conditions, including those related to maintenance, are those neighborhoods such as The Pines and Bourgogne.

Notes

8. Le Corbusier.

References


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