

## Modern Architecture in Setif (Algeria, 1930–1962). Expression of a Plurality of Approaches

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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 a part of the puzzle that represents the “backdrop” of modern architecture, in this city<sup>1</sup>.

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 1930, 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-aedificandi 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 a 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 (1909)) as well as the home of F. Hennebique in *Bourg-la Reine* (1901), 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 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>2</sup>.

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

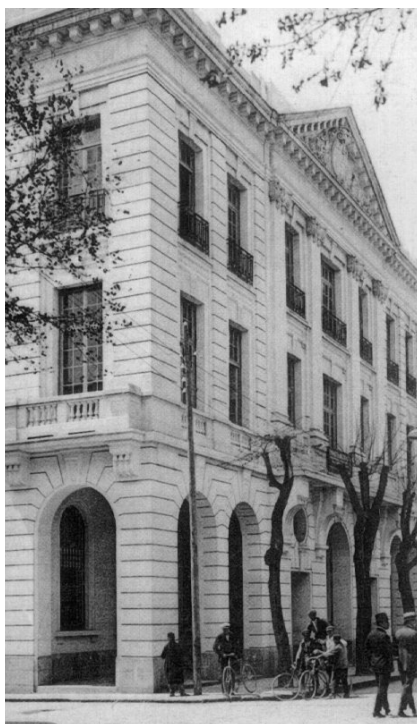
From the beginning of the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the colonial state was involved in social housing programs, initially in collaboration with associations and cooperative movements, then through public offices and HLM (*Habitation à Loyer Modéré*) financial companies. This program 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 300 m<sup>2</sup>, 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 (Cheminots) to the east<sup>3</sup>, 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”<sup>4</sup>, 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<sup>5</sup>, 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<sup>6</sup>. 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 gares* suburban 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 *Galleries de France* building by



**01** P. Ponsard, G. Charbonnière, J. L. Giovanelli Enterprise, Headquarters of the branch of Crédit Foncier Algeria and Tunisia, Setif, Algeria, 1914-1920. Postcard.



**02** Ponts et Chaussées building, Sétif, Algeria. Before the height extension (1959). © Archives of the University of Geneva, Archives of architecture J-H Calsat Fund, 1936.



**03** X. Salvador, DPIC., M. Garnier, Perret Brothers, Civil Hospital, Sétif, Algeria, 1935-1938. Engineering and execution Ch. Tisserand companies. © Chantiers, Archives of the Department of Algiers, 1938.

the Hennebique agent JL Giovanelli (1931), with spans of 16 m, and that of the *Ponts et Chaussées* (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<sup>7</sup> 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 sidelines of the XIII National Housing and Urban Development Congress in 1952<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup>. 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<sup>10</sup> 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<sup>11</sup>. 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.

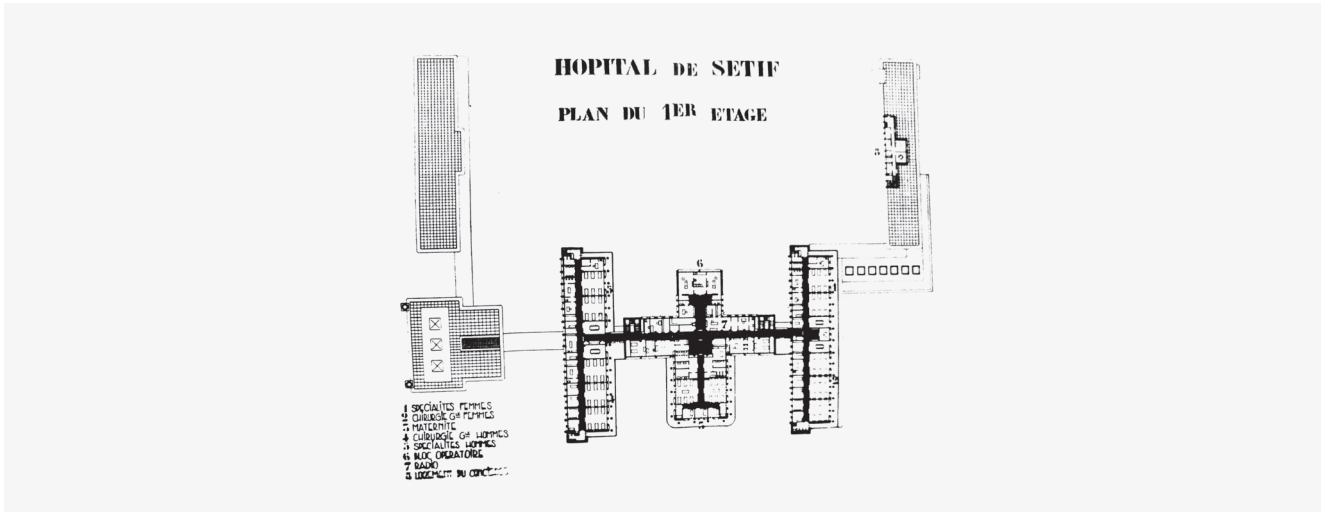
The new modern area, *The Pines*, located at the southern boundary of the civil hospital, was first formed along the roads as a growth axis, before developing on the north side. The first building (*Brincat I*) stands on the alignment of this pathway. The second, *Brincat II*, is set back from the boundaries 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<sup>12</sup>, 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<sup>13</sup>. 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”<sup>14</sup>.

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 *Penguin* 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 Chiab* Turkish Bath (1930) and the central post-office (1930-32). The Arabist style clearly shows the return to the past by



04 G. Barthe & A. Gazalet, DPLG, SEFA company, City of Orleans, Sétif, Algeria, 1958-1959. © Assia Bouadjadja.

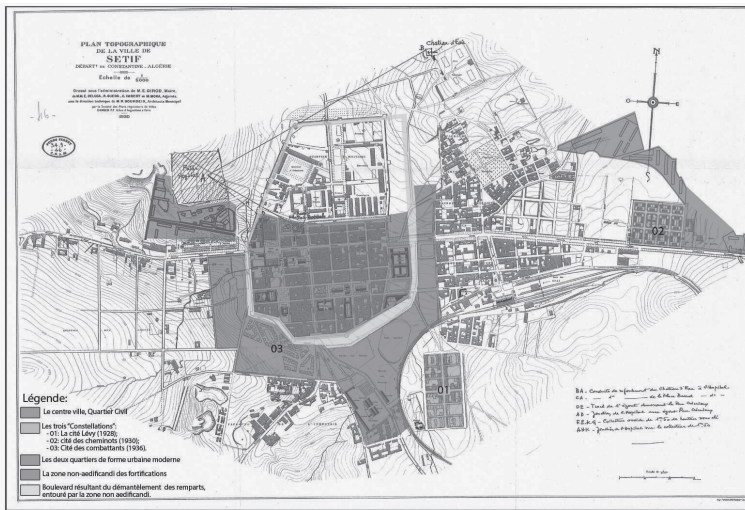
05 P. Berardi, Botto, Scognamiglio & Hamelin, Cheminots city, Jules Cuttoli, Sétif. © Cheminot Sétif, 1930.



06 L. Regeste, DPLG, B. Carlone entreprise, Carlone Building, Sétif, Algeria, 1949-1952. Postcard.



07 Plan of Sétif on which were located urban entities mentioned in the text. © Perret, Auguste et Perret brothers fund. 535 AP, 344(1) / Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine/Archives d'Architecture du XXe siècle, 1930.



09 A. Jdanoff, Mun. J. Mauri & D. R. Pons, at the background, the six slab blocks of Palm City, 1958–1959. On the right: Alain Sèbe, A. Daure & H. Berri, building of the “ramparts” city along the Boulevard, 1959–1963. On the left: P. Bourdeix, Mun., W. Wagner, Botta company, 1934–1938, five blocks of the “veterans” city. © PUD of Setif, 1962.

drawing on the register of what is commonly called “Islamic architecture”. *Hammam Chiab* and the central post office are adorned with polylobed 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-Aedificandi area, the Ring Setifois

Setif, like fortified towns, had a strip of land around its wall, which was untouched by urbanization in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Around 1930, 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 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 translucent concrete, which counted among the latest innovations of the time. No ornamentation is apparent except some generally monochrome molding details, including a group of window frames whose objective is to meet the interests of composition related to scale. Other public buildings such as the court, the central police station, the officers’ building obey the same modern aesthetic.

In the western part of the city, several social housing projects were completed. Palm city (*Cité du Palmier*), a city of 200 dwellings, is representative of them. This is the first Corbusier-inspired major “ensemble” in Setif, meeting the principles of minimum habitat. Unit size goes from two rooms (32 m<sup>2</sup>) to four rooms (52 m<sup>2</sup>). This vertical garden city

has six slab blocks of four to seven floors, oriented north-south or east-west, connected by walkways and distributed by a system of walkways and outside stairs with panoramic views of the surrounding landscape. The typology of housing is inspired by the Muslim house, crystallized in the rural model that results in providing a room for guests, cut categorically from inside the apartment, a multipurpose room with a kitchen and a bathroom which is accessed via the loggia.

### Conclusion

Setif knew neither the intellectual and social upheaval nor the artistic avant-garde in Europe, it was, however, a field of application and experimentation of the modern movement; first on a technical level then on an aesthetic one.

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 development projects.

Garden cities, in the form of satellite neighborhoods, emerged, confirming the involvement of the state and associations in the production of social housing.

A return to the past was also carried out through traditionalist or Arabist approaches referring to records of the past, typological or aesthetic, rural or Muslim, as was the case for the *Cité du Palmier*, the *Peguin* school and the famous *Chiab Hammam*.

Examples of enclosure planning are found in neighborhoods characterized by new towers and slab blocks that display considerable technical skill, bringing together

comfort conditions, including those related to maintenance, are those neighborhoods such as *The Pines* and *Bouaroua*. ■

### Notes

- 1 William Curtis, *L'Architecture Moderne Depuis 1900*, Editions Phaidon, 2006.
- 2 Claudine Piaton, Ezio Godoli, David Peyceré (eds.), *Building Beyond the Mediterranean, Studying the Archives of European Businesses (1860–1970)*, Honoré Clair, Paris, 2013.
- 3 Pierre Berardi, architect, 1930.
- 4 Bourdeix and Wagner, architects, 1932.
- 5 Development Economic and Social Plan of Algeria, launched by De Gaulle (1959–1963).
- 6 A. Sèbe, architect, 1959–1963.
- 7 Louis Regeste, architect DPLG, Alger, 1949.
- 8 Le Jeune Sétifien.
- 9 Xavier Salvador, architecte, DPLG, 1935.
- 10 Fonds Perret, Auguste et Perret frères. 535 AP, 344 (1). *Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine/Archives d'Architecture du XXe siècle*.
- 11 Le “Petit Sétifien”, 27 janvier 1947.
- 12 Guy Barthe et André Gazalet, architectes DPLG Alger, 1959. *Journal Travaux Nord-Africains*, 21 août, 1958.
- 13 Leonardo Benevolo, *Histoire de l'Architecture Moderne Tome 2, Avant-Garde et Mouvement Moderne*, Paris, Dunod, 1998.
- 14 Alain Colquhoun, *L'Architecture Moderne*, Gollion, Infolio, 2006.

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