



Social Housing of 1950s in Tlemcen (Algeria): An Architectural View

Sociálne bývanie päťdesiatych rokov 20. storočia
v Tlemcen (Alžírsko): Architektonický pohľad

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**SOCIAL HOUSING OF 1950s
IN TLEMCEEN ALGERIA**

SOCÁLNE BÝVANIE PÄŤDESIATYCH
ROKOV 20. STOROČIA V TLEMCEEN
ALŽÍRSKU

Photo Foto: Yasmine Nour El Houda
Saidi, 2019 – 2022

Francúzska správa prejavila záujem o sociálne bývanie v Alžírsku v tridsiatych rokoch 20. storočia, v čase stého výročia kolonizácie. Toto obdobie bolo charakteristické silným demografickým rastom a odchodom obyvateľstva z vidieka do miest. Výstavba kolektívneho sociálneho bývania v Alžírsku si kladla za cieľ prekonať krízu bývania a odstrániť slumy a prekérne formy bývania a svoj vrchol dosiahla v päťdesiatych rokoch. Kolektívne sociálne bývanie bolo zamýšľané najmä pre moslimské obyvateľstvo, ktoré bolo zvyknuté na tradičné domčeky s patiom a introvertným systémom.

V architektúre týchto budov sa prejavil vplyv modernizmu, ktorý vo veľkej miere ovplyvnil architektúru sociálneho bývania v Alžírsku. Mnohé z postavených kolektívnych obytných budov patrili do kategórie HLM (nízkopríjmové bývanie), predtým HBM (lacné bývanie). Zdroje použité na financovanie bývania pochádzali najmä z verejného sektora a súkromného sektora a zakladali sa na princípoch normalizácie, racionality, štandardizácie a typizácie modernej architektúry. Otázky, pre aký model bývania sa rozhodnúť, zanikli s programom ohláseným v meste Constantine v roku 1958. Typy bývania, ktoré sa mali realizovať, zodpovedali prísny normám, mali redukované plochy a výškovú výstavbu.

Tento príspevok analyzuje výstavbu sociálneho bývania v Tlemcene, meste ležiacom na západe Alžírsku, ktoré je známe svojou arabsko-moslimskou architektúrou. Urbanistická morfológia mesta sa vyznačovala určitou stabilitou až do príchodu Francúzov, keď zaznamenala radikálnu

transformáciu, ktorá priniesla vznik novej urbanistickej formy špecifickej pre alžírské mediny, najmä tie na severe. Táto charakteristika je veľmi zreteľná na úrovni intravilánovej zóny: hybridná štruktúra arabsko-koloniálneho typu, ktorá je výsledkom zložitého prekryvania zástavby z arabsko-moslimskej a z koloniálnej éry. Príchod Francúzov znamenal začiatok premeny mediny, ktorá trvala viac ako sto rokov a dala vzniknúť mestskej štruktúre, ktorú poznáme dnes.

V Tlemcene, podobne ako i iných alžírskych mestách, vznikla vrstva sociálneho kolektívneho bývania z koloniálneho obdobia počnúc rokom 1937, čo je rok, keď boli v *Sidi Chaker* postavené prvé budovy HBM. Dnes má mesto približne desať sídlisk sociálneho kolektívneho bývania z koloniálnej éry.

Cieľom tohto príspevku je vyplniť medzeru v poznaní predstavením charakteristiky sociálneho kolektívneho bývania v Tlemcene a odhalením rozdielov a podobností medzi viacerými typmi bývania prostredníctvom analýzy troch sídlisk: sídliska HBM *Sidi Chaker*, sídliska HLM *Sidi Saïd* a sídliska HLM s ochodzou *Metchkana*. Tieto tri príklady sa nachádzajú mimo opevnení mediny, v extraviláne a v nových prístavbách realizovaných francúzskou správou, pričom každá budova má inú typologickú a topologickú konfiguráciu. Budova v tvare písmena U (budova HBM v *Sidi Chaker*), štvorcová budova (sídlisko HLM v *Sidi Saïd*) a radová budova (sídlisko HLM s ochodzou *Metchkana*). Štúdiá vychádza z prehľadu literatúry, archívnych údajov, architektonických prieskumov a štúdie kvality architektonického návrhu.

V tejto štúdii sme zvolili topologický prístup, ktorý umožňuje charakterizovať a pochopiť architektúru budovy a bytov v nej a určiť jej priestorové vlastnosti prostredníctvom troch mierok: mierky mesta, pôdorysu budovy a pôdorysu sídliska. Naša práca sa sústreďuje na poodhalenie priestorov sídliska, jeho konštant a kvalít, ktoré sú s ním úzko spojené.

Introduction:

During the 1950s, the production of collective social housing accelerated in all Algerian cities for many reasons, among them to respond to the housing crisis, eradicate precarious housing and bring about the economic and social advancement of families¹. This new typology manifested itself through modernist architecture, which relies on standardization, rationality and normalization and breaks with the ornament of Algeria's neo-classical and neo-Moorish buildings of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The first experiments were carried out in the capital Algiers and subsequently extended to the majority of cities. Modern social housing projects were built for Muslim inhabitants following models intended for Europeans but taking into consideration the socio-cultural criteria related to the lifestyle of Muslims used to a traditional housing type². Tlemcen, a city situated in the west of Algeria, had like other Algerian cities acquired its share of social housing starting from 1937, when the first HBM³ buildings were built. In 1950, Tlemcen witnessed a significant production of collective social housing, to respond to the housing crisis sparked by strong demographic growth. Today, the city has around ten collective social housing estates dating from the colonial period. This production remains unknown or poorly documented, with very little scholarly attention, unlike the major Algerian cities (Algiers, Oran, Annaba and Constantine). Indeed, Tlemcen is mostly known for its Arab-Muslim architecture, which has frequently been addressed by leading specialists: architects, engineers, sociologists, historians, anthropologists, etc.,⁴ yet mainly examining the pre-colonial periods, medieval architecture, traditional fabric and the medina with a focus on traditional houses.

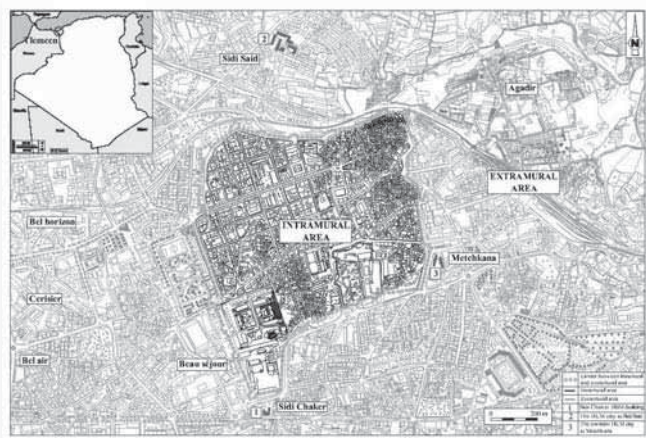
The aim behind this paper is to present the characterizations of collective social housing through the study of three housing estates located outside the fortified walls of the medina,

in the new urban extensions carried out by the French colonial administration. The study is based on a review of the literature, the archival data, architectural surveys and the quality study of the architectural design. It adopts a topological approach that makes it possible to characterize and understand the architecture of housing and habitat and to highlight the properties of space and forms at three scales: the district, the building and the housing. Because it contributes to the definition of the urban image and to the construction of the culture of the population, this 20th century heritage, as a main component of Tlemcen, is a subject of great relevance in the urban history of the city.

The Colonial Grafting in Tlemcen

Tlemcen, a medium-sized city of 140 158 inhabitants (2008)⁵, is located in the northwest of Algeria. Capital of the Zayyanid dynasty (1231 – 1557), “the city of Tlemcen was added to the Islamic world in the late seventh century”⁶, and is among the oldest cities in the country. It is known for its history, culture, scholars, marabouts, craftsmanship and conservatism, which makes it the guardian of traditions and ancestral rites in the eyes of Algerian society⁷. Today it is home to nearly 70% of the country's Arab-Muslim heritage⁸. Its architectural and urban heritage has been built up over the centuries and eras from the Romans through the various Islamic dynasties: the Idrissids, the Almoravids, the Almohads, the Zayyanids, the Merinids, the Ottomans and finally the French after 1842⁹. Tlemcen is one of the first medinas in the Arab world to be colonized by a European power in the 19th century¹⁰ and possessed the oldest urban layout which was still standing while the French came to Algeria.

The urban morphology of the city witnessed a kind of stability until the arrival of the French, who, by transforming it, produced a hybrid fabric of an Arab-colonial type, the result of a complex overlap between the Arab-Muslim medina and the



LOCATION OF TLEMCEN AND ITS HISTORICAL CENTER (INTRAMURAL AREA) AND EXTRAMURAL AREA

LOKALITA TLEMCEN A JEJ HISTORICKÉ CENTRUM (VNÚTORNÁ ČASŤ) A EXTRAMURÁLNA OBLASŤ

Source Zdroj: PDAU (Master Plan of Development and Urbanism), developed by authors: Yasmine Nour El Houda Saidi, Najet Mouaziz Bouchentouf, 2022

new colonial graft¹¹. This mutation operates in two ways: intramural inside the walls of the medina, and extramural outside of it. The first one was involved in the shaping of new streets in the medieval fabric and the construction of new buildings on open plots for the settlement of the French army and the first French colonists¹². The second assumed the form of an extension by claiming land outside the fortifications and is characterized by the adoption of a checkerboard plan and a grid alignment of buildings diametrically opposed to the tangle of the medina streets. As well as the transition from the enclosed house to new types of individual and collective housing open to the street was introduced in the form of apartment buildings intended for the European population, built in the intramural area. Built for rent-paying tenants, these apartments are known as “investment buildings”, in other words, making a profit for the owner through the paid rent. Investment buildings in Tlemcen have a common principle of spatial orientation: they place the prestigious rooms oriented to the street (bedrooms, living rooms), and reject the secondary rooms situated to the back of the flat (kitchens, bathrooms).

Origins of Collective Social Construction

The interest of the French administration in making accommodations for the Muslim population was manifested starting from the 1930s, during the celebration of the centenary of France’s presence in Algeria. This moment was an opportunity to assess and reflect on the type of housing to adopt, particularly after the appearance of slums where migrating rural populations had settled. If it was admitted that rebuilding an Arab city



MELIS INVESTMENT BUILDING
INVEŠTIČNÁ BUDOVA MELIS

Photo Foto: Yasmine Nour El Houda Saidi, 2019

(medinas and kasbah) was unthinkable, making Muslims live in purely European accommodation was also out of question. Architects produced theoretical studies and hybrid housing projects for Muslims, inspired by the houses of the medinas yet at the same time proposed as low-cost housing with minimum standards. “On the basis of the principle that the Muslim urban habitat should be distinct, the Muslim Reforms Commission called for a revision of the legislation on HBMs, designed for France but applied in Algeria as well that would accommodate the needs of Muslim residents and take into consideration local conditions”¹³

Algeria was not untouched the influence of modern architecture, the emergence of which owes a great deal to the travels of Le Corbusier during the 1930s and his influence on a group of French architects born in Algeria. Qualified as “Algerianists”, this generation of architects of the 1930s found in modern architecture of Mediterranean or even Arab, Moorish or Ottoman inspiration an expression of this identity. Their borrowing both from modern vocabulary and from the architecture of traditional houses found an application in the indigenous towns of the 1930s. “Promotion of modern low-cost housing for the Algerians followed in the footsteps of the projects built for Europeans, but incorporated another set of sociocultural criteria that

maintained the separation of the two communities¹⁴. Still, after the 1950s, this horizontal housing was gradually abandoned in favor of collective housing for the Muslim community, which was considered ready to live in European-style housing with modern conveniences, lighting and direct views as well as a collective form¹⁵. The Constantine Plan was intended put an end to questions about the model to be adapted by proposing collective social housing estates responding to the primacy of the site's organizational technique (crane path, methodical planning management, storage area) and the speed of realization, to the detriment of the architectural and construction quality.

Social Housing Financing

Until the 19th century, the question of housing was not considered to be a matter for public institutions. Apartment buildings built in Algeria were financed by private funds, in particular through wealth gained as colonial enrichment (trade in wine, citrus fruits, cereals, etc.), which excluded the mass of families with limited resources that could not afford to pay the rent. The creation of HBMs¹⁶ and later HLMs in France during the 1880s and in Algeria during the 1920s subsequently introduced the public financing of housing. The resources used to finance housing came mainly from the public sector (Finance Ministry and the national budget) and the private sector (bank credit and private savings). Public financing was aimed at the HLM cooperative companies, mortgage credit companies and the Algerian housing cooperative companies¹⁷. For HLM companies and local authorities, a zero-interest rate was applied over a 25-year loan period, while for cooperative companies the interest was 2% per annum over a 15-year period and for a full financing loan, it was 4.4% per annum over a 10-year period. The housing endowment fund, as a budgetary account created for this purpose, made it possible to grant these various loans, which up until 1962 cost the French state 0.6 billion francs¹⁸. The construction and housing activity was largely promoted and financed by the public authorities, particularly at the end of the 1950s (*Plan de Constantine*), when the political situation combined with housing needs created pressure and urgency that made public intervention mandatory.

Case Study

The buildings selected for our study are part of the 1930s housing policy established by the French administration in Tlemcen. The three buildings are located in the extramural area, in the new districts created by the French administration: *Sidi Chaker*, *Sidi Saïd*, and *Metchkana*. The topological study is based on the following criteria: the thickness of the building and its morphology, the arbitration length of the corridor, the stairwells and their positions, the extraction or incorporation of horizontal services, and the partitioning or decompartmentalization of housing.

Sidi Chaker HBM Building

The Sidi Chaker building was designed by the French architect Andrès Brassart and was built in 1937 by the HBM departmental office. It is located in the district of *Sidi Chaker*, at the southwest



THE HBM BUILDING AT SIDI CHAKER

BUDOVA HBM V SIDI CHAKER

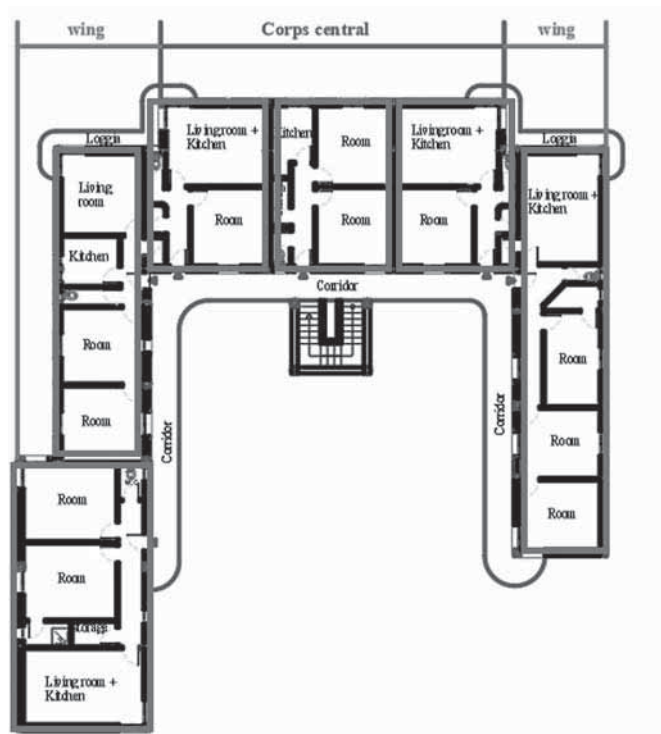
Photo Foto: Yasmine Nour El Houda
Saidi, 2022



LAYOUT PLAN OF THE HBM BUILDING AT SIDI CHAKER

NÁKRES BUDOVY HBM V SIDI CHAKER

Source Zdroj: Yasmine Nour El Houda Saidi, Najet Mouaziz Bouchentouf, 2021



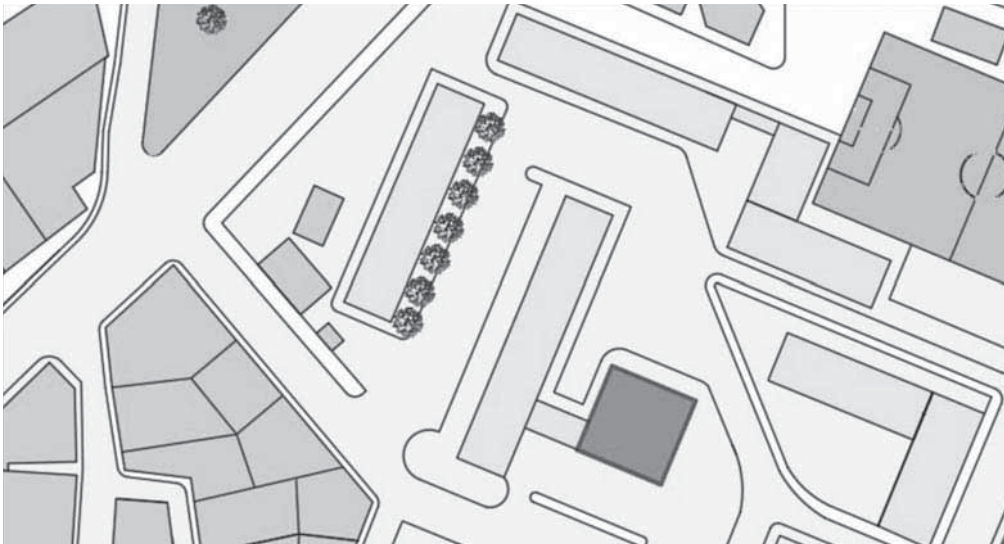
CURRENT FLOOR PLAN OF THE SIDI CHAKER HBM BUILDING 2021

SÚČASNÝ PÔDORYS BUDOVY HBM V SIDI CHAKER

Source Zdroj: Yasmine Nour El Houda Saidi, Najet Mouaziz Bouchentouf

boundary of the walls of the medina, along the ordinary local road opened in 1937. As the first HBM collective building built in Tlemcen, it was reserved for Muslim tenants who previously lived in the slums of the Marmol district. The building has four storeys above the ground floor with thirty apartments of different sizes: two rooms, three rooms and four rooms. Each floor contains six apartments accessible by a single central external staircase. The ground plan of the building is of a U-shape, the choice of which makes reference to the typology with open courtyards that the private investment frequently adopted to evoke the semiotics of status associated with the image of the *coeur d'honneur* courtyard of aristocratic mansions¹⁹. Yet at the same time, this desire to improve the image of social housing is not reflected in the interior layout, which is reduced to its simple expression and falls short of the standards in use for bourgeois or high-status apartments.

Access to the residential units is from the corridor. The building is divided into three main parts. The main body of the building has a symmetrical distribution, containing the two-room and three-room apartments, while the side wings contain the three-room and four-room apartments. All the units are floor-through apartments with two opposite facades. The building has two kinds of balcony: the corridor which runs along the building at the level of the main facade where the windows of the rooms lead into the corridor, and the short balconies which serve as loggias intended for the drying of laundry: "Many balconies and loggias give the facade a particularly pleasing modern appearance, not to mention the resulting pleasure for the owners"²⁰. At the same time, the building contains two housing types distinguished by shape, size and interior distribution: oblong and square. The oblong housing is the result of the U-shape of the building and has a longer linear service corridor, a feature that prevents the full independence of the rooms since one room is succeeded by another, while the performance space (the living room) is reduced to a single room. Square apartments, in turn, are the smallest and the least valued dwellings where traffic is reduced to the necessary minimum. The use



LAYOUT PLAN OF THE SQUARE BUILDING OF THE HLM COMPLEX AT SIDI SAÏD

NÁKRES ŠTVORCOVEJ BUDOVY ZÁSTAVBY HLM V SIDI SAÏD

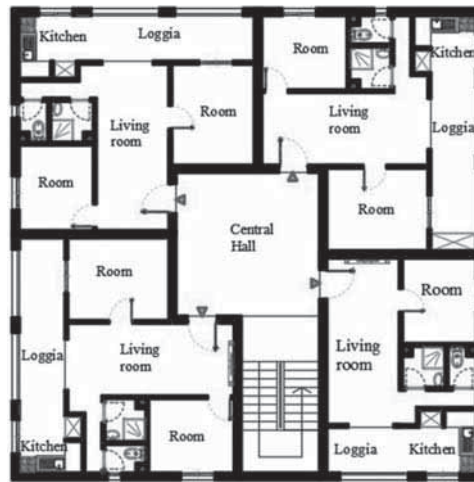
Source Zdroj: Yasmine Nour El Houda Saidi, Najet Mouaziz Bouchentouf, 2019



THE HLM BUILDING AT SIDI SAÏD

BUDOVA HLM V SIDI SAÏD

Photo Foto: Yasmine Nour El Houda Saidi, 2019



CURRENT FLOOR PLAN OF THE HLM BUILDING AT SIDI SAÏD

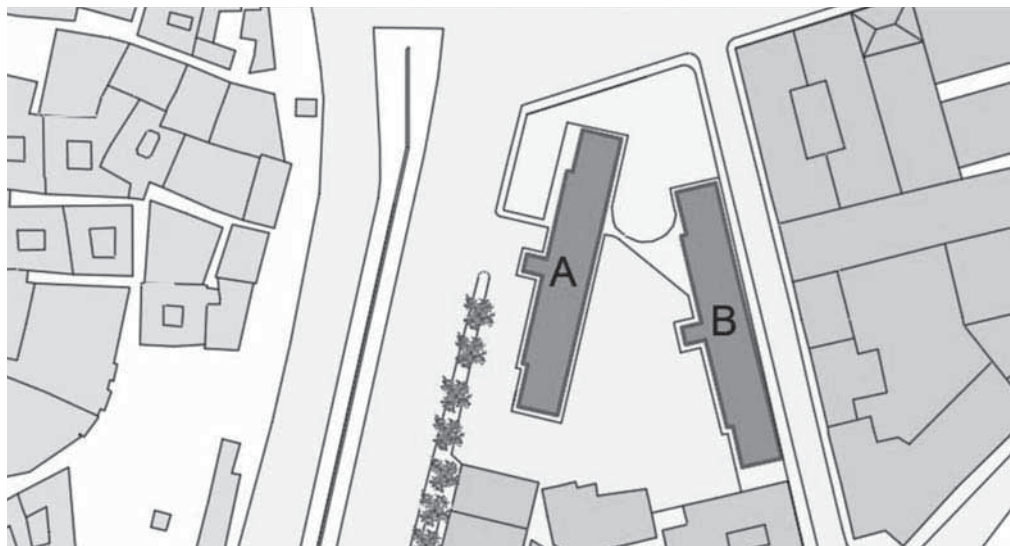
SÚČASNÝ PÔDORYS BUDOVY HLM V SIDI SAÏD

Source Zdroj: Yasmine Nour El Houda Saidi, Najet Mouaziz Bouchentouf, 2019

of the kitchens attached to the living rooms and the adjoining rooms, or the entrance door that opens directly onto the toilet, differentiate these apartments from the bourgeois residences of private apartment buildings and the traditional houses of the medina, particularly through the separation of functional spaces (kitchens, shower rooms, toilets) from the more elevated ones (living rooms, bedrooms). The neutrality of the housing plans offers a wide choice in the use of the rooms, because they have the same size and floor area, especially when the kitchen is independent from the living room. The rooms located near the kitchen can be used as a living room yet can equally be used as bedrooms, depending on the needs of the dwellers. The choice of the U-shape building generates a multitude of housing varieties: the oblong layout appears in three different plans and the square layout in two.

The HLM City at Sidi Saïd

Built by the French architect Léo Fontaine in 1958 by the Collective HLM Public Office, Department of Tlemcen, and intended for the Muslim population, it is located in *Sidi Saïd* in a peripheral area of Tlemcen, outside the battlement of the medina on the edge of the *Négrier* road. The complex has one hundred and twenty apartments spread over eight buildings of different shapes: oblong, square, and L-shaped, but all arranged to allow each dwelling to benefit from good natural light. The example that forms our case study is the only one built in a square outline. With five storeys above the ground floor reserved for shops, it has fourteen apartments, with two-room and three-room configurations of differing sizes. The first floor units are a two-room and a three-room. The current floor has four houses of two-room and three-room apartments.



LAYOUT PLAN OF THE HLM BUILDING AT METCHKANA

NÁKRES BUDOVY HLM
V METCHKANE

Source Zdroj: Yasmine Nour El Houda
Saidi, Najet Mouaziz Bouchentouf, 2021

Planned as a square shape of $16.5 \text{ m} \times 16.5 \text{ m}$, it makes use of an isotropic plan, square with four identical facades, which generates 4 corner units, made accessible by a single peripheral staircase which overlooks a central hall, considered as a space for both passage and meetings among the residents. With its distributive and a priori repetitive character, the floor plan imposes the same size, the same surfaces, and the same angle distributions, which all hold true in the case of the examined floor.

The interior layout of the accommodation follows the principle of “Para-traffic”: primarily about eliminating the corridor and placing the living room in a central position, so that it must be crossed to reach the different rooms and thus plays the role of a traffic and distribution space. However, this principle is not adequate with the socio-cultural requirements of the Algerian Muslim family, which values intimacy, embodied in the character of traditional houses with independent rooms. The non-prioritization of spaces and the separation between day spaces (kitchen, living room, toilet, and bathroom) and sleeping spaces (bedrooms) cause a trivialization and simplification of the plan induced by the economic nature of housing (budgetary limitation). “The type-plans of the flats also have great relevance for architectural history, sociology, and the research of living styles, as the construction of tens of thousands of flats in housing estates was based on these type-plans”²¹. The absence of projecting balconies and the square shape of the building, combined with the reduced floor areas of the housing, give the building a severe appearance, which is itself characteristic of the achievements of the Constantine Plan, in which the objective was the construction of a large number of housing units for a maximum of inhabitants.



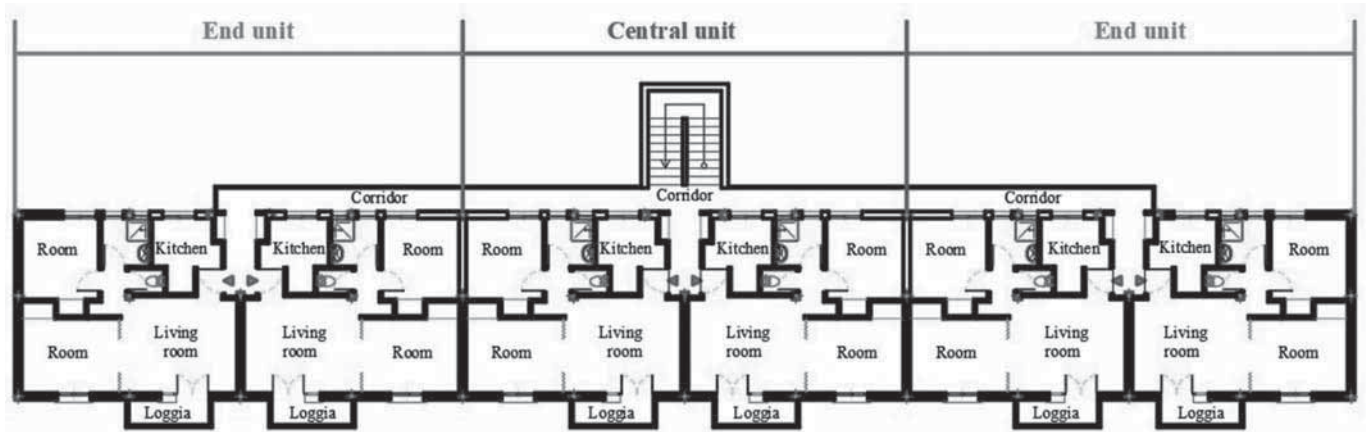
THE CORRIDOR HLM ESTATE AT METCHKANA

SÍDLISKO HLM S OCHODZOU
V METCHKANE

Photo Foto: Yasmine Nour El Houda
Saidi, 2022

The Corridor HLM City at Metchkana

The third example, designed by the French architect Léo Fontaine and built in 1958 by the HLM public office, department of Tlemcen, was intended to house the Muslim population arriving from the great rural migrations. It is located in the district of



CURRENT FLOOR PLAN OF THE HLM BUILDING AT METCHKANA

AKTUÁLNY PŮDORYS BUDOVY HLM V METCHKANE

Source Zdroj: Yasmine Nour El Houda Saidi, Najet Mouaziz Bouchentouf, 2021

Metchkana within the eastern limits of the wall of the medina, outside the fortifications. The complex is made up of two identical oblong blocks: Block A, which is our case study, and Block B, each are four storeys high above a ground floor. Together, they contain fifty-eight apartments of either two, three or four rooms each one. The ground floor has a two-room apartment and a four-room apartment. The examined floor houses six three-room apartments made accessible by a single central external staircase. Conceived as a narrow bar of 6.80 m × 48 m, the building uses as its form is one of the solutions proposed by the Constantine Plan, which induced Muslim families to live on higher floor levels than accustomed, for the sake of urgency and rapidity in completing the construction.

Access to the units on the front from the passageway (corridor) is the consequence of the use of the bar form. The corridor is considered the most suitable arrangement to respond to the program of small repetitive dwellings, and in this case turns out to be the most rational distribution, due to the narrow width of the bar building. The building is divided into three large identical units: the central part is in direct relation with the stairwell and the two other parts are at the ends, each of which contains two apartments of square outline. Unlike the buildings built during the 1930s, the square topology is the only form present in this building, which displays greater housing variety in terms of size, surface and distribution. All the dwellings are floor-through apartments with two opposite facades, which allow them to benefit from natural lighting. The building has two kinds of balconies: the passageway which runs along the building at the level of the main facade (the bedrooms, the kitchen and the bathrooms which overlook the passageway) and the individual loggias, short balconies in service for drying laundry.

The interior distribution of the square dwellings follows the principle of “Para-traffic” with the elimination of the

corridor, though compensated by folding partitions allowing the living room to be isolated from the bedrooms if necessary. This arrangement shows the need to allow separations in use even with open spaces, as “for the designers of that time, the corridor is one of the comfort instruments”²². Granting the living room a central position between the different spaces allows the dwellers to move freely between the rooms and allows it to be considered as a distribution space. One result, though, is the use of enfilades, where one bedroom leads to another, which led to a neglect of separation between day and night spaces. This organization doesn’t reply to the needs of Algerian Muslim families.

Conclusion

While 20th century housing is an essential component of any city, in Tlemcen, this heritage has been neglected in most studies and monographs through a strong presence and attractiveness of the Medina and its Arab-Andalusian style houses and buildings. French colonization introduced an urban fabric and a type of dwelling diverging from the existing ones, a checkerboard layout, and the opening of the dwellings on the streets. The apartments buildings, as the first housing project, display the classicizing architecture of European belonging²³ by reproducing the models of the metropolis. The year 1930, which coincided with the centenary of colonization, provided the moment to think about the question of housing for all, and the beginning of the realization of buildings and housing estates of different standings intended for Europeans and Muslims with limited financial incomes. Le Corbusier’s travels to Algiers and the internationalization of modern architecture had an effect on the buildings constructed, where the rich decoration and the mimicry of bourgeois building disappeared in favor of a more stripped-down architecture, in which primacy is given to use more than the image. As a result, the hybrid HBM building of

Sidi Chaker built in 1937 borrows some characteristics from the colonial apartment buildings of Tlemcen, like the mode of occupation of the plot, the richness of the spatial configurations of the apartments with large ones beside the small ones, yet while approaching the social housing in the use of the corridor and the reduced floor areas of its apartments. The HLM city of Sidi Said and Metchkana built in 1958, in the form of oblong and square outlines independent of the plot, respond to the guidelines initiated by the Constantine Plan of 1958, particularly in terms of floor areas, distribution of housing, and restriction of the typological variety for each project to reduce the cost of construction.

After independence, Algeria began a vast project of reconstruction and modernization of society to turn its back on colonization and archaism. Of all the inherited types of housing, it is the one proposed by the Constantine Plan that created the greatest increase in size and comfort, and thus was adopted as a model of social housing guaranteeing the benefit of the Algerian citizen²⁴. It is the model made up of two to three rooms adjoining a living room, with an entrance, bathrooms, balconies and loggias, organized in small bar-shaped buildings of 4 floors, which were built in great number in Tlemcen and in most Algerian cities.

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